

# JUST JAZZ GUITAR

www.justjazzguitar.com

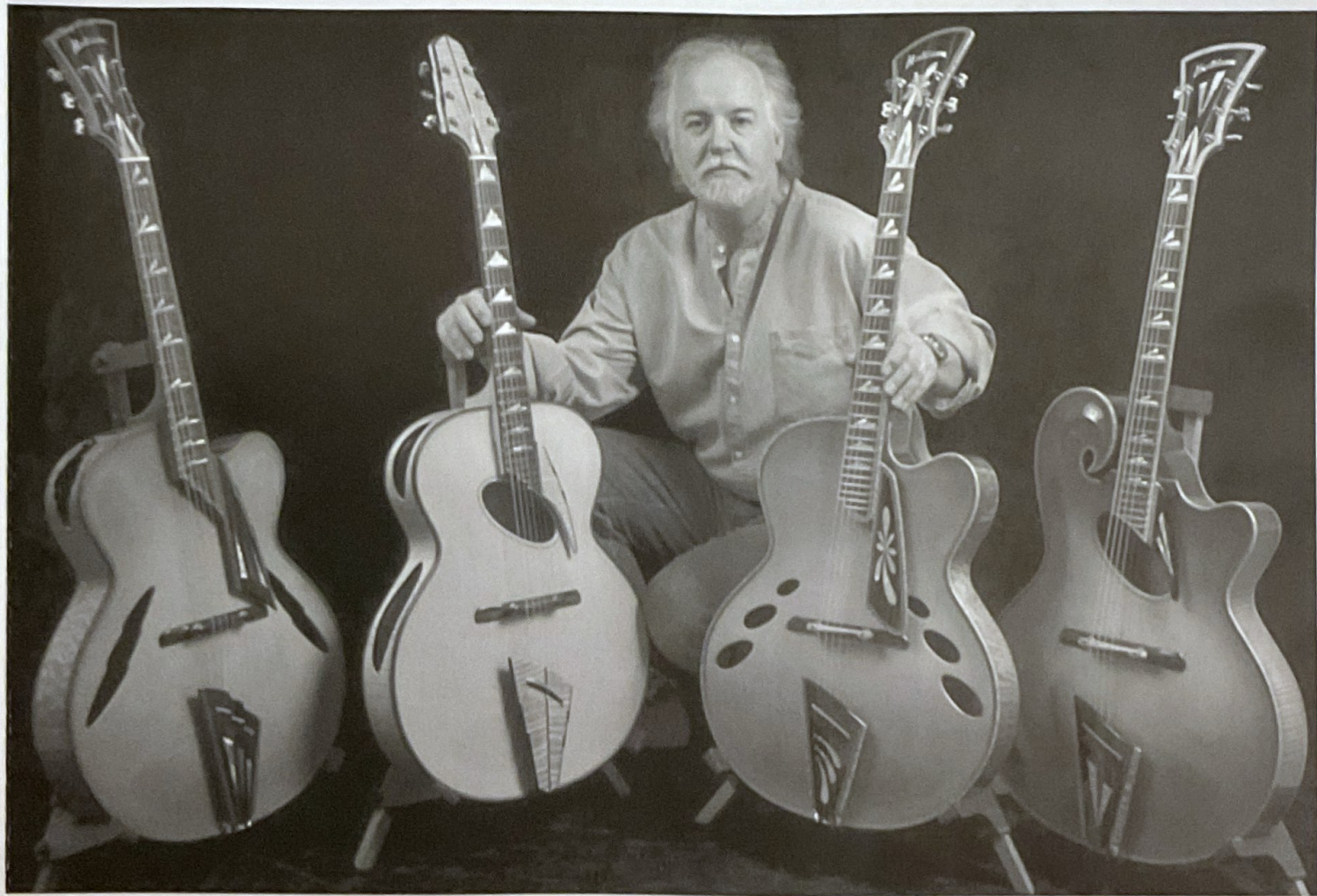


Ralston VL Guitar

U.S. \$11<sup>00</sup>

THE PUBLICATION FOR THE JAZZ GUITAR ENTHUSIAST

NO. 70 • FEB. 2012



John Monteleone with his Four Seasons Guitars

## Music

Somewhere Over the Rainbow  
A Felicidade  
Night and Day  
Walkin' My Baby Back Home  
Chalooch's Blooze

## Interviews

John Basile  
John Monteleone  
Bob Grillo  
Joey McKenzie  
Mike Hubbard

## Reviews

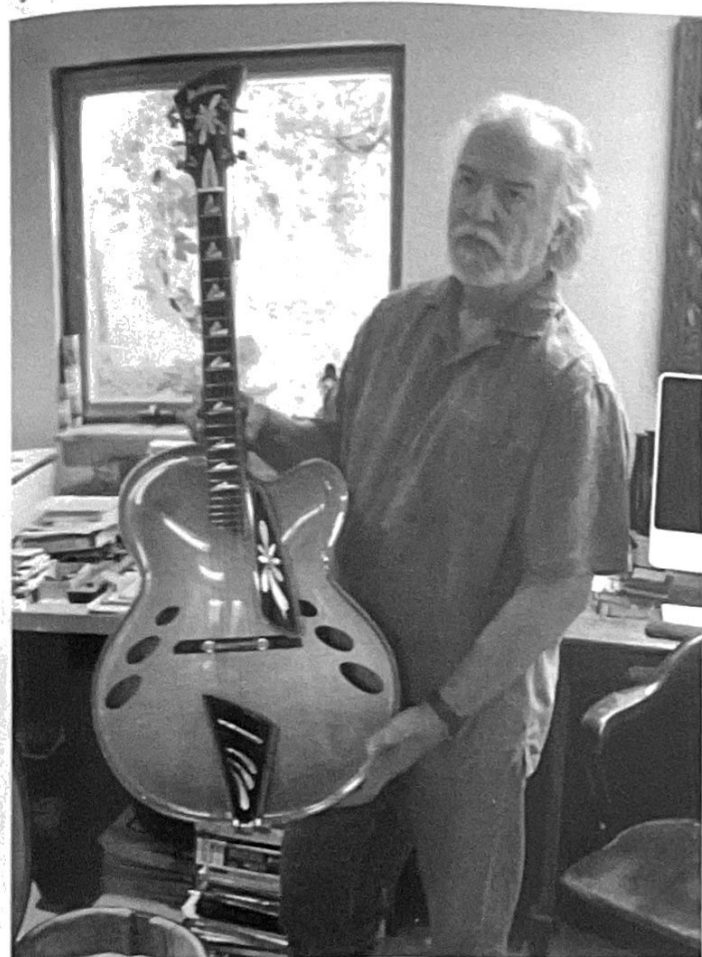
Ralston VL Guitar  
SeQuel Tribute Amp  
Amplitude app and iRig

LISTENING  TEST  
with Joshua Breakstone



# John Monteleone

by Joe Barth



The New York City area has a long tradition of great luthiers. John D'Angelico labored on the south side of Manhattan, building what many believe to be the finest specimens of the archtop guitar. To work under his wing he brought in a young apprentice named Jimmy D'Aquisto who would make his own unique statement through a series of archtops he would build in his shop out on Long Island. New York is the home of other fine luthiers like Roger Sadowsky and Ric McCurdy, as well as John Monteleone.

When John was a child he smashed a Harmony guitar. Not as an act of violence but of curiosity. He wanted to see what was inside the instrument, what made it sound the way it did. He knew that sound moves through wood and he wanted to discover how. He has devoted his life to that study and the result are some of the finest archtop, flattop guitars and mandolins ever built. I met with John at his Long Island shop for this conversation.

**JB: You started with doing repair work for Mandolin Brothers. What first appealed to you**

**about building archtops?**

JM: It goes back to one of my first exposures to the guitar itself, and it was a D'Angelico archtop. I was eleven years old working at my dad's store, and there was a professional guitarist who would come around to visit his wife who worked at a business next to my father's shop. I saw that he carried his guitar in and out of that shop. One day I got the courage to ask him if I could see his guitar and he showed me his Gibson ES 175. He was a gigging jazz musician. He told me that he was having a guitar built for him by a man in the city. That man was John D'Angelico. John built him a wonderful New Yorker, and when this fellow showed me his finished guitar, the sight, sound, smell and feel of that wonderful instrument just stayed with me.

At the time I was into rock music but I had an appreciation for jazz and for instruments like that New Yorker that one plays jazz on. I built my first guitar in 1958. In 1974 when I began to build mandolins, I began to appreciate deeply the artistry of the arched soundboard. That led me pretty quickly into making archtop guitars. In fact, I built my first archtop in 1976.

**JB: Did you ever meet John D'Angelico?**

JM: I, of course, was aware of his shop in the city. I used his strings on my guitar but I never had the opportunity to meet him. In the summer of 1964 I saw a Martin flattop on which John had put a 12-string neck, and I thought, I need to meet this man. But soon after that I heard that he died.

**JB: Talk about the impact of Jimmy D'Aquisto upon you.**

JM: In 1973 I started doing repair work for Mandolin Brothers, and I heard about Jimmy's reputation and that he lived on Long Island somewhere. When someone brought in a D'Angelico for repair or restoration I would pick up the phone and call Jimmy to ask about aspects of the project or where to get parts. He was wonderful to me and always made time to answer my questions. He was very open to telling me the right and wrong way to approach the repair. He was that open because I, at the time, was doing a lot of the grunt repair work that he preferred not to do anymore because of his busy schedule constructing instruments. I had this kind of professional relationship with him right up until he died. I never really apprenticed under him or anything like that. It was just conversations about these specific repair projects.





John Monteleone and his 4 Seasons guitars

**JB: When he died, his wife asked you to finish two of his guitars, I understand....**

**JM:** Yes, there were two guitars in his workshop here on Long Island that needed to be completed, and I finished those two instruments. One of them was a rare Solo model, of which only nine exist in the world. At the time of his death, Jimmy was working on a project for Fender Guitars. Jimmy died in a motel in Corona, California, but the two guitars were in his shop here.

**JB: Didn't you build mandolins before guitars?**

**JM:** In the 1970s there was a great demand for mandolins styled after the Gibson F-5, and no one was filling that demand. So I started building a mandolin faithful to the F-5, and built about thirty of them before I started to work in my own ideas of what I felt were improvements. I have built about 200 mandolins. I have just recently crossed that number in guitars. At first flattops, but now I build mostly archtops.

**JB: In general, how should someone look for a great archtop?**

**JM:** First, find a music store that has some great archtops and try them and hear what a finely crafted archtop guitar sounds like by comparison. Make sure the instrument is set up correctly. Just because the instrument is on display in a store doesn't mean it is set up correctly. Understand what a vintage guitar sounds like when it is set up correctly and is playing at its maximum. Know that the archtop is going to need more maintenance than a solidbody or a flattop guitar. This is the archtop's association with the violin. It is all about setup for a guitar to sound well. It is like a finely tuned car. Once you understand the sound and the playability of the instrument, you are prepared to acquire a quality instrument.

**JB: Let me ask some general construction questions and then we will move to the models you make. What woods do you select for the top, sides, and back?**



JM: Of course, a variety of spruces for the soundboards, and maples for the back and sides. Within those two categories there are a lot of woods to choose from. Sometimes I use a sitka spruce, which is really reliable soundboard material. I have other more exotic spruces for specific projects. For maples, there are many variations to choose from, depending upon the particular project.

**JB: What is your process for drying the wood?**

JM: You need to know what has been done to the wood before you received it. When I receive the wood, I almost always let it sit for a couple of years. There is some wood here that has sitting for a number of years. That is not to say that you can't ever use recently acquired wood. It all depends upon how the wood is when you receive it.

**JB: How do you approach carving the top and back?**

JM: My carver carves about 85% before I start in by hand. I want to be on the safe side where I can read the materials to get the sound I want. My goal is to liberate the piece to achieve maximum tone.

I use my own configuration of an asymmetrical X bracing on most of my tops, which brings a broader range to the instrument. It allows the lower tones to operate with the least resistance and efficiently and is most compliant with the rest of the body. The higher frequencies then can align themselves and operate more clearly defined when they have that mass to work with. Of course, the size and location of the f-holes as well as the size and location of the X-bracing can have a subtle yet definite effect on the tone of the instrument, making it either darker or brighter.

**JB: How do you shape the sides? How much do you wet the wood?**

JM: I still like to use steam and hand-bend the sides. I can do it by hand in about the same time it takes to do mechanically.

**JB: How do you shape the necks? There is a lot of talk about one-piece verses three-piece. Are your necks one-three or five-piece, and why?**

JM: I prefer the one-piece neck because it is uncomplicated, solid and has one piece integrity to it. I have made laminated necks in the past but my preference is for one piece. The one-piece has no tonal advantage

over the laminated, but I just prefer the look and the challenge of the one-piece. The laminated neck can begin to come apart after about fifty years. The wood just doesn't want to move together anymore. I use 3/16th truss rods in my necks.

**JB: Fingerboard wood and thickness...**

JM: I like about 1/4 inch thick ebony fingerboards. In general, I prefer about a 14-inch radius. I use a 25.4 scale unless the customer desires something different. I like that scale because it lies well with the strings. A string at that scale has more balanced overtones. A neck is a very personal part of the guitar. Some customers could not care less about the neck. One customer was so specific that he had the neck of his favorite guitar cast and sent to me so I could take measurements of the cast.

**JB: Do you use wood or plastic binding?**

JM: I use wood exclusively. Plastic does not share a relationship with the wood. Tonally it does nothing that wood does. Wood on wood is much more natural to the instrument. I think it looks a lot better. If you are framing a painting, you want an elegant frame that enhances the overall experience of the painting. The binding frames the guitar. Wood is more work but it is worth it.

**JB: Talk about the inlay that goes into your guitars.**

JM: I do all my own work and cut all my inlays. Jimmy D'Aquisto hated Mother of Pearl inlay. When he worked on a D'Angelico, inlays were expected of him. He felt that when he put inlay in, he was creating dead spots on the fingerboard. I understand that. My preference is to do some because I like it. I could order it out but I will continue to cut my own as long as I can. I believe that a custom-cut inlay just adds that much more to the artistic dimension of the instrument.

**JB: Tailpieces: tell me about the material and shape.**

JM: I use ebony tailpieces with adjustable straps, which I make here. The brass tailpiece has a slight ringing to it that some people cannot hear, but it annoys others. I like the ebony because, again, it is more natural to the instrument. It is more similar to the violin, viola, cello and double bass.

**JB: What bridge woods do you use? Do your bridges adjust, why or why not?**

JM: The bridge is an ongoing process of archtop

costruction. I keep experimenting. I could write a book on the ongoing aspects of the bridge. The footprint is important in terms of its dimensions and density of material. I used to have a large contact area with the soundboard but I have been backing off a bit. You have to know how far you can go, and then back off a bit. D'Aquisto was exploring the limits of the bridge. The bridge can change the character of the sound. I keep experimenting. I once used a combination of woods, ebony and maple.

**JB: Do you use hide (like D'Angelico) or aliphatic resin glue? Is there a tonal difference?**

JM: I'll use hide glue. I also use tight bond in places, sometimes super glue for inlay work.

**JB: Do you use U-V-cured finishes, or traditional lacquer finishes?**

JM: The finish work is sometimes my least favorite aspect. You have to get into a kind of Zen to get in the mood for the finish work. The finish is like a microscope of your woodwork. It just magnifies everything. I use lacquers and apply about eight to twelve coats, depending how thick they are. You want there to be just enough and then go just a tiny bit over that. If you get too much on there, it works against you.

**JB: Talk about your polishing and buffing process.**

JM: It depends upon the amount of lacquer I have applied. I have a buffer that I built for most, and do the final and touchup buffing and polishing by hand.

**JB: What tuning keys do you use?**

JM: It varies in term of what the instrument demands or the client prefers. I often use Schallers. On my really high-end instruments I use leather-end tuning keys that I make myself. I also use an open back Waverly because they are really nice.

**JB: What pickups do you use?**

JM: Pickups are again a very personal matter. I obviously use floating pickups. The ones that Kent Armstrong makes himself are very good.

**JB: How many guitars a year do you produce?**

JM: About ten to twelve a year.

**JB: Concerning some of your specific models, first the Radio Flyer.**

JM: The Radio Flyer grew out of my standard tradi-

tional model, the Eclipse. I wanted to modernize it in terms of both the sound and appearance. I gave it its name because I heard so many of the great jazz guitarists over the radio. I also wanted to design an instrument that would be adaptable to more styles of music than just traditional jazz.

The Radio City guitar grew out of the Radio Flyer and was another kind of tribute instrument honoring the inspiring performances of artists on the great stages of the world, and what better stage than the one at the Radio City Music Hall, where so many great artists performed.

**JB: How did the Gotham City model come about?**

JM: That guitar originally started as the Black Widow, which was the same guitar, but all black. The Gotham City was basically a natural-finish version of it. The Gotham City is me experimenting with the sound holes. Experimenting with sound holes is like experimenting with the bridge of the guitar. They are these tonal variants that greatly affect the sound of the instrument. The diagonal oval hole is a sound hole that I have been putting on a lot of guitars.

**JB: Tell me about the Grand Artist with the mandolin cutaway. Does that style of cutaway affect the tone in some way?**

JM: It is a different guitar.

**JB: How so?**

JM: It is like a fine wine. You have to play it to see and hear what I mean. Having made a lot of mandolins, I sensed a long time ago that it would be very interesting to build a guitar with a mandolin-style body. Where the body joins the neck would have to be in a different place. The body is going to be a little shorter in length but you now have the scroll, which compensated a little for that. The scroll on the body gives the resonate body a certain personality. A friend of mine calls it the Terminator. It has this very big kind of sound but unique. It is very strong, yet it can be as delicate as you want it to be. It is a nice alternative. I like alternatives. When you give artists a fresh color of paint or a different type of stone to sculpture they will come up with new forms of art. The same is true when you put a different-sounding instrument in the hands of a creative musician. He comes up with new-sounding music.

I also realize that the guitar is a pretty foundational

boast. You have to build it according to the traditions of the instrument. I try not to take undue advantage of its shape, but seek to be innovative within its traditions.



**JB: Which guitarists have used the Grand Artist where we could hear this instrument in a musical setting?**

**JM:** That raises an interesting issue and probably a subject all to itself. Who plays these instruments? In the old days it used to be the working musician, but this is a different day. That whole thing has changed.

The people who have supported the development of the archtop guitar are the collectors and people who are willing to invest in something beyond the ordinary. Most working musicians cannot have a custom-made instrument built for them.

**JB: Playing for \$70 a night doesn't allow affording a custom-built guitar.**

**JM:** No. They need a utilitarian guitar to go out and gig with. Even if they had a custom-built instrument, they wouldn't want to take it to the gig and chance having it damaged or stolen. Who takes a D'Angelico, that John built, out to the gig? I know one guy.

**JB: Ron Anthony.**

**JM:** Then two guys... (laughter). That is the way it is. It is the interest of the collector that gave rise to the archtop being able to be developed to the fine instrument it is today. Many of these collectors are fine players but they have other professions and just are not known to the musical community.

**JB: When you are building an instrument, you must be wondering whether it will be performed in hundreds of concerts and heard by thousands of people, or will it be hung in a glass case in someone's home.**

**JM:** I view myself as an artist in the same way that a painter or a sculptor is an artist. The luthiers of old did not build instruments for performance, and when a musician wore out his instrument, they built the musician another. That has all changed.

**JB: ... which raises another interesting point for another article: As a luthier, are your material and**

**construction choices for acoustic and musical reasons or are they for purely cosmetic considerations? But, that is for another time.**

**JB: Talk about the Eclipse, the oval-hole archtop.**

**JM:** The Eclipse was my first archtop model. At first, I wanted to get as close to the traditional archtop as possible. I have done this with that guitar. Every other model I have done comes out of the foundational aspects of that model. The simple, well built guitar, is wonderful.

Upon that foundation, we know what the f-hole guitar is. The oval-hole design is not as well known. The oval-hole is interesting. I never wanted to paint the archtop guitar into a corner as only a jazz guitar. Any guitar can be a jazz guitar.

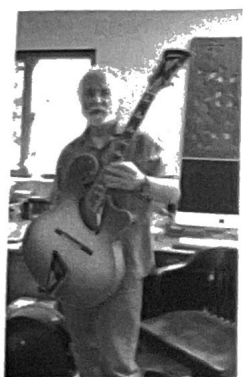
**JB: Ed Bickert with his old Telecaster...**

**JM:** Some guys play a nylon-string guitar. Why can't we take the archtop and use it in other stylistic contexts? Now, the oval-hole guitars that I had seen had not been perfected in the way that I thought they could be. What I liked was that you could take some of the flattop, loose, surrounding sound and combine it with the archtop quality of capturing the notes in a very well defined way. Combining these qualities, you would have something unique that would appeal to a broader range of musicians to explore. So I set out to see where it would go. I have decided to rotate this hole and make it more elliptical. Being elliptical, the sound projects quite well, and rotating it allows me to lay out the tone bars a different way.

**JB: And this has become the Quattroport model?**

**JM:** Yeah, it was second one I tried this on. The first one was the guitar that went into Scott Chinery's Blue Collection. This was an experimental guitar. It was not intended to go into that collection. I was building a Rocket City for Scott, and at the same time I was building this other guitar alongside of it where I was trying several ideas. One was the oval-hole where I could change the bracing of the soundboard and its relation to the bridge. I called this the Rocket Convertible guitar. The oval-hole gave this the rocket effect, and also on this, I had a side-sound system (two sound holes facing the musician) and thus came the Convertible part of the name. I wanted the player to hear the instrument well.





**JB: Tell me about the Hexaphone model.**

JM: The Hexaphone is a flattop guitar. Hex means six, and phone refers to the speaker, so it is a six-string speaker. I always liked the looks of jumbo acoustic guitars, but they never seemed to deliver the sound that you think that they would. I changed the configuration of the

side and the back to heighten the mid range and highs without taking anything away from the bass, which big-bodied guitars do so well.

Let me say about all the models, that as an independent builder, I prefer to make each guitar unique. The idea of punching out the same model one after another like a machine sounds boring. The independent builder should be like an artist, and have some freedom of expression with the instrument he builds.

**JB: Tell me about the Four Seasons set of four guitars.**

JM: They were my first attempt at a thematic concept. I had never seen four guitars that were built as a group and designed to remain together as a set to tell a story. The four seasons is a subject that has intrigued the sculptor, painter, and composer.

I had some special woods in my personal collection that I had acquired from the D'Aquisto estate and thought it was time to do a special series of guitars. They are four guitars that have cosmetic appointments of, and are named after, each of the four seasons. They all have the side sound hole that allows sound to project directly to the player as well as to let him view inside the body of the instrument. I started with winter. These four guitars are inseparable. If they ever leave my possession, they must be sold as a group. Different pieces of wood either reminded me of or suggested to me one of the season of the year. On Winter I chose some light and dark maples and spruces that were very creamy in texture. On every aspect of the guitar I used only the best material, including some diamond inlay. Inside there is a pen-and-ink winter night scene of a skater on a pond, where I used 50 diamonds as stars in the scene that can be viewed through the side hole. I built this guitar in 2002.

Next guitar was Summer, built in 2003. It has a sum-

mer scene painted inside with diamond inlay. The next year came Autumn, made from wood that reminds me of falling water and rustling leaves. There is a Fall scene inside that again uses diamond stars. Lastly Spring was built with tiger maple, and as with the others, has diamond inlay.

**JB: You said that the four guitars are inseparable. If you were to sell them as a set have you determined a price for all four?**

JM: The guitars are not for sale, but I have the four of them insured for nearly a million dollars. They were on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the archtop guitar exhibition February 2011. I have commissioned Anthony Wilson to write a composition, a guitar quartet, to be performed on all four of these guitars. It was premiered at the MMOA exhibition in February.

**JB: Talk about the instrument you made for Anthony Wilson.**

JM: He wanted a Radio Flyer. He was playing a Byrdland, which has a very short-scale neck, but he quickly adapted to the normal scale of the Radio Flyer and has been playing it ever since. It has worked well for him as a gigging, touring and recording guitar.

I made a guitar for Mark Knopfler a couple of years ago. He wrote a song entitled Monteleone that is featured on his *Get Lucky* album. That guitar I called Isabella.



**JB: For someone to order a guitar from you, what would be the price?**

JM: My standard guitar is \$39,000. I build about ten to twelve guitars a year. I currently have orders that will keep me busy for the next three years. I have stopped taking new orders for the time to allow me to get caught up and not feel so pressured on completing my current commitments.

**JB: What advice would you give to the young up-and-coming luthier.**

JM: Start basic. Don't try to do something fancy early on. That is getting the cart before the horse. Take a basic archtop like an L-5 and build something as close as possible to that. You need to become consistent in

controlling your materials, tools and your skills. All three of those are tied together and it is very difficult to be consistent in working with these three.

Joe Barth is author of *Voices in Jazz Guitar*: Great

<http://www.monteleone.net/index2.html> • John Monteleone • P.O. Box 52 • Islip, NY 11751 • 631-277-3620

Performers Tell about Their Approach to Playing (Mel Bay) which is available at Amazon.com and other fine retailers.

He can be contacted at [pjosephbarth@aol.com](mailto:pjosephbarth@aol.com)

## John In The Workshop

