

LUTHIER PROFILE: **GARY NAVA**

By OLIVER McGHIE

'WELCOME TO the smallest guitar factory in the world,' Gary Nava says in jest, showing me into his home at Twickenham. Although in actual fact Gary's statement is probably not too far from the truth. Indeed, at the very back of his garden is a small workshop and in this workshop is the smallest set-up for a guitar-making luthier I have seen to date. There is a bench no bigger than a butcher's block. Next to the workshop is an even smaller building which holds a band-saw, sanding machine and drill.

But as we all know, size doesn't matter, and the amount and quality of guitars Gary makes per year is a sign that his business works efficiently and well. This year Gary will begin work on his 50th guitar.

Instrument making aside Gary teaches Design and Technology at St. Paul's Preparatory School for boys at Colet Court, London, where he can pass on his skills to the pupils. When not teaching, he devotes his time to the crafting of guitars. Typically, one classical guitar takes over 100 hours to make.

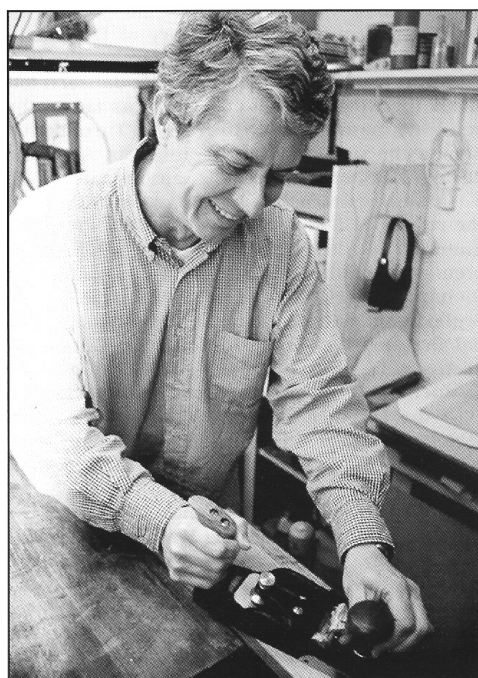
Along with classical instruments Gary also makes acoustic steel-strings, and various other models (electrics and mandolins included), not only for commission, but also to enhance his experience as a luthier. 'Whatever you make, informs the next project you work on. Making a mandolin, for example, allows you to develop techniques you wouldn't ordinarily use,' Gary explains.

Hanging up on his wall is a deft, imposing looking resonator. 'I'd always enjoyed the blues and I thought to myself one day that I will make a resonator. It was a good learning exercise and it's lots of fun to play.'

Gary spent three years at the London College of Furniture, from 1976 to 1979. 'It was a really good time to be there, many of today's leading luthiers were fellow students. You tend to learn as much from each other as from your tutors. I was taught by the knowledgeable and kind Czechoslovakian, Herbert Schwartz. Although coming from Eastern Europe, he obviously had a completely different style of making instruments. They tend to use the dovetail neck as opposed to the Spanish slipper.'

I ask Gary about the special sort of relationship between customer and luthier. 'The relationship you develop with the people who have commissioned guitars from you is interesting. You start to feel like a Savile Row tailor, where the customer comes in and you take the measurements.'

'As a luthier, you have to make sure that their input and choices don't compromise the quality of the sound. You should know what you want to do with the struts, thickness of the wood, and the types of wood you want to use etc. They can decide on the purfling or the finger-board width; that's not



Gary Nava.

going to have a great bearing on the overall sound, but for somebody to have a personalized instrument, these features are very important.'

Another important aspect of Gary's guitars is that if you could get inside them they are as clean as they are on the outside. 'If you look inside, the front, back and sides are cleaned up as perfectly as the outside of the instrument. The struts and linings are all nice and crisp. If the instrument is going to look perfect on the outside it should look perfect on the inside.'

Gary has actually set-up a lively blogging space on his web-site, which he regularly updates. Since last August he has been providing detailed accounts of the various stages in the guitar-making process, always relating it to and showing the current model he is working on (it is also a chance for him to 'rant and rave' on other topics in the guitar world). 'I've just finished a cedar-topped classical. I only have a small amount of fine tuning to do. You can see this on-line.'

The starting price for a rosewood classical guitar is £1,200. The price goes up depending on ornamentation or materials.

For further information visit:

www.navaguitars.co.uk or telephone 020 8894 1695.