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Meet the Maker: Stephen Marchione

by James Condino



FIRST MET STEVE MARCHIONE writing a story for *Mandolin Magazine*. He was bold, confident, and opinionated; I liked him instantly. A couple of years later, we wound up next to each other at the 2011 GAL Convention. Two troublemakers with funny last names; we've been good friends ever since. The more I get to know him, the more respect I have for him and for his work, and also the more similarity I see in our backgrounds and in our core individuality as nerdy instrument builders. We're working on a collaborative project in the near future that will be a celebration of the work and heritage of our mentors, highlighting the history and heritage of the first two generations of great Italian American guitar builders and pushing it beyond into the next level with our own flair.

Give us a little bit of background and the early years:

I was born in Texas in 1966, but as a young boy, my family moved to Bergamo, Italy, outside of Milano towards Cremona. In 1972 I was seven, and I can remember my father took me to Cremona to see a Stradivarius violin. I didn't quite understand everything, but I knew it was very important.

Growing up, I had a strong sense of design. Both English and Italian were spoken at home. In our family, the arts were everywhere and considered a pinnacle of what you could do; they were held in the highest esteem.

Guitar making was an art, so it was supported. My family always had nice Italian instruments around — classical guitars, violins; my grandfather had three very nice Italian violins that he showed me on a number of occasions. I don't know what they were, but they were of enough value that he left them to the Boston Conservatory in his will.

We eventually moved back to Texas and I made my way to The Naropa Institute in Boulder where I majored in jazz performance. Eventually I set out for New York City to try and make my mark as a guitarist. It was very exciting and all so new for me at the time. I can remember going to my first gig and there was Mike Stern and the heavy New York jazz guys playing for \$60 a gig; I instantly realized that I needed to come up with another plan.



VINCENT CLÉROUX

In 1989 I wound up working for Rudy Pensa at Pensa-Suhr. Back then, 48th Street in Manhattan was unbelievable. Across the street was 48th Street Custom with ESP; Sadowsky was down the street right off of 48th. You've got Manny's, Sam Ash, We Buy Guitars. And then every day there was a parade of top players like Mark Knopfler, Peter Frampton, John Abercrombie, and Paul Simon. I got to know a lot of these guys, and some became customers; some of them are still my customers. On top of that, there was also a constant parade of great vintage instruments. It was the beginning of the explosion of the whole vintage market.

It was incredible. As a high school kid, I would mow lawns for six weeks and then go there and buy guitars. Now those guitars are worth as much as my house. It seemed like three or four city blocks of just guitar shops with entire rooms stuffed full of vintage guitars, not like today when the shops look like art galleries with a half dozen guitars on a wall. There would be hundreds of instruments covering every usable bit of space on the wall, and stacked on the floors and in the stairwells.

One day Rudy had fifteen D'Angelicos stacked up in a corner of the back room, lacquer on lacquer. All of the hardware was removed and there was a cardboard



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box full of parts. For about \$1500 you could buy any one of them. He'd put together a full guitar like it was a kit out of the parts box to build it up complete. The only guys that ever went in there were the jazzers and the old Italian guys. Nobody else cared at all. They recognized that the guitars were cool and expensive for the time, but no thanks. That wasn't the scene. People would make fun of you for showing up with an old guitar because you couldn't afford a new one. Rock stars would write songs about it. I thought it was going to be that way forever.

Exactly. One year, it must have been '90 or '91, Rudy got on a kick of buying every D'Angelico and D'Aquisto he could find. He decided that was where the market was going and he was going to invest in it. He got an enormous safe and had it hand carried up to the third floor by ten huge Italian guys — like something out of "The Sopranos". It held twenty guitar cases; he filled that with only D'Angelicos and D'Aquistos over a period of about four months.

That was really when I fell in love with the archtop guitar. I had been a solidbody and classical guitar player up to that point. I saw the archtop guitar and I made the connection with



Facing page, top: Steve Marchione French polishes a classical guitar in his Texas shop. Bottom: Young Steve in Bergamo, Italy. This page, clockwise from upper left: In the Pensa-Suhr shop, 1990. First Marchione archtop, 1995. In his first Texas studio, 2002. First Marchione solidbody, 1993. French polishing an archtop in his current shop, 2012. Showing off a variety of electric models, 2011.



the violin world right away. I got to work on all of those guitars. I was building the Pensa-Suhr guitars, but I also got to repair old 335s and 'burst Les Pauls and things. The bar was high — everything had to be perfect. John Suhr was a stickler for that, and I learned right from the beginning that you had to be able to take on a job and do it perfectly. If you didn't know how to do it, you found a way to do it right. That was a very good work ethic for me.

I worked at Rudy's from late 1989 until October 1993, and for the first year of that time, I was apprenticing with John Suhr. At the same time, I started buying tools of my own. I found an old maple workbench from the New York Department of Education and set it up in my apartment. I had some wood and some hand tools, and I started building mandolins and flattop guitars at home. They were from blueprints — that was all I had. They took forever to build. I'd only finish one or two things a year. But I learned a lot, and when I left Rudy's shop in 1993, I started Marchione Guitars on 20th Street between 5th and 6th Avenues, down in the Flatiron/Chelsea District. I chose that location because it was a big recording district then, and many of my clients owned and worked in these studios. Later I moved to Houston, Texas. I bought a house and set up my workshop there, and I had a little more space.

So you started out making solidbody electrics, and got into acoustic guitars and mandolins. But I know you are also making violins. How did that start?

I had been a GAL member for a few years already when I went to my first GAL Convention at PLU in 1995. That was a huge eye opener — both the hands-on workshops and the lectures. I was taking notes like crazy. Romanillos was there. Tom Ribbecke gave workshops on archtop guitar making. All of the old-guard guys were there doing their thing. It was awesome. For me as a maker, the convention was a crucial, pivotal moment, and it is where I met my teacher-to-be and one of the best friends I'll ever have, violin maker Guy Rabut. He recognized that I had a serious interest in that level of work. He invited me to visit his shop in Carnegie Hall, in one of the



HAP NEWSOM

artist studios. All of the other stuff was important, but Guy is the one who taught me what real technique was supposed to be. Hand planing joints. Chalk fitting dovetails. Hot hide glue. If you're not doing that, you're kidding yourself. You're not doing it right. Period. We still have a strong relationship and I feel blessed to have that opportunity and to be able to offer things to him at this point.

I can't stress strongly enough how important those high standards are, not only for me, but for people who want to make the best instruments and who want to be at the top of the art form and also the top of the market. You learn how to build an instrument that is going to last; it will outlive us, because it can be properly fixed later. It will be valued.

Guitar players are generally a conservative group. Maybe not as much so as violin players, but still conservative. You want to build things that people are comfortable with, so you stay within certain parameters. With archtops, you've got the D'Angelico/D'Aquisto school of thought, and you've got the Gibson school of thought. What is great with the violin world is that they have such a tiny amount of wiggle room in their strong tradition. But within that, there is room — *f*-holes, curves, shapes, placement, material choice. Now all of the sudden there is a huge artistic palette to work with. Once I saw that, working on my archtop models, I realized just how much there was to learn and what an incredible art form we have to work with.

I see guitar making as a very complete art. You're the designer; you're a genuine craftsman doing the sawing, joining, and assembly; and you do all the finishing. Then you have created an instrument that doesn't even begin its purpose until the musician gets to it. The listener interprets and enjoys the music. I find it so inspiring to be a part of that creative circle.

How did you meet Jimmy D'Aquisto?

Rudy Pensa introduced me to Jimmy. He'd come up and see the electric guitars I was making for Rudy. I told him I was making some F-style mandolins at home and he was excited for me. Jimmy was the nicest guy. You could show him something that was not like anything he'd made, but he would look at it carefully, and he always had something nice to say about it for



This page, top: Steve's exhibition table at the 2006 GAL Convention. Look closely to find Taku hiding behind the guitar. Above: Carving a maple back old-school with a whaling harpoon. I mean, a big fishtail gouge. Facing page, top: Using a violin-style depth marker punch. Bottom: A pivotal moment captured on black-and-white film. Steve has a front-row seat to see Guy Rabut demonstrate carving a violin scroll at the 1995 GAL Convention.

that day. He saw the flaws; he saw the things we were not doing right, but he always said something really kind — “I like the way you guys made this horn.” “You guys are making a really nice neck shape.” He was a great person. Luckily that relationship continued when I went out on my own. I never studied with Jimmy, but having that personal connection, having worked on a lot of his guitars, having him look at stuff that I made and talking about it with him — that meant a lot to me and it is still with me.

I've lived a few doors down the street from several world-class luthiers. I didn't formally study with them, but we'd see each other a few times a week. It was always understood that what we do matters, and to apply yourself with all you had, like any serious discipline. When one of them needed a fine chisel, he'd take out a five-penny nail and heat it over a Coleman camping stove until it was the right color. Then he'd give me a hard time for not knowing how to be self-reliant.

I believe that for me personally, working hard, making good instruments, and making a good living is all part of the path. I like making something that is worth money and that people are willing to pay me for. I'll never get rich doing this, but I like to live comfortably. If you do a good job, you should get paid for it. That's a good thing. I really try to look at the business end of things: How much material really went into it? How many hours did it honestly take me? I try to price accordingly. My guitars are expensive, but the market has supported that for twenty-three years. I've never had less backlog than two years, or maybe eighteen months. It seems to be working.



VINCENT CLÉROUX



ROBERT DESMOND

That is a real challenge for most craftsmen. They are not good negotiators. They are not good at speaking up for themselves. Their pricing is often completely random and they always appear to be in a hardship. I've spent the last year keeping time studies of every piece of work I touch. Every other luthier I've mentioned this to has cringed at the idea.

What are your production numbers like and how has it evolved as you got better at your craft? How did it change when you brought in a CNC machine?

I've moved to the point where I always have one or two full-time employees — journeymen luthiers working with me. I asked Jimmy D'Aquisto how many guitars he made in a year. This was maybe in '92. He said that comfortably he could make seven or eight a year. He could push himself to make more, but working by himself, that is what he liked to make.

I found about the same thing — I could make between seven and twelve guitars a year, making some archtops and some electrics. I was shooting for one a month and usually falling a bit short. It was never quite enough; I always felt like I was in a recession. Even though there was more demand — people wanted more instruments — I just couldn't produce them.

I left Rudy's in 1993, and I stayed in New York until February of 2002, when I moved back to Texas. In Houston I bought a nice house and built a workshop. Once I got the shop running, the first thing I did was to look for an apprentice in the local violin shops. I realized I needed a different business model, one like the European shops use.

If you go to a shop in Cremona or Spain, you'll usually see one maker who is the owner of the shop and two, sometimes three makers working with them. Or maybe there is one other maker and two apprentices. The shop has three or four makers in this European model, and you are still making things by hand. You're not trying to be a factory, but it really does change the output of the shop. Then you can do batches of five for three different models and successfully complete all fifteen of those in six months. Do a second batch, and you have an output of around thirty a year. That's what I'm doing now.

I like the two-or-three-luthier model with maybe someone else helping out — a young guy sort of apprenticing. That keeps the flow going well. You don't have to do the same task over and over again. Maybe you've got someone planing the ribs, someone making the linings, someone making the blocks. At the end of the week you've got five sets of ribs ready and they have all been made by hand, and done right. It's great. You're not going for the production-line thing, but you have enough time so you can find the best way to do something.

We hit thirty guitars a couple of years ago. Right now somewhere in the low thirties seems to be a good yearly output. I'm blessed to be in that situation. I have some very good dealers that handle my product in the States, in Europe, and in Japan. I always try to deliver the best product I can and I have a lot of repeat customers. It seems like the situation makes everybody happy. I've made somewhere around 500 guitars.



I worked on my own for fifteen years; I like having a few other people in the studio to tell jokes and listen to music with. I enjoy the company during the day because this is what I do full time every day.

You are encouraging guitar makers to adopt old-world traditions of handcrafting, and your shop is set up in a way that Stradivari might find familiar. But you also have a CNC machine.

I bought the CNC — a very nice, at the time, Isel Techno — when we had the two-person shop model, just myself and Taka Moro. It didn't really change production for a few years. There was a lot of time spent learning how to use it and figuring out what I wanted to use it for. I use it for the templating and roughing out the plates. I want an archtop plate to hit my workbench profiled, but I want to be able to carve each plate inside and out by hand to get the thicknesses, the sound, and also the finish I want. I'm not interested in using the CNC to bring it to the final dimensions and then just taking it to a sander and then assembling it. What makes each guitar beautiful is that each one is unique.

How did you rough out a plate before you got the CNC?

I used to go to a router table and establish the profile. Then I'd use a Lancelot to rough out the arch. I could carve it faster that way than I can with a CNC. But with the CNC, I can set the parameter for what the instrument is, and also change the profiles. They come off the machine close to what I want, so I'm not investing energy hogging off waste; there is nothing artistic about that.

Doing that carving year in and year out, I developed some debilitating tendonitis in my right elbow. The left wrist and elbow started catching up fast because I was compensating, and that ended my guitar playing for quite a while. Once I started being able to rough things out with the CNC, the tendonitis pretty much went away. It hasn't bothered me in years. What a blessing that is; just that was worth the price of the machine.

When I bought the CNC, it was like buying a mid-level BMW; it was an expensive machine. If somebody wants to make one guitar a month, you should look long and hard at a CNC. It is a wise investment. I've been at this twenty-three years — taking care of yourself is a big part of it. The same thing with dust collection. These investments may seem expensive, but they are worth it if you can live another thirty years. That is one way that I don't want to follow the D'Angelico/D'Aquisto tradition. They both died at age fifty-nine.

I take the Spanish guitars just as seriously as I do the violins and archtop guitars. I have a lot of clients who are on the world stage. Knowing that I can make a guitar on that level, for professional musicians, is deeply satisfying to me. My instruments may resemble other people's instruments, but it is really important to tie things together. The goal is to tie in the instrument to musicians who are going to actually make music that people will buy and listen to — tying that circle together.

For me, some really important things about the archtop guitar include not letting the back be too thin or too heavy, but finding the right balance of weight, stiffness, and tone for that particular piece of wood; having a nice carving pattern for the top; and chalk fitting the braces and putting them in with hide glue. Too much springing of the braces is bad and telegraphs through the top. You don't go in and change bass bars on a guitar like you do on a violin over the years. Don't overdo it. Make the guitar responsive; there is nothing worse than strumming a heavy archtop that just sounds dead. You'd pick up one of Jimmy's guitars and it would sing; hit it hard and it would yell! These instruments are alive.

One of the things I that got hammered at me right from the beginning with Pensa-Suhr, with all their rock-star clients, is that your fretboard, your frets, and your setup had better be perfect. If they are not, it is not worthy. A bad fret job ruins any guitar. A fretboard that is not true under string tension is a joke. I've finished plenty of guitars, strung them up, taken everything back down, and completely refretted them. Something moves. There is a tiny twist. You've gotta make it right. Even a mediocre player will know. For the professional client, that's critical.

A steep arch is going to be tighter and have more pop to it; a lower, flat, more-gentle arch is going to be looser. I want it to sound like a Marchione guitar, so I tend to walk the middle path on a lot of things. Once I get the plate in my hand, I want it to have a certain response. Each piece of wood is different. The key is to be able to manipulate each one for the desired player.

This is my life passion. I feel blessed to be able to do this for a living and get paid for it. I also think we are really lucky to be living in this age where a lot of people are doing it and we can share and help each other out. It is a great scene. The United States, Japan, and Western Europe are where it is all happening; that is pretty remarkable. Japan is wonderful. One of the things about them is that as a culture, they really get the value of something that is made by hand. It is super important to them. There is nothing better. If you can step up and consistently deliver, customers love that stuff.

I live in Texas; people are crazy about guitars here. Junk... expensive stuff... everything. It's guitar heaven; a big part of the culture. I like that too. —



Facing page: Taka Moro (at left, background) works in the Marchione shop full time. After a lengthy apprenticeship years ago, he developed into Steve's

right-hand man. Taka is from Japan and is a fine jazz guitarist. Also pictured is their friend and former co-worker Manuel Salazar.

