elliptical journey

John Monteleone's Art Deco-inspired instruments feed the eyes, tickle the ears and stimulate the imagination

BY JOHN THOMAS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS DECKER

"JIMMY GAVE THIS TO ME," says John Monteleone, holding up to eye level a small, all-metal tool with a six-inch handle attached to a cam. Rotating the handle sends the cam and the sharp blade on its outer edge on an elliptical journey; its circumference can be adjusted for size by sliding the handle in its slot in the cam.

"He had two that had been John's, and he knew that I had been cutting oval soundholes in my mandolins," Monteleone recalls. "So he called me up and said, 'John, I've got two elliptical cutters. You should come over and get one.'"

This elliptical cutter is very clearly the work of an ingenious and artistic machinist of yesteryear. "Where did John get it?" I ask. "Oh," replies Monteleone, "Jimmy's dad made it for John. He was a die maker — very talented. I've gotten a lot of use out of this."

"Jimmy," of course, is Jimmy D'Aquisto, and "John" is John D'Angelico. It was Orville Gibson's 1895 patent application that charted the career path for both men. Gibson fused guitar and cello — that is, he made a guitar with a carved top and back. He claimed he'd created an instrument that exhibited a "degree of sensitive resonance and vibratory action" and "a character and quality of sound entirely new" to musical instruments. In so doing, he established an ideal that would compel D'Angelico to produce 1,164 extraordinary instruments during his short, 59-year life.

D'Angelico's inspiration provided D'Aquisto with both a vocation and an education. At 17, D'Aquisto began a partnership with D'Angelico that saw him rise from floor sweeper to successor when D'Angelico died a dozen years later, in 1964. D'Angelico, however, had also bequeathed to D'Aquisto a sort of artistic prison.

Upon D'Angelico's death, D'Aquisto completed the guitars in progress and embarked on a continuation of his mentor's work, producing the pearl- and celluloid-laden New Yorker and Excel models that archtop cognoscenti had come to demand. But, as D'Aquisto later explained to protégé Linda Manzer, he felt trapped by the expectations of his early clientele.

By the mid-1980s, D'Aquisto began to shed the D'Angelico legacy. He first eliminated plastic bindings and mother-of-pearl inlays, and soon replaced violin-inspired f-holes with large, aggressively shaped sound ports. From that point until his death in 1995, D'Aquisto's designs moved farther and farther away from D'Angelico's. (And he gave his creations names that emphasized their radical departure from his mentor's traditionalism: Advance, Centura and, perhaps most fittingly, Avante Garde.) Sadly, D'Aquisto, like his mentor, died at the age of 59.

John Monteleone is neither a traditionalist nor a revolutionary. He's cognizant of the past and contemplative of the instrument's future, but feels constrained by neither. Monteleone sees his work as timeless. For example, Monteleone's visual aesthetic is strongly influenced by the Art Deco movement of the 1920s, but when I ask about the origins of his interest in the 1920s, Monteleone seems momentarily puzzled.

"Oh," he responds, "you mean because Art Deco began in the 1920s?" When I nod, he says, "It's not the time that I'm drawn to, but to elements of the time's art. Remember, it wasn't until long after the Paris Exposition [of 1925] that we began to call those designs 'Art Deco.'" (Indeed, it wasn't until the publication in 1968 of Bevis Hillier's *Art Deco of the 20s and 30s* — more than 40 years after the movement originated at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes.) "I'm drawn to the elegance of Art Deco," he adds. "The geometry and symmetry of those designs lend themselves to guitars, too."

This colloquy reveals much about Monteleone — humble yet self-assured — and his art. A Monteleone guitar is, as he puts it, "first, a tool." It's a tool that reflects everything that has gone before it. The carefully sculpted X-bracing looks to be a refinement of 1930s Gibson archtops, and the bridge is positioned precisely at the top's balancing point. ("I learned this from studying and building violins.") Then, there's the minimalist finger rest that protects the guitar's top, but doesn't make too big a visual statement. The elegant tailpiece also melts into the overall design. It's the quintessential Art Deco creation: "capable of relating to the modern world . . . with an abandon calculated to stimulate . . . fantasy" (to paraphrase historian William Jordy).

But a Monteleone guitar is bold, too. The Radio Flyer, for example, features a large, sweeping headstock and big, dolphin-shaped soundholes. The Radio City has f-holes of a more traditional shape, but a bold finger rest and fingerboard inlays inspired by the architecture of New York's Radio City Music Hall. The Quattroport has an angular snakehead headstock and, well, four soundholes, three of which sit on the guitar's bass side and push the envelope with regard to "just how much side you can remove and still maintain structural integrity." The Grand Artist Scroll blends Orville Gibson's Style 0 scroll with an elliptical soundhole set at an acute angle across the guitar's top.

Soon, I'm gazing at the Deco-Vox, a Chrysler Building-inspired guitar with an array of angular pearl inlays and a horizontal sunburst finish. The guitar's owner tells me that he gave Monteleone the body-size parameters and then "let John do his thing. I'm not going to tell a genius how to do his work."

Monteleone rolls his eyes and, as if to make certain he doesn't let this go to his head, asks if we'd like some iced tea, wandering off to get a pitcher and cups. The tea is welcome on this unusually warm June afternoon – about seven hours into an extraordinary visit to John Monteleone's workshop.

A CUSTOMER'S CROSSING

DARIO RONCO HAS CHOSEN to cross the Atlantic to pick up his Monteleone Triport archtop in person. (This Italian-born resident of Romania can sense the enormity of the moment — not to mention the risk that airline baggage handlers pose.) He lets me tag along, and fretboard wizard Howard Emerson is with us as well. We've encountered some vintage Gibsons, a couple of D'Angelicos (including the second made and one previously owned by George Benson) and, most impressively, a gaggle of Monteleones. Howard has put them all through their paces.

After riding the ferry across the Long Island Sound, I navigate the winding path from Long Island's Port Jefferson, on its northern shore, to Islip, on its southern shore. Several minutes after ringing what I believe to be Monteleone's doorbell, a man looking nothing like Monteleone (based on the photos I've seen) opens the door.

"May I help you?"

"Uh," I stammer, "I'm looking for John Monteleone's house."

"Oh," the man replies, "guitars. I thought so. John is two doors down."

After driving the gravel path to the shop behind Monteleone's (actual) home, I see Howard Emerson sitting on the shop's front step, playing a bit of bottleneck on his 1927 Gibson L-5. Howard is an old friend of Monteleone's, and a guy who can test the limits of Monteleone's guitars. (Monteleone designs his archtops to play a broad range of music, beyond the jazz with which they've been most closely associated.) As I step from my car, Howard launches into a gorgeous arrangement of "I Can't Help Falling in Love," played in open D on the L-5.

As the bottleneck whines on the L-5's strings, Monteleone emerges from his shop. He offers me his hand and then invites me to sit at the patio table in front

John Monteleone stands behind his work, which is held by Dario Ronco, proud owner of a new Triport model.

Monteleone still carves the final arch of the top and the back using a small hand plane.

of his shop. "So," says Monteleone, "where do you want to start?" I suggest a shop tour, and Monteleone smiles. "That seems like a good place to start," he says. Before we get too far along, however, a man bearing one of the largest smiles I've ever seen emerges from a rental car. This must be the recipient of the new Monteleone Triport.

Dario pulls a guitar case from the car. (Apparently, he was unable to contain his excitement and didn't quite await my arrival before picking up his new Monteleone, but he has kindly returned to the shop a day later.) I quickly hand it to Howard, saying, "OK, show us what this thing can do." Howard opens the case and removes a stunning creation. Like all Monteleones, this guitar is valid both as visual artwork and musical instrument.

In terms of visual aesthetics, Monteleone never does the expected. For example, the Triport's top soundhole confirms that Monteleone has, indeed, been making good use of that elliptical cutter, but he has placed the soundhole at an oblique angle across the guitar's top. That angle matches the rake of the front edge of the ebony tailpiece and end of the ebony fingerboard. And, unlike the Gibsons, D'Angelicos and D'Aquistos of yore, the tailpiece is angled so that it is closer to the bridge on the bass side rather than the treble side. "That makes the front edge of the tailpiece match the angle of the oval soundhole," he says, "but I made the tailpiece like that for a tonal reason and then worked to make it succeed visually, too."

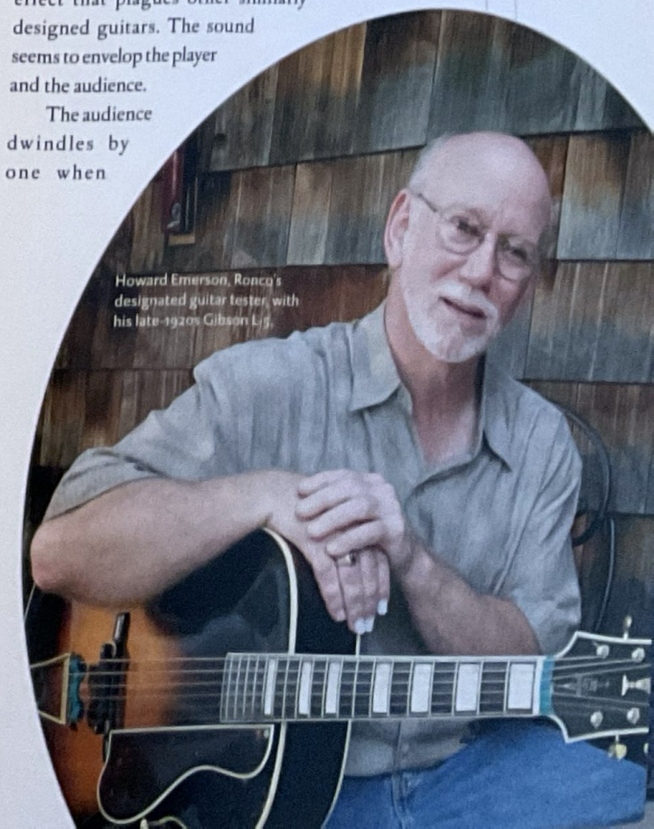
Monteleone then discusses the "after-length" of the strings: that distance from bridge to tailpiece and nut to tuner. "I can't detect a difference in tone due to the after-length above the nut," he explains, "but the after-length below the bridge does make a difference. A longer after-length produces subtle alteration to the touch and feel of the strings. There is no effect on volume. Touch is an elusive concept and difficult to explain, but there is a difference. So, I 'flip' the tailpiece to produce a shorter after-length on the bass side."

Visuals always take a back seat to sound, but the completed work is an integrated whole, visually and musically. Dario's guitar is a case in point. Visually, it's a mix of the bold, the subtle and the whimsical. The soundhole, which cuts across the face of the instrument in an unexpected fashion, is bordered by an understated rosette made of a single line of dark purfling. That single line of purfling borders both sides of the maple binding throughout the instrument. A sliver of ebony serves as a finger rest. Finally, sitting atop the guitar is its most obvious nod to the Art Deco aesthetic: an angular snakehead headstock that takes its inspiration from New York's Chrysler Building. The guitar, with maple back and sides and Sitka spruce top, has a natural finish over its non-cutaway (rare, for a Monteleone) body. It's sleek and modern, yet timeless — and like no other guitar you've ever seen.

Howard, meanwhile, has been playing non-stop since we gathered around to ogle the guitar. He's tried a half-dozen tunings, fingerpicking and playing bottleneck. (Dario requested "a fingerstyle archtop," and Monteleone has accommodated him.) Now, you might want to sit immediately in front of Howard to hear this guitar, but you also might want to cozy up next to Howard behind the guitar — to hear what he hears from those huge side sound ports (see sidebar, page 87).

Monteleone's delightful sound ports are large enough that they seem to replicate the sound coming off of the face of the instrument — not always the case with side ports. In addition, since there are two of them and they are both large, it eliminates the out-of-phase effect that plagues other similarly designed guitars. The sound seems to envelop the player and the audience.

The audience dwindles by one when



Howard Emerson, Ronco's designated guitar tester, with his late-1920s Gibson L-7.

Dario migrates over to Howard's L-5. He plays a tune or two and picks up a little black book. Intrigued, I mosey over to take a peek. It seems Dario has a log of guitars played — the equivalent of a bird watcher's lifetime journal of species seen.

"Hey," I say, "there must be a Monteleone or two in the shop that you haven't yet played." Grinning, Dario grabs his little book, and we all head inside.

ROOTS

"I've got my first guitar back here," says Monteleone, and we then begin a tantalizing stroll from the shop's front door to its back wall. Beginning at the beginning makes sense, so I have to restrain myself from stopping every few inches and asking Monteleone about what appears before my eyes.

On my left is a rack of completed guitars, above which sits a rack of completed mandolins. On my right is a room filled with guitar cases, some of which look to be vintage items. We pass some assembled guitar bodies, tops in various stages of carving, necks with peghead overlays displaying a variety of angular, abstract inlays and stacks of beautiful wood. At last, we stop at the far corner, and here, in a few square feet, is a most efficient Monteleone career retrospective. On the shelf to my left sits the body of a dreadnought that Monteleone built when he was 13 or 14. A disassembled violin sits on the right. "I built violins more as a study than as a serious attempt to become a violin maker," says Monteleone. "There are centuries of knowledge in the violin-making community. I wanted to unlock the part of that that is applicable to guitars." Directly in front of me is contemporary Monteleone, represented by a neck from a seven-string archtop that sports angular cutouts in its peghead.

Author John Thomas and John Monteleone examine the first guitar Monteleone ever built.

Monteleone is in the process of restoring the dreadnought. It's mahogany and spruce, made simply but nicely, especially for a first effort by a luthier-to-be in his early teens. "I got the wood in New York City," he tells me. "I found a place in the Yellow Pages. I knew that you couldn't get guitar wood just at your local lumber store. I knew you needed something special. So, I found this place, H. L. Wild [at 510 E. 11th St.], and my dad drove me. It was a really cool place. That building was used in the film *Ragtime*."

The guitar has a nicely joined two-piece top. "Mr. Wild said, 'You might want to start with a three-piece, ready-glued, up top. It's a little difficult to join the top pieces for a beginner.' So, I said, 'OK, Mr. Wild!' But I joined the top myself."

"Was there any information available then about guitar construction?" I ask.

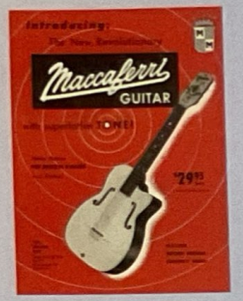
"Not steel-string-guitar building," replies Monteleone, "but there was this book, *Make Your Own Spanish Guitar* [by A. P. Sharpe, 1957]. It was all about how to make a classical guitar, which was not what I wanted to do, but I figured it had to have some information that I could extrapolate. I just kind of did it the best way I imagined. I also used to go to music stores and take down a Martin, take it down and play it, and absorb everything I could out of it by osmosis."

Extrapolation and osmosis seem to have been a good strategy; Monteleone Number One looks to be a fine instrument. (And Monteleone still has Number Two. "It's the guitar I play every day, my couch guitar.") Where extrapolation and osmosis left off, necessity filled in. Monteleone points to the end graft and neck block on Number One. "My father was a little-league manager, so he had access to a good supply of baseball bats." Sure enough, the neck block and end graft are pure Louisville Slugger. The inside sports sycamore braces.

The neck reinforcement is a flat piece of steel.

Learning from a Legend

Monteleone's adventures with Maccaferri



At first encounter, Mario Maccaferri, who had just celebrated his 80th birthday, was impressed with John Monteleone's work, and he entrusted to him a guitar of his own design. "He handed me a blueprint of a classical guitar that he had designed and asked me to build it, and I did," Monteleone remembers. "I made him the guitar, and we had a lot of fun during the process tweaking the design. It was a D-hole, cutaway classical that looked like the steel-string guitars he designed for Selmer. Mario was a world-class classical guitar player. He still enjoyed playing the guitar and played just about every day. He played the guitar I made until the day he died."

Their relationship blossomed after Maccaferri received the commissioned guitar. "Mario was retired and was looking for something to do," Monteleone explains, "so he suggested that we build some guitars together, and we decided on a dozen. We went out shopping for the wood together. Constantine's was not too far away, in the Bronx, so we took a drive over there and picked out all of the rosewood and mahogany veneers that we were going to use to do the laminations for the sides and backs.

"Mario got really excited about the guitars, and he made the forms for them himself. And he made the lamination press for the backs. The originals were laminated, but they were never made by Selmer the way that he wanted to do it, with a slight arch to the backs."

Selmer, according to Monteleone, made the backs flat and then bent the relief into them. "They took the easy way out, but when we made the guitars, Mario got to do it the way that he originally wanted to."

Monteleone and Maccaferri made six classical guitars and six steel-string guitars. All were true to Maccaferri's original plan, eschewing the design changes implemented by Selmer — the small, oval "petite bouche" soundhole and the long scale — that had led Maccaferri to terminate his partnership with them in 1939.

And what happened to those MonteFerris?

"You know, this is a sad thing," says Monteleone. "Unfortunately, a series of events transpired up there in the Bronx, and the guitars all disappeared. A couple of years after [Maccaferri] had passed, I called [his wife] Maria and asked if I could buy a guitar, because I had never gotten any of the 12 that we had made. It would have been really nice to have one of those pieces as a keepsake, a memento of our past together. She said, 'No, I divided them up among the family members, and there are none available.'

"So, I asked about the classical guitar that I made for Mario. She said, 'I've got some bad news. It got stolen out of the house.' So that disappeared, and I never got any of the pieces. . . . I called everyone I could think of — shops, pawn shops, I may have even called the police at the time — but I never heard anything. They're gone."

The Maccaferri legacy endures, though. "I thought that the design was really wonderful," says Monteleone. "It was a very ergonomic design, somewhere in the OM size range. And I really wanted to see what the design could do if it had X-bracing instead of Mario's ladder bracing, and a pin bridge instead of the floating bridge. I called it the Hot Club. In fact, there's one over there underway."

We walk to the rack and examine the Hot Club. "I wonder what Mario would have thought of this design?" I muse. "Oh, he loved it!" says Monteleone. "I showed it to him, and he really liked it. Right then, he said, 'We're going into business! You've got to move up here, or I'll move there. We'll set up a factory, and I'll give you my name!' When I balked, Mario said, 'You want to make money or you want to make art?' I said, 'Well, if you're going to put it like that, I'll have to think about it.'"

Monteleone called Maccaferri the next day to give him the bad news. "I said, 'You know what, Mario? I want to do both. I want to make art and I want to make some money. I'll be a much happier guy that way. So, thanks, but no thanks.'"

Maccaferri took the news well. "He said, 'Ah, that's all right . . . Let's go make some violins!'" Monteleone laughs. "I said, 'OK, that sounds good to me.' I was into violins at the time — I think that I had even made a couple by then — and I thought that it would be fun and I could learn something. And I did. Mario had been a violin maker back in the '20s, before the whole Selmer thing started. He'd won some medals for his violins, and he'd squirreled away some violin wood, so we made four violins."

Ever restless, Maccaferri then turned to building a cello, which he constructed but never finished. After that, it was on to the next challenge: plastic violins! "Mario was really into plastics," says Monteleone, "and thought that plastic was the answer to intonation and other problems of wooden instruments." So, at nearly 90 years of age, Maccaferri tooled up to make plastic violins. "He spent a lot of money tooling. He was injection-molding violins and assembling them by hand, himself. He made several hundred of them. His dream was to have it played in Carnegie Hall, and he did."

Indeed, on March 10, 1990, Dorothy Happell took the Carnegie Hall stage with a plastic Maccaferri violin in hand and played, among other works, Schumann's Sonata No. 1 (Op. 105). Alas, Allan Kozinn's review in the next day's *New York Times* was not charitable:

It looks and sounds like a violin, but not a very good one . . . The plastic violin's deficits, mainly, were in projection. Although all the sound of the bow on the string came through with all its usual characteristics, the upper range of the instrument sounded scrawny, and its richer lower range lacked the resonance and bloom one expects from a good wooden instrument. It might be useful as a student violin, and it is ideal for players who want to fiddle in the rain, or on the beach. Its attractions as a concert instrument, though, are limited.

"Sheffield steel," he says. "My dad was a pattern maker, so he could get me good materials." Mr. Wild gave him a formula so that he could calculate where each fret had to go, and Monteleone laid them out to the nearest one-thousandth of an inch.

"In those days, you could get nothing," Monteleone notes. "You had to make everything, which is a habit I've carried over to this day." He points to the pantograph he uses to carve his arched tops. "I made this machine. I bought a couple of the metal parts, but I made everything else."

MONTEFERRI AND MONTEQUISTO

Moving to our right, I spot some plastic guitars hanging on the wall. "Are these Maccaferris?" I ask. "Yes," says Monteleone. "I uncovered these guitars in Mario's warehouse shortly after I'd met him. There were thousands of them — all made, boxed, strung to pitch and ready to be shipped, back in 1953 or 1954."

Mario Maccaferri was the classical guitarist and luthier best known for designing the Selmer-produced guitars that Django Reinhardt embraced and that remain de rigueur in gypsy jazz. Monteleone and Maccaferri built a dozen guitars together — six classical guitars and six steel-strings, each with a short scale and a D-shaped soundhole (see sidebar, page 82).

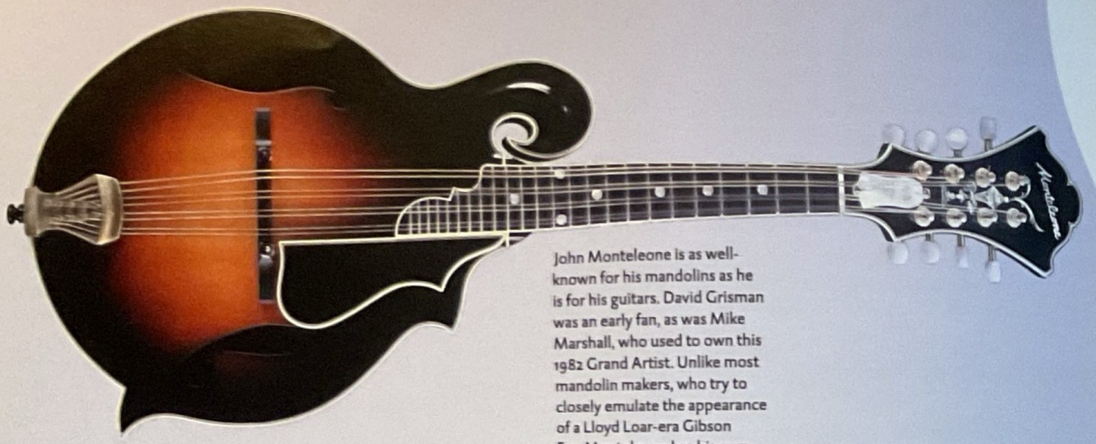
"It all started in 1980 when I brought some of my guitars up for him to see," Monteleone recalls. "I knew about him and I guess I wanted to let him know that we could relate to each other through a common bond of guitar making. It led to a long friendship that had some very interesting moments."

Talk of Monteleone's collaboration with Maccaferri has reminded me of his most celebrated collaboration: the "MonteQuisto."

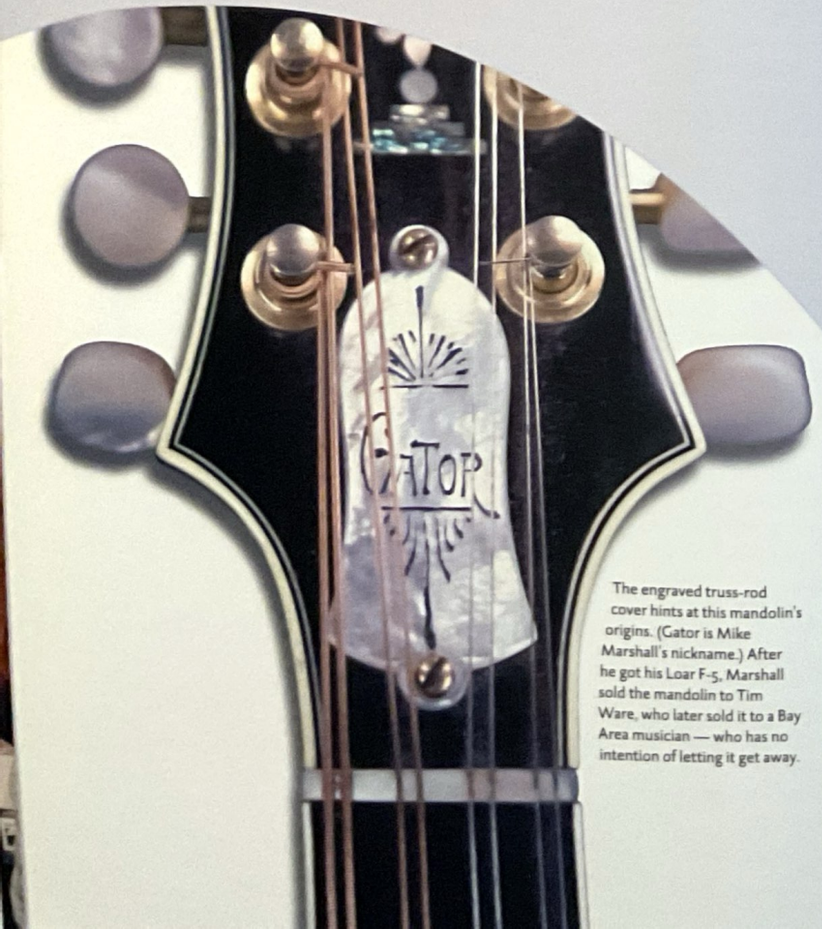
"I had this client," explains Monteleone, "who had a guitar on order when Jimmy [D'Aquisto] died. He then asked me to make the guitar for him. I said, 'Ah, thanks, no. I'm not into it. It's not for me to make.' I just didn't see finishing it as an act of integrity. Out of respect for Jimmy, the project wasn't something that I wanted to lend my name to."

That artistic calculus changed dramatically about a year later, when the effects from D'Aquisto's estate were being sold off. "I bought all of the wood that I

The ornamentation on this Deco-Vox was inspired by the Chrysler Building in New York City. Although many of Monteleone's archtops have f-holes, he now builds quite a few with oval soundholes.

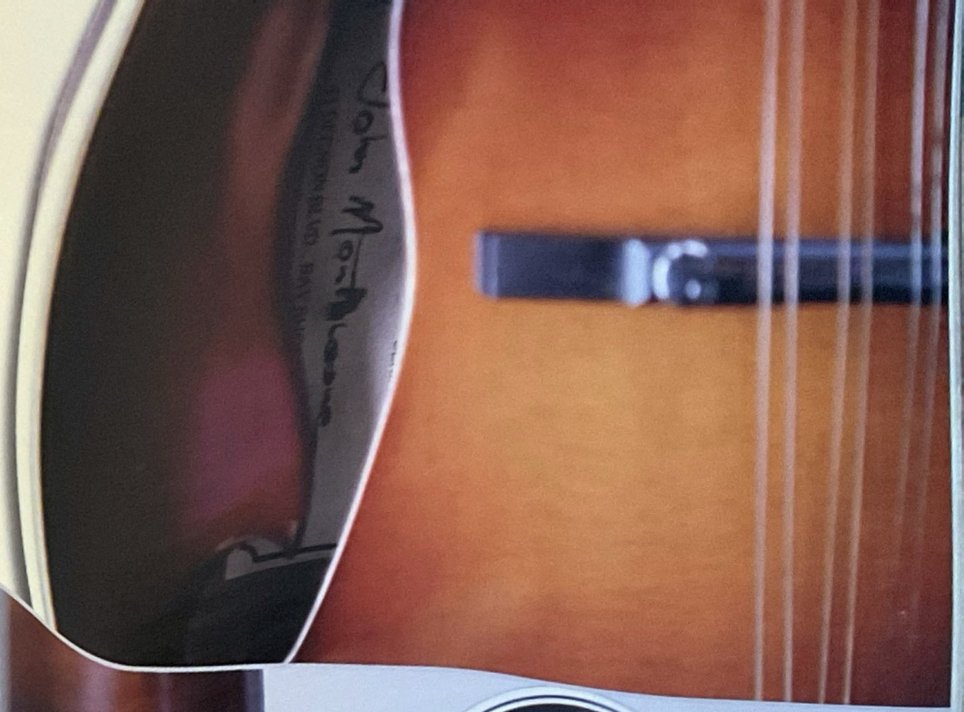


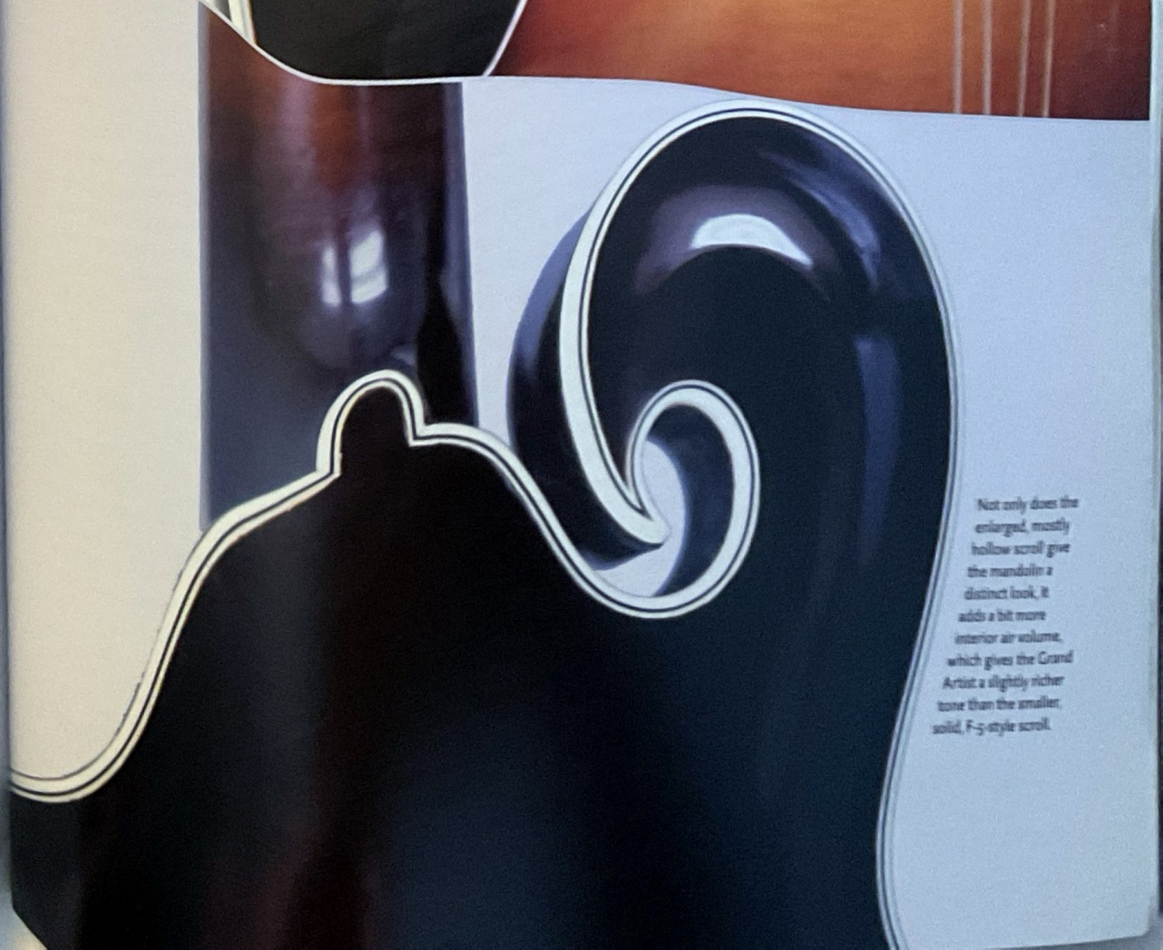
John Monteleone is as well-known for his mandolins as he is for his guitars. David Grisman was an early fan, as was Mike Marshall, who used to own this 1982 Grand Artist. Unlike most mandolin makers, who try to closely emulate the appearance of a Lloyd Loar-era Gibson F-5, Monteleone has his own way of doing things. The most obvious differences are the enlarged scroll, the symmetrical headstock and the differently shaped fretboard extension.



The engraved truss-rod cover hints at this mandolin's origins. (Gator is Mike Marshall's nickname.) After he got his Loar F-5, Marshall sold the mandolin to Tim Ware, who later sold it to a Bay Area musician — who has no intention of letting it get away.

John Monteleone's signature on the label got a little smeared at a long-forgotten gig, but the mandolin sounds better every year.





Not only does the enlarged, mostly hollow scroll give the mandolin a distinct look, it adds a bit more interior air volume, which gives the Grand Artist a slightly richer tone than the smaller, solid, F-5-style scroll.

could," Monteleone says. "Then, some things got out of his shop. [Staten Island guitar dealer] Mandolin Brothers had some things for sale. My client saw some parts there — a body mold, bent sides, a neck blank and some ebony that could be used for a fingerboard and tailpiece. He called me and asked whether he should buy them. I said, 'Well, remember that you wanted me to make a guitar? This might be the opportunity. It makes for a project that would be sensible.'"

The client had commissioned Jimmy D'Aquisto to build a Solo, perhaps the best regarded of the modern, minimalist designs that characterize the guitars that the luthier built in his last years. D'Aquisto had built nine Solos; this was to be the 10th. Monteleone completed the project, using only wood that D'Aquisto had owned. Building the guitar, says Monteleone, was both "a study and a lesson."

THE DESTINATION: FANTASY AND FUN

To view the fruits of Monteleone's lifelong study, we return to the shop's steps to revisit Dario's Triport. Back out front, Howard is still playing the Triport, and we settle in to hear a master test the guitar's abilities. Monteleone grows a bit nostalgic and begins to recall his early days of building guitars. At the time, Monteleone was nearing completion of a seven-year stint doing repair work at Mandolin Brothers, where he learned from "many fine and otherwise" examples of vintage guitars. He was also building instruments in his spare time.

His "evolutionary concepts" in the "sound, look and feel" of his instruments were spurred in part by players who were pushing the boundaries of the archtop guitar. Fingerstyle players Billy McEwen, now living in Norway, and, most prominently, Howard Emerson, the man sitting next to me, "opened the door to the possibilities," Monteleone says, as Howard launches into a funky rendition of Blind Blake's "Police Dog Blues."

"These guys used to come over to the shop in those early days, and they would bring their experiments. Billy used to buy just about every guitar made, and he would bring them by the shop to have them tweaked and worked on. Billy was playing fingerstyle. Howie [Emerson] was playing fingerstyle and bottleneck — and brilliantly, I might add. And this was the kind of approach that got me to thinking about the archtop in another way. Up to that point, the archtop had never been given its fair due. It had been boxed into this jazz stereotype, and I always thought that was very unfair to the instrument.

"As a solo instrument, the archtop was not getting its chance. But guys like Billy and Howie were applying techniques to the archtop that really wound me up in the right way. I'd think, *Yeah, it's possible.* Why can't you use the instrument any way that you want and use it as a tool? It's got to be a tool. That was always my rule number one. If you can't play music on this thing, it's useless; it's a wall hanger. But, if you approach the instrument for its function, its value as a musical instrument, then it can't lose its integrity. . . . You can inspire a musician to get inside the instrument, to explore, to begin to pull things out of the instrument."

As our day winds to a conclusion, Howard switches from the Triport to the Deco-Vox. (There is no other place on Earth but Monteleone's shop where one can meaningfully say that.) This guitar, unlike the Triport, sports but a single opening on its front, and nearly everything about the Deco-Vox is dazzling. It's got a clear voice with the biggest bass that I've ever heard in an archtop guitar. Perhaps most eye-catching is its sunburst, if you can call it that. It's pink and green, with a large swatch of green rubbed across the lower bout and a swatch of pink rubbed across the upper bout, leaving a natural spruce color around the bridge and soundhole.

"It was kind of an evolution of ideas," says Monteleone. "I never liked the traditional, typical sunburst pattern. I got away from that years ago by experimenting with the pattern of light and dark and colors."

Monteleone had two sources of inspiration for the inlay design: the buyer's wife and that icon of Art Deco, New York's Chrysler Building. "The client's wife had asked me a long time ago if I could make a guitar like the Chrysler Building. I said, 'I don't think so.' But then I began to think that there were some interesting elements to the building's design that could work on a guitar. You know, if you don't interpret things directly or literally, but let the ideas have some movement, a design can get really interesting."

Whether a Monteleone is relatively unadorned, like Dario's Triport, or gilded with wild, angular inlays

Side Order

Monteleone and his signature sound ports

John Monteleone points out that a great musician can transcend even "a pretty lousy instrument" by "taking it to a magical place." A luthier's job is to help them get to that place — to "meet musicians on the proper playing field. You bring them things that work for them, but aren't gadgety or gimmicky."

As an example, Monteleone refers to the soundholes on the side of a guitar. "A lot of people think of that as gimmicky," he says. "When I was a kid, I thought about that sound. In the '70s, I thought it out and made a sketch. But I never made a guitar with side sound ports because I figured no one would accept it."

Although side sound ports seem fairly common these days, I first saw them on a few of the Blue Guitars that collector Scott Chinery commissioned and exhibited at the Smithsonian in 1996 and 1997 — including Monteleone's contribution. "Scott and I were talking about guitars, as usual," Monteleone explains. "Scott said to me, 'The trouble with archtop guitars is that I can't hear them when I'm playing them. I've got to lean over, and it's just not practical.' I said, 'Well, there is a better way that I've been working on: sound from the side of the guitar. It's sort of the "me" guitar because it would be made for the player's enjoyment.' And Scott said, 'You know, that would work! That's a great idea.'"

As fate would have it, Monteleone was building two guitars at the time: a Radio City for the Blue Guitars showcase and a Rocket Convertible with side sound ports. Monteleone proposed switching the guitars and submitting the Convertible to the Chinery exhibition, and Chinery agreed. (Monteleone completed the original Blue Guitar and finished it in the same Mohawk Ultra Blue Penetrating Stain. He sold it to a collector in Japan.)

"I was surprised when I saw that a number of the Blue Guitars had side sound ports," Monteleone says. "I guess that Scott then told Linda [Manzer], Tom [Ribbecke] and Bob [Benedetto] to include them on their guitars, too." Monteleone was interested to see what the others had done with the idea. "I was fine with Scott asking others to incorporate side sound ports into their guitars. And if Scott had told the others that this was my idea, they all might have talked to me about it before doing it, and the results would all have looked like my guitar, which would not have been nearly as interesting. I liked being surprised and seeing the different interpretations."

What about the Rocket Convertible is "convertible"? The sound ports — two on the side and one on the instrument's face — are fitted with steel sliding panels that allow for opening, partially opening or closing any port. In a work of comic and mechanical genius, the top's convertible panel is maneuvered by a rod, capped with an ebony button, that enters the guitar alongside the neck heel and resembles something on the dashboard of a 1950s Nash Rambler! Only Monteleone could be so bold, cool and outlandish in executing a single functional feature on a musical instrument.

"It was a gamble, but it worked," he says of his creation. "I could cut off any hole, in any combination, and all combinations worked. I was looking at this guitar as the 'me' guitar, so I wasn't particularly worried about whether the front hole would work, but the front worked. I knew it had to work off of the sides, but was unsure of the front. But it worked, and it then became the 'us' guitar."

Now, more than half of the guitars he makes are oval-hole archtops with side soundholes. About half of those are "convertible," and the other half are what he calls "full-blown open."

Testing the flexibility of a carved back requires the skill to create the proper arch, the knowledge to know when optimum thickness is reached and a strong thumb.

and a surreal 'burst, like the Deco-Vox, it's difficult to stop staring at the instrument and put it to its highest use – playing it. How does Monteleone accomplish this? "The really important thing for [the visual motif of] any guitar, as I look at it, is that your eye moves," he explains. "It doesn't stay in any one place. That's an important element to any art. Your eye gets drawn into certain places, but it doesn't stay there, it moves. The design pulls the eye to other places."

Monteleone mentions that he's going to be doing a "train guitar." "I'm guessing that you're not talking about inlaying a choo-choo train and some tracks in the fingerboard," I respond, and Monteleone smiles slyly. At the mention of Bob Johnston's and Joe Welsh's book, *The Art of the Streamliner* (Metrobooks, 2001), Monteleone grins broadly and begins waxing philosophic about industrial designers of the streamliner genre: Walter Dorwin Teague, Norman Bel Geddes, Henry Dreyfuss and, especially, Raymond Loewy.

Loewy holds a special place in Monteleone's design heart. Revered for designing such disparate objects as streamliner locomotives, the Lucky Strike cigarette package, the Studebaker Avanti and the Coke bottle, Loewy was one of the first graphic designers of the Art Deco era to move from drawing product advertisements to designing the products themselves. In so doing, he took center stage in the journey from "pattern to abstraction" (in the words of author Jonathan Woodman) that led to a "decorative machine aesthetic."

Monteleone's artistic journey seems remarkably similar to that taken by Loewy and others working in the Art Deco era. I suspect that his "train guitar" design will represent a substantial abstraction from any locomotive that I've seen. "Well," he muses, "abstraction is really what makes any design interesting."

Intrigued by art that feeds the eye and stimulates the imagination? Search out the architecture of Robert Mallet-Stevens, Louis Sue, André Mare, Joseph Hoffman or Pierre Patout; the interior design and furniture of Emile Jacques Ruhlmann or Jean Dunand; the iron work of Edgar Brandt; the glass work of Rene Lalique; or the fashion and costume design of Paul Poiret or Erté.

However, if you also want that artwork to tickle your ears, follow Dario's lead and get your hands on a Monteleone guitar, mandolin, mandola or mandocello. Oh, and don't forget to log that Monteleone in your little, black guitar-geek book!

The subtitle of this article is adapted from Ruth Vassos' 1929 description of Art Deco advertising in Contempo: This American Tempo: *"Feed the Eye, stimulate the imagination, tickle the appetite of the mob."*