Left: Gary in his workshop, a converted Methodist chapel near Wisbech

Below: *El Corazon* (Spanish for the heart). Hearts adorn the guitar's sound hole to celebrate the owner's recovery from a triple heart by-pass

Making music

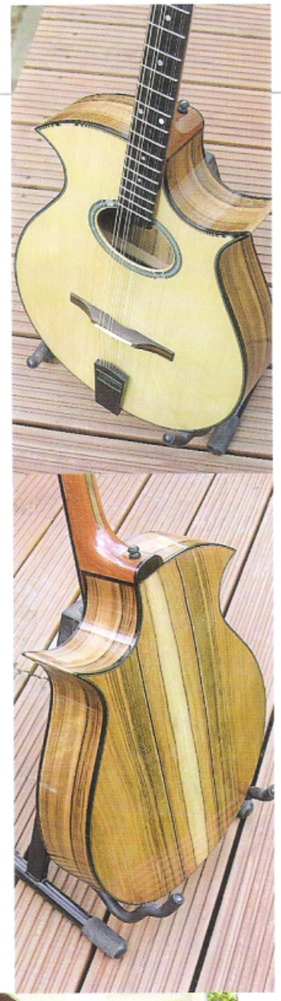
Luthier Gary Nava uses traditional techniques to make a range of stringed instruments. Gary's son, Luke Nava, tells ***Venue*** what makes them special

MY FATHER, Gary Nava, is a luthier–or maker of stringed instruments–and has been for more than 30 years, during which time he has produced a remarkable variety of custom instruments. Using traditional techniques, he has made acoustic guitars–both steel-string and classical–as well as an array of folk instruments, such as mandolins and ukuleles. All are built to the individual specifications of his clients, who range from amateur performers to the stadium rock band, Muse. Most are made from a variety of exotic hardwoods, including rosewood, walnut and ebony, imported from all over the world. The internal structure of Gary's classical guitars is based on the design developed by the Spanish luthier Torres in the 1800s.

Having recently relocated with his wife Amanda from south west London to the Fens, Gary now has a larger workspace in a converted Methodist Chapel close to Wisbech to cater for his expanding client base. Increasingly those who love making music on these instruments are looking beyond the mass-produced instruments that are cheaper and more readily available than ever before. Gary understands that there's something very special about commissioning your own instrument. 'Everything can be made-to-measure', he says, 'from the choice of woods and ornamentation to the dimensions of the neck and body–making each instrument perfect for the individual player's needs and aesthetic persuasion.' Neck shape, weight, the spacing of the strings can all make a huge difference to performance, for amateurs and professionals alike.

Gary's list of satisfied clients is long and includes London's Spanish Guitar Centre and students at the Royal Academy of Music, as well as individuals ranging from social workers to priests. Requests come from as far afield as Dubai, often via the web. A recent commission was for a quality left-handed guitar as a 50th birthday treat for the buyer.

'One client was part of a horse-racing syndicate, so wanted his guitar's decoration to match those of his jockey's colours,' Gary says. 'Another, who had recently undergone a triple heart by-pass, celebrated his recovery by commissioning an instrument with hearts around the rosette–the intricate pattern that adorns a guitar's sound hole. Muse came to me with a pile of exotic wood that they'd collected on tour in Africa and South America, and asked if I could build a matching classical guitar and baritone ukulele from it. You don't get that kind of flexibility with off-the-peg instruments!'



Left: A fine example of Gary's craftsmanship is this Mandocello-style guitar

Gary originally trained as a guitar-maker at the renowned London College of Furniture in the late 1970s and, after graduation, continued to hone his craft at the London Guitar Gallery, developing ideas and techniques. His desire to share his skills led him to teach Design and Technology in the 1980s, helping countless teenagers fulfil their ambition to make an electric guitar. Gary himself made his first guitar at 14, as he couldn't afford to buy one, and then made another for his 'A' level. 'My dad would bring home offcuts of wood from doors for me to work on. My favourite is still a 30-year-old guitar made from a Cuban mahogany wardrobe door–very rare nowadays.'

With construction taking over 150 hours, many of Gary's clients face a year's wait to take delivery of the instrument of their dreams. At any one time Gary may be working on four guitars, all at different stages–some varnished, some waiting to dry. However, modern technology enables him to ensure they can follow the progress of their instrument with regular e-mail updates and posts to his blog (www.guitar-maker.blogspot.com). 'Making instruments can be a solitary business, but the blog is a great way of connecting with the outside world,' says Gary. 'I can let clients know what's on my workbench each week and also share some tricks-of-the-trade with a wider audience. It's surprising how many young and aspiring luthiers get in touch for advice.'

When asked what the hardest part of making a guitar is, Gary replies, 'For me, it's coping with the pressure I put myself under to deliver the best possible instrument. I get to know my clients very well, and many of them have important personal reasons for wanting a custom instrument. Knowing how special the build is to them means I'm always driven to fulfil their great expectations.'

Gary Nava, Luthier:
www.navaguitars.co.uk
Tel: 01945 430725

Every instrument he makes is signed by the luthier, Gary Nava