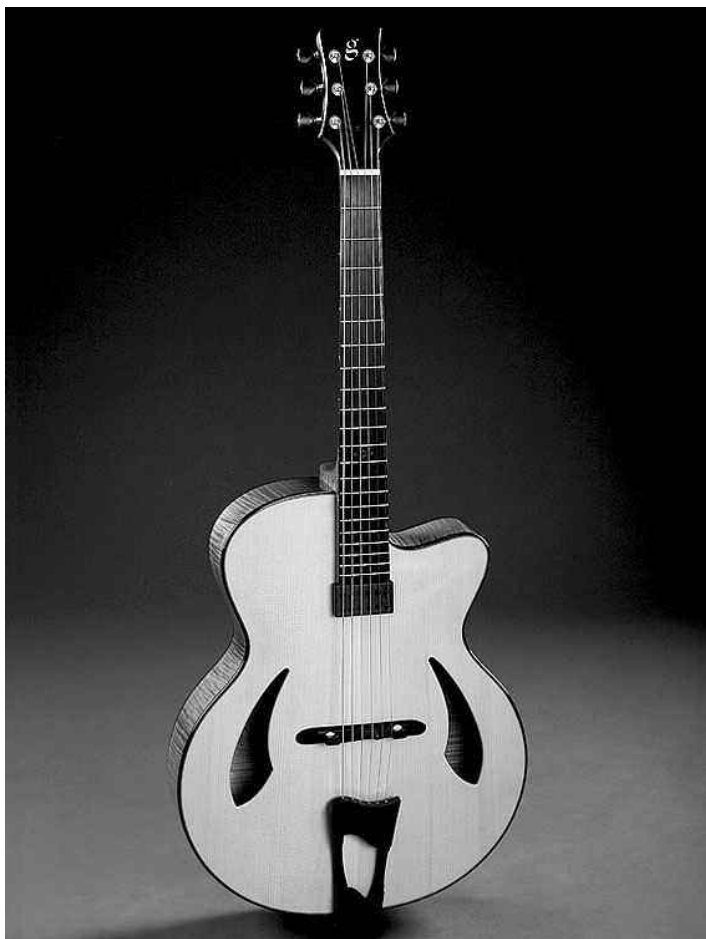


# *Greenfield Guitars*

## **“Hand Crafted One at a Time”**

by Ed Benson



**EB: You’ve been building and playing for many years. How has the customer changed over the years, especially in today’s economic climate?**

Michael Greenfield: Lately, the players are better educated about the archtop guitar in general, and more specifically, about handmade archtop guitars than they were 10 years ago, let alone 15 or 20 years ago. I also think that there is more interest in the archtop guitar these days, from both a player’s and collector’s perspective. The growth of the archtop/jazz guitar community, word of mouth and magazines like *Just Jazz Guitar* have helped inform the players, and point out the benefits of playing handmade guitars vs. mass-produced, production guitars. This has also made owning and playing them very hip! The economic climate has not affected that at all, but it has affected our orders. Hopefully, things will return to normal soon.

**EB: Are you building less expensive guitars? More laminate vs. carved?**

MG: I do not make a laminated guitar (although I do

laminate my sides), so that is the same as it always has been. As for my making less expensive instruments, while many in our craft, who make many more archtops each year than I do, have moved toward various automated means to carve out their top and back plates, I am still carving by hand and binding with wood (not plastic). It is a very time-consuming process, but I find it very rewarding. There is a very intimate connection with the materials, which dovetails with my general build-philosophy. Whether I am building an archtop, nylon-string or steel-string guitar, I invest roughly the same amount of time, passion, experience and the same master-grade materials in each instrument. Also, I have noticed that rarely do my clients want a “straight ahead” instrument. Most of my players opt for some of the higher-priced tonewoods, options and appointments.

**EB: I know you stopped doing repairs a few years ago. Have you gone back to doing them?**

MG: No. I “officially” closed my repair/restoration business in 2000. I do still take care of some of the “jazzers” in and around town, and friends’ guitars.

**EB: It seems to me that many players are shifting from larger 17-18" guitars to 14 1/2 and 16" size. Do you see this change? And if so, why the change?**

MG: I seem to have a pretty even balance among my 15," 16" and 17" guitars. From year to year, the orders favor one body size more than another and then swing back the other way in subsequent years. 17" guitars are great, but for gigging cats, it can be a burden to “climb on board” such a large guitar every night. But then, I know players who live on top of a Super 400, 5 nights a week. The smaller bodied (15" and smaller) guitars are like driving a little sports car! They are fun and comfortable. They also bring something else to the musical mix: they tend to be very quick and immediate in voice—great for bop players. Depending on technique, you can also get that distinct “pop” from the pick attack, a la Benson. The down side, especially for soloists and chord players, is that you don’t get the same full-bodied resonance you do from a 17" guitar. The larger bodied guitars tend to “breathe” a little more and have a more open, complex voice. The 16" guitars are very “Goldilocks,” sitting somewhere in the middle... and are “just right.” I am not saying I prefer the 16" one over the others...I just felt like throwing the Goldilocks thing in for fun! And just as the 15" and 17" have their own distinct personalities, so do the 16" guitars.

**EB: How many guitars do you build a year and how long is the wait for one?**

MG: I build about 15 guitars each year and usually 3-5 of them are archtops, depending on the year. My wait list is usually about 3 years, but with the current economic climate, I have had a few cancellations and do have a couple of open slots this year. Many of my colleagues seem to be experiencing the same phenomenon.

**EB: What are current prices and how many different models do you make? Is one model the most popular?**

MG: My archtops are priced from \$13,300, and I offer four different models: two 17" models, a 16" and a 15" (which is actually 14  $\frac{3}{4}$ "). All of the specs and descriptions are on my web site. As explained earlier, there really is not one model that is more popular than the others.

**EB: Is the classical market still strong? Anything evolving there?**

MG: Yes! I am making more concert classical guitars these days, and have been doing very well with them, mainly with the European market. I also offer a maple, carved back, cross-over, [nylon string guitar] with a flat top: my model C2. The jazzers really seem to dig them. It is another "arrow in their quiver" and another tonal color on their musical palette. I do have a few players who play nylon-string jazz exclusively and they tend to gravitate to either of my concert guitars: the C1 or the C3. I should say that none of my nylon string guitars are "Spanish guitars." They have a very contemporary voice, which players really like.

**EB: Are you optimistic about the business in the next year or so? Do you see any major changes coming?**

MG: The past year and the beginning of this year have been really tough on all of us builders. Things are pretty bleak out there. Japan is really suffering, as is the US, UK and France. Many of my agents are having a very difficult time selling guitars of any sort and are selling more pre-owned guitars, as folks are liquidating their collections to raise cash. I am hearing the same story from my clients and colleagues everywhere. I hope that those of us who have been doing this for a while and have chosen guitarmaking as our full-time career, will be able to weather the storm. I think it will

be another few years before things stabilize. But I am not an economist, nor do I want to begin to try to forecast global economic trends.

Beyond the economy, my thoughts in general about the archtop guitar market these days is that there are now many new guitars coming to market from the Pacific Rim, at really low prices. It is accelerating the "race to the bottom." My material costs are often more than the retail price of some of these imported guitars. None of us can compete with that. It is devaluing our craft. If a maker is selling his guitars for \$8k, which is modest, it is still more than 4 times the price of many of the imports. If that maker's production is 12 guitars per year, that's \$96K. That is before *materials, rent, insurance, machinery, telephone, advertising*, etc, leaving not much to live on. Yet the race to the bottom continues.

The other side of the discussion is that the archtop guitar is now more affordable and accessible than ever for those wanting to get in and test the waters. Hopefully, some of those cats will develop their chops and their love of the archtop guitar and then look to commission a better-quality instrument from one of the independent, hand-makers. I have also noticed a growing trend: some steel-string, fingerstyle players are venturing into the world of the archtop guitar. My Altiplanos model (Pierre Bensusan's signature model) addresses this market and is an interesting hybrid.





**EB:** With the demise of the Long Island show, do you plan on showing at any future guitar events?

**MG:** I exhibit at the Montreal Guitar Show every year. I am trying to get over to Europe this year, but the economy is a problem. I was supposed to be at last summer's Healdsburg Guitar Festival, but my dog passed away on the first day of the Montreal show. I was pretty destroyed by her passing and did not feel like doing much after that, so I cancelled. But I do hope to be at the next one.

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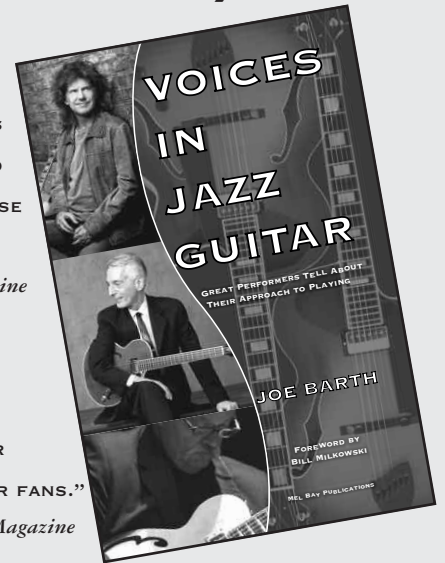
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