

My Dream Guitar

Built by Michael Keller
Article by Henry Lowenstein



For every guitar player, the ultimate fantasy is to have a guitar that meets their every desire and requirement. As guitar enthusiasts, we are extremely fortunate to be living in what can only be described as the Golden Age of Luthiers, with literally hundreds of skilled artisans in the United States and Canada waiting to make a guitar to our exact specifications. This article will discuss, through my experience, the player's process of creating the ultimate guitar, having it built by the right luthier, and how the guitar's worth can be maximized during the process and evaluated at the end of the process.

MY BACKGROUND

To help in understanding the process I went through, it is necessary to tell the reader a little bit about my background. I've been a guitar player for thirty-five years. I started off as a player and, as I learned more about the instrument, became a collector. I play everything from classical to rock. I performed professionally in my high school and college years, performed in university jazz bands and orchestras, and played my last real public performance at my wedding. I have more than the average experience with guitars because my grandparents owned a guitar store. I began working in a guitar store when I was fourteen, and actually owned my own guitar store for a number of years as a side business to my legal practice. I was also the founder of an organization called the American Guitar Player's Association, which some of you might remember or may have even been members of. I have roughly one guitar for every year I have been a player, and these range in price from several hundred dollars to tens of thousands of dollars.

The only other thing that sets the stage for my viewpoint in this article is that in my late thirties I contracted a rare form of reactive arthritis that, among other things, damaged the joints in my hands, wrists, fingers, and shoulders, and made playing many of my guitars painful and sometimes impossible. This was the impetus for the quest for my ultimate guitar, which necessarily included features that would make playing easier.

Even though I custom ordered my dream guitar based on my changed physical requirements due to this ongoing arthritic illness, don't jump to the conclusion that a custom-made instrument is only for those people with special needs like myself. Any guitar player with normal abilities, regardless of the guitar's dimensions, can benefit greatly from ordering a custom-made guitar. The trick is to do your homework and know exactly what you are looking for, keeping in mind that you may not be able to get everything you want incorporated into one instrument. Make this important

decision based on your ability, playing style, preferences, dislikes, any special features (including size/dimensions), and don't forget your pocketbook! This article will help you focus on these important considerations, which need to be answered before you can order the right custom guitar for you.

THE DECISION TO BUILD

The first step was deciding whether I really needed to have a guitar made when there are so many extraordinary and diverse production guitars available new, and so many older models available from vintage dealers. Having a guitar built seemed impossibly difficult. I was worried about spending money on a guitar that I had not played, finding the right luthier, and choosing materials. I was also worried that, after I had spent a lot of money, I would not readily be able to sell the guitar the way I knew I could with a name brand like Martin or Gibson. What I didn't know at the

EDUCATE YOURSELF

Here is a list of a few of the resources I consulted before beginning the final phase of my dream guitar quest. You will want to look at some of these sources before making any final decisions.

- George Gruhn's multiple books on guitars
- Grit Laskin's *A Guitar Maker's Canvas* on guitar construction and artistry
- Martin histories
- The *Blue Book of Acoustic Guitars*
- Tom Wheeler's *American Guitars*
- Tony Bacon's *Ultimate Guitar Book*
- Ralph Denver's *Guitar Handbook*
- Stringletter Publishing's must read: *Custom Guitars, A Complete Guide to Contemporary Handcrafted Guitars*
- Irving Sloane's groundbreaking treatise on guitar construction and repair
- Hoadley's extraordinary *Understanding Wood*
- Walker's *Encyclopedia of Wood*
- Every issue of *Acoustic Guitar* magazine since 1993 (as well as their website)
- 13thfret.com which has links to most of the world's premier luthiers all in one place
- Taylor Guitar monthly newsletters, which discuss many issues of guitar mechanics, and is available online as well.
- Past Healdsburg catalogues, to see who had been there consistently.
- I also contacted C.F. Martin, Bob Taylor, Rick Turner, Grit Laskin, the folks at Parker Guitars and Collings Guitars, JLD Research, and the electronics wizards at L.R. Baggs, Shadow, and Fishman.
- All of my personal guitars which all had elements of things I liked, including wood quality, neck size, body size, and sound quality—just not all in the same guitar.

time was that the journey in figuring all these things out would actually be one of the most fun and rewarding things I had ever undertaken in my life. The journey would exponentially enhance my knowledge and enjoyment of the instrument I loved so much, would introduce me to people who shared my interests in music and the art of the guitar, and create a deep and lasting friendship with the luthier I ultimately chose. When I think back on everything I did, it ended up being a ten-year journey, and all the things that worried me at first simply became legs of that journey.

To have a guitar built for you, you have to know what you do and don't like. That means playing, and sometimes buying, guitars. Every time you have picked up a guitar and thought "Wow, that neck feels really good, but I wish it was just a little narrower," or "I love the inlay on this but I wish it had a slotted headstock," or "This guitar would be perfect if it just came in Koa," you've added to your list of desires for your dream guitar. What you have to do now, and what I did, is get scientific about it.

Once you have educated yourself a little (see sidebar) you have to play guitars in music stores, the guitars of friends, or even your own guitars, but a little differently than you have played them before. Take a soft tape measure with you—one that can't possibly scratch the guitar. If you like the way a neck feels, measure the scale length, the width of the neck at the nut, and at the 12th fret. Get an idea of how thick the neck is, how thick and wide the body is at the upper bout, the waist, and lower bout. If the upper frets seem unusually easy or difficult to access, look carefully at how, and where, the neck joins the body, and notice all the details that make it that way. And, if you find something really close to what you want, buy it if you can. This will give you an opportunity to live with the features you like and see how they might be refined before you go all out with your "soul mate" guitar of the future.

This is a good time to mention something really important to the process. When creating your list of desires, you have to be cognizant of something your mother probably told you growing up: You can't have everything. By this I mean that you cannot fit every element of every style into one guitar. Doing so will likely compromise the elements you most want, and neither you nor your luthier is going to be happy in the end. This does not, however, mean that there isn't an ultimate guitar out there for you. It just means that there may be more than one ultimate guitar and you have to pick the one you want the most right now.

NAVIGATING THE SEA OF CHOICES

I had played hundreds of guitars, but the pickings (pun intended) in my town were pretty slim. I had a few "big box stores," and was lucky enough to have a little high-end boutique, but there are hundreds of luthiers out there and thousands of guitar variations—and I couldn't tell how something played from a webpage. The only solution I found was to travel. Now, that sounds like an expensive proposition, and it can be if you are not clever. I was lucky to some extent because in past years I had owned a music shop, so I had gone to the annual NAMM show and got to play a huge selection of production instruments. But custom-built guitars are not necessarily at the NAMM show, which caters to mass markets, and I needed to get to play some rare and unusual instruments.

The way I see it, almost everyone takes a vacation every year or so. Sometimes even two vacations if you can get some good airfares. So I decided to kill two birds with one stone and plan my



Keller offers unlimited choices for a super-slim laminated neck and heel. Here we chose ebony cased in bird's-eye maple to form the stripe in the mahogany. A wide heel left room for a matching inlay on the heel cap. The Florentine cutaway was chosen to begin low on the 16th fret for maximum ease of playing and an aesthetic match with the parlor size.



A handcrafted wood rosette from Russia, imported by David Schramm, is lined with rows of top quality paua abalone sourced from around the world by the Duke of Pearl, Chuck Erikson, to be matched with the neck inlays imported from Vietnam by Andy DePaule. Styled after a turn-of-the-century Harwood pattern.

vacations around places I knew would allow me to play the maximum number of world-class guitars, while giving my wife (and sometimes my kids) something to do while I was in Nirvana. My first expedition was to see Stan Jay at Mandolin Brothers in Staten Island. Stan has just about the best high-end collection of "wood and steel confections" of anyone on the planet—and he lets you play them all to your heart's content. A place like Mandolin Brothers, which offers literally millions of dollars of guitars by small and large luthiers, as well as production guitars, also has the advantage of a staff that can really educate you. There are a couple of other great shops, like Gruhn's Guitars in Nashville (a really fun place to vacation), which can also be found on the internet. I took a slight detour from a business trip one year and went to the Dallas Guitar Show, one of the major guitar shows in the country. That gave me a chance to talk to a whole host of guitar experts and fur-

ther refine what I was looking for.

While the shops were great, the advice was better. Stan told me that if I really wanted to check out many of the nation's best luthiers, all in one place, I should go to the Healdsburg Guitar Festival. This show is now held every other year in the little town of Santa Rosa, close to Healdsburg California, which is forty miles north of San Francisco in the heart of the Sonoma wine country.

HEALDSBURG

If there is a heaven, it looks just like the Healdsburg Guitar Festival. About 120 of the nation's best luthiers (more next year) get together to talk, play, and show the best of what they have to offer to the public. Luthiers have to compete to get into the show, and are accepted based on the quality of their work and other criteria. Younger luthiers are evaluated on the promise they show for

THE DREAM GUITAR - The Specifics

Dimensions. Upper bout width: 10 1/2 in., lower bout width: 14 1/2 in., waist width: 9 in., body length: 18 5/8 in., overall length: 39 1/4 in., depth at neck: 2 7/8 in., depth at lower bout: 3 5/8 in., soundhole size diameter: 3 1/2 in., soundport size diameter: 3 1/2 in. by 1 1/2 in., neck width at nut: 1 11/16 in., neck width at 14th fret: 2 1/4 in., scale length: 24 in.

Scale Length. I wanted it as short as possible to accommodate my hands, but I didn't want it so short that tone and volume were compromised. I was originally thinking of going as short as 22 inches. At 22, Michael wasn't sure I would be getting everything I wanted from the sound, particularly since I was making the guitar narrower than he had ever made a guitar before. If I had just done the narrow guitar and not the super short scale, or just done the super short scale and made the guitar a little wider, it would have been alright. However, when including both there was a potential issue. We compromised at 24, a length he had used before, and kept the narrow depth, which worked out beautifully.

Neck and Frets. The two best necks I had in my collection were from a Martin low profile 0000-38 and a Parker Fly. The Parker had a synthetic compound radius fingerboard that lacked elements of the Martin's slick ebony, but added a dimension to it. Most notably, Parker had stainless steel frets. Stainless steel frets never wear out, never tarnish, and help preserve the life of strings by retarding the oxidation that occurs between the nickel silver compound of normal frets and the alloys in the strings. However, stainless steel frets require the use of tools that nobody seems to have and also pose a risk to any delicate inlays that may be on the guitar. On top of that, Michael (and most luthiers) had never worked with them, so this was a feature that would have to wait for another guitar.

Headstock. I had originally wanted a slotted headstock, but had concluded from my study that the mass of a guitar's neck contributed to its volume. With Michael's wonderfully thin neck, and the unusually small and shallow body I had demanded, I was afraid to take any more mass from the neck. Instead of taking mass away, we ended up adding weight to the headstock with an ebony lamination and inlay on the back.

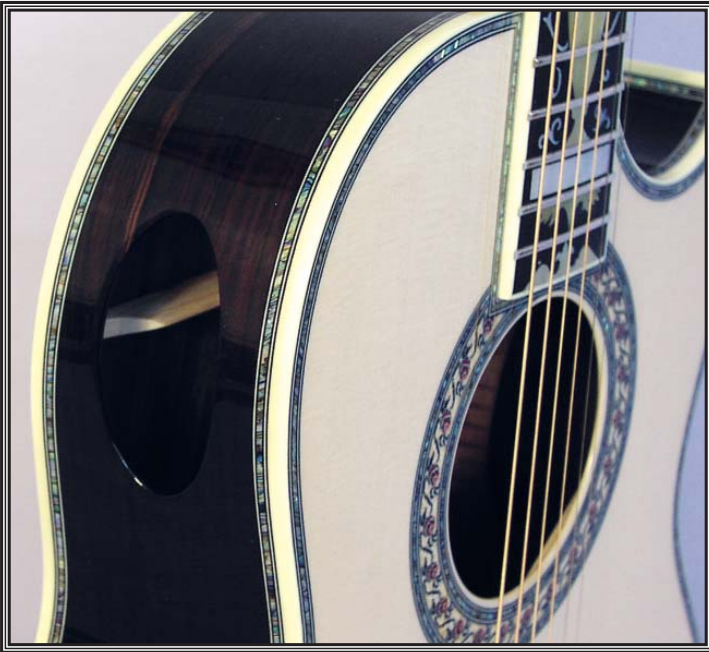
Wood Choice. I sent Michael a lot of Brazilian rosewood to tap and look at. I had gotten the wood from an artist early in my quest. The artist, a superb sculptor named Frank Verrilli, had a great carving on display in an art gallery. It was carved from a luthier's board he had bought twenty years earlier. I mentioned to him that I loved his work, but was thinking of buying it and having it sliced up for a guitar. He was a guitar player too, as it turns out, and we made a deal that if I bought the art and agreed not to carve it up, he would give me for free the two boards that he had bought with it and had not yet carved. It was an offer I couldn't refuse. I had the wood cut by Rick Turner in California and then sent to Michael. The wood I thought was the worst of the lot turned out to be the wood Michael flipped over. He said it was the best Brazilian he had

seen in his career as a luthier. I trusted his experience with this, and boy was that the right decision. Michael had some prime Adirondack from his own wood, and used billets from the same tree for the braces. He hand chopped the braces so that they would split along the grain, making them stronger and thinner. With this combination of wood, we were off and running.

Sound Port. Neither of us had ever built or owned a guitar with a sound port. This is where having a luthier with a good rapport in the luthier community is important. Grit Laskin had written an amazing chapter in his book about the positive effect of sound ports on guitars (I had played Laskin guitars at Mandolin Brothers and would be really confident of any conclusion Laskin would come to). While I had played a Boaz Guitar with a sound port, which had completely convinced me to go with a sound port, it had been a much larger port on a very different guitar with radical bracing. Michael called up Grit Laskin and spoke to him about doing the sound port, and gained valuable advice and information concerning size, placement, and even construction.

Inlays. Michael had never put as much pearl into a guitar as I wanted to put, but he was into it. He was going to do the inlay work, but I had my choice of having him cut the pearl patterns, having one of the heavyweights in the industry, like Larry Robinson or Harvey Leech do them and send them to Michael, or buying the inlays from a third party on the Internet. Michael had sent me to Andy DePaule's website, www.luthiersupply.com. Andy has a huge selection of inlays that are cut in Vietnam and shipped to the U.S. They can even do custom work which is fast and inexpensive. All of the elaborate inlays in my guitar, not counting the binding, cost me about \$120.00! DePaule could have inlaid them in Vietnam too, for not much more. But Michael was doing some very touchy adjustments to the radius of my fingerboard, on a shorter scale than anyone else in the industry was doing, so I did not want to mess with his technique too much and I ended up having him do the inlay. DePaule's service, and a few others like his, have revolutionized the way we get inlays and art on our guitars. You can even find inlays on eBay stores, though they vary in quality dramatically. I ended up using a mix between the two traditional inlay worlds and saved thousands of dollars. However, if I were really into the collector's value of the guitar, a work by a big name inlay artist like Larry Robinson or Harvey Leech would have added to the resale value exponentially.

Bracing. I have owned a number of Breedlove guitars which use a unique bridge-to-endblock soundpost system called a JLD Bridge System. It is one of the many things that give Breedloves a booming base and balanced tone, and the JLD is available as an add-on to virtually any guitar. While I knew the JLD inventor, Jim Oliver, personally and was a big fan of the product, Michael felt uncomfortable using the system for the first time on such an important guitar. Years of experience in "tuning" the guitar's top with shaving and bracing would be changed with the introduction of this device, and indeed, I knew that Breedlove had developed its top with the JLD in mind. This was one of those instances where I had to go with Michael's judgment.



Sound port placement is critical as both a monitor and a sound enhancement for the guitar. The sound port is laminated with a book matched piece of Brazilian, and sanded to seamlessly reinforce the hole. It reveals hand-cut brace work from the same Adirondack as the top, which is sanded to a polished finish for maximum sound reflection.



Keller headstock bound in ivoroid with paua, faced with matched Brazilian Rosewood, and inlaid with matching Harwood design, which itself is inlaid into the matching Brazilian truss rod cover. The back is veneered in ebony with matching Harwood headstock back design. Has gold Gotoh 510 tuners with pearl knobs, 18:1 ratio geared.

future work. As a result, every year they have the grand masters as well as fresh faces at the show. This is not only a great chance to meet the luthiers themselves and learn some really serious academic guitar-building theory, but also to make use of the numerous "quiet rooms," which allow you to actually play and compare these extraordinary instruments.

At this show, you will also have a chance to meet people who own many of these luthiers' guitars and pick their brains, which goes a long way toward giving you a sense of security about the luthier you choose. I heard nothing but superlatives and praise from top-flight collectors about the luthier I eventually chose.

As I walked around the tables at Healdsburg, I had a really good idea of what I wanted to ask and which guitars I wanted to play. I had determined that I needed somebody who could build me a parlor-size guitar that was thinner than usual so that my shoulder would not be strained while playing. I wanted a short scale neck—shorter than any high-quality production guitar since the turn of the century—so that my hands could stretch frets with ease and the tension on the strings would be greatly reduced (this also had the advantage of adding tone to a small-bodied guitar). However, I wanted a cutaway which was not available in any turn-of-the-century guitar.

I also wanted to use my own spectacular Brazilian Rosewood, but I needed someone who knew enough about wood to choose the best of my stash and supply top-quality Adirondack spruce, mahogany, and ebony to match it. I wanted a very lightly built guitar to get the maximum possible volume, a slim neck (again, for my hands), and a complicated compound radius fingerboard to take the stress off my wrists and fingers. I wanted a specific radius Florentine cutaway, specially sized frets, and a sound port cut into the upper bout (see "The Dream Guitar" sidebar on page 19 for more details). I had already bought the electronics I wanted from L.R. Baggs, and had bought Gotoh Deluxe tuning machines with pearl knobs. I wanted a Martin 00 body shape with a deep waist and a lightly braced top that would pull the maximum tone and volume out of extra light strings (looked down upon by most luthiers), with action so low you could breathe on the strings and play a note. However, I also wanted that small-bodied guitar, with those extra-light strings, to have full tone and lots of volume.

I was convinced, from what I had read (and from my two-inch-depth Cordoba Gypsy King), that all of these things could be accomplished by a master luthier, without compromise. Oh yes, I wanted 45 style pearl inlay with triple binding everywhere (including around a custom wood mosaic rosette), and full and elaborate inlays on the neck, headstock, and back of the headstock, which I wanted faced with ebony. The reason for this is that, by this point, my hands were deteriorating faster than medications could help them, and I wanted to make sure that if the day came when I could no longer play the guitar regularly, I could at least enjoy looking at it as a piece of art. A little morbid, I admit. You can imagine the looks I got as I went from table to table with my list of requirements.

My criteria eliminated two-thirds of the luthiers at Healdsburg off the bat. Here are some of the reasons: Some otherwise excellent luthiers don't feel they can make money if they veer too far off the molds and jigs they have set up in their shops, and I can understand that. They have perfected a certain style and form, and once they move away from that, it either becomes too time-consuming for them or they are not confident of the outcome, or both. Some luthiers specialize in archtops or classical

guitars, so while they could probably make anything, and make it well, I had no frame of reference for what they might make, and they didn't either. You really don't want to pull a luthier too far out of their element on your life's dream guitar. Some luthiers were clearly not very experienced. They had only been making guitars full time for five years or so. While their work was beautiful and some of their prices very appealing, I needed somebody who knew it all and could do it all for a project this complicated. Some luthiers there did gorgeous work, but were "hobby" luthiers. That is, they made a few guitars here or there while working other full-time jobs.

An important issue and concern for everyone going through this process is the value of the instrument if you ever want to sell it. If Martin is like the gold standard, a guitar by a hobby luthier, no matter how good, is basically a guitar you had better plan to keep. You may know the value of the instrument, but it is going to be hard to convince anybody else to pay three thousand dollars or more for an instrument from somebody who is not only unknown, but who by virtue of their limited production, will never be known.

On the other hand, I was determined to not spend money for hype. There are some luthiers who are quite good, but have become so expensive that nobody could possibly be as good as their prices. I am reminded of a famous passage from John T. Maloy's early book, *Dress for Success*, where he stated: "If you are paying more than twelve dollars for a silk tie, you are paying for something other than the quality of the silk." This holds especially true in the luthier world. A basic flat top guitar with the best

craftsmanship in the world can be obtained for five thousand dollars. If a similar guitar is selling for twenty-five thousand dollars, you are paying for something other than the craftsmanship.

Likewise, some luthiers' guitars have tripled in price simply because a guitar hero plays their instrument. I don't blame the luthiers at all. They should get what the market bears, and more power to them. The hype factor may well also hold long-term investment value. Look at D'Angelicos or D'Aquistos. But as a player first and collector second, I wasn't interested in paying for anything other than pure craftsmanship, especially since my research and many conversations had revealed that some guitar heroes play the instruments they play because they are acquired for free.

MY PERFECT LUTHIER

I had met one luthier who had said yes to every one of my requests, and had not balked at getting volume out of a parlor-sized guitar. He had been making guitars for a living for 27 years, had been accepted at all the Healdsburg festivals since its inception, and had published articles about guitar construction. Furthermore, his name had come up through other luthiers each time they had turned my difficult project away. That luthier was Michael Keller. As it happened, his was one of the first tables I went to. His guitars were flawless, light, and loud. His necks were paper thin, with fast, low action, and he even had a baby short scale model in his standard line. On top of this, when he played one of his guitars for me, he played exactly the songs I would have played. And when I played his guitar, he remarked that he played that same arrangement as well. This may seem like a small thing,

but it was a real bonus. In Michael, I had found a person who intrinsically knew my style, knew the music I was going to be playing, understood my physical needs, and was completely open to building a guitar, with my wood, from scratch. No preset molds, scales, sizes, or requirements. He had apprenticed and trained with two of the top luthiers in the world (Richard Schneider and Jeff Elliot), had trained a lot with Jim Olson, and everyone at the show knew him and respected him. In conversations, I also found out that top high-end guitar shops, like Dave's Guitar Shop in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, used him regularly for difficult and intricate restoration work—another hallmark of a great luthier. Best of all, except for a few books, a miserable website (which he has since remedied with guitarist and master website designer Dave Bricker of Spot Gfix), and past Healdsburg catalogues, I had never heard of him! No hype! I had found a luthier's luthier, and a well-kept, if unintentional, secret in the collector world, ensuring, at least for the time being, that I was going to be



Nirvana! Luthier Michael Keller (left), proud new owner Henry Lowenstein (right), and the dream guitar finally get together after months of careful craftsmanship, hundreds of emails/digital images, and a separate airline ticket for the guitar! Was it worth it? Absolutely, especially when the luthier and owner collaborate to make a masterpiece such as this.



Classic Harwood design from Andy DePaule's Luthier Supply, cut in Vietnam out of top quality paua abalone, and modified and inlaid into the Nigerian Ebony fingerboard by Michael Keller. Has a custom compound radius fingerboard, nickel frets, and a 24-inch custom scale.

paying for pure craftsmanship. I was about to have built the most amazing guitar I had ever played, seen, or heard.

Contrary to common belief that the wait for a custom-made guitar is agonizing, the nine-month process with Michael was almost (almost!) more fun than getting the guitar itself. Although we had agreed on a basic price and I had an idea of what he charged for options, I was still a long way away from knowing everything I was going to do with this guitar. Over the next nine months, we would discuss everything from how to arrange my wood for the best pattern to what the shape of inlay pieces would be. I started off by giving Michael a deposit and writing him a long email about the type of features I wanted. I also wanted to be careful to not urge Michael do something he was uncomfortable with, or something that went counter to what he suspected was good acoustic mechanics. I didn't want to change basic features around so much that it was no longer a "Keller" guitar. This would be throwing away all the reasons I had picked him in the first place, and would also have an impact on any future value of the guitar as an instrument bearing his reputation. To Michael's credit, he really let himself be a conduit to a lot of creative thought, and knew just when to reign it in.

During the course of the building of the guitar, Michael called upon many resources within the building community. Jim Olson, a good friend and teacher who had actually been one of the luthiers who pointed me to Michael's table at Healdsburg, gave some advice on making sure my Brazilian did not break during the bending process. Michael called upon or sent me to people he had met over a very long career for all sorts of materials ranging from endpins and rosettes to mahogany neck blanks and ebony fingerboards. It is not enough to know the materials and how to use them. These days your luthier has to know where to get top-quality materials and make sure that the supplier sends the best of what they have. Size may not matter, but with guitars, experience does.

Oh, the joys of digital photography. Michael and I spoke almost every day, but even our enjoyable thousands of minutes and words weren't as good as opening up my email every few days and seeing the progress in high definition. Apart from the sheer excitement factor, this process helped us head off some potentially dis-

TIPS AND TRICKS

When trying out guitars, develop three or four pieces or parts of pieces that test out the range of the guitar, and always play those same pieces on each guitar you test, preferably in the same order. This seems like a simple concept, yet I have run across a number of people, including myself at first, who waste valuable time and effort by not comparing apples to apples. Have your routine down and you will be amazed at how quickly the differences in guitars become evident.

Strings are half the game. If you are really interested in a guitar, ask the shop if you can buy a set of fresh strings for it in the make and gauge you play—or better yet, bring your own. The single most important element of a guitar is its strings, and over and over again I see people making decisions on multi-thousand dollar guitars based on strings that have been played to death for months, and are not even the brand or gauge they will be using. Any shop worth its salt will let you play using your set if you are serious about buying. Buy the strings you like in bulk so you always have a few sets with you to put onto the "contenders" you find. Also, get an all-in-one tool like the Planet Waves string winder-cutter, a tuning fork, and a quality capo like a Shub (not that very many shops will let you change strings yourself, but some might). Then, learn to change strings professionally. A diagram of how to do it correctly is on the John Pearse strings website (<http://www.jpstrings.com>), as well as the Acoustic Guitar magazine website (<http://acousticguitar.com>). I have seen guitars go from complete and utter duds

to amazing instruments with a simple change of strings, especially in big box stores where the strings are never changed.

If you want to check out scale lengths, follow a trick that Michael Keller taught me. Place a capo on the first, second, or third fret of the guitar. Measure the distance between the saddle of the guitar and the fret where you have placed the capo. This gives you the scale length you are testing. Now tune the guitar, with the capo in place, to standard pitch. Voila. You feel and hear almost exactly how that guitar will play and sound with a shorter scale.

You can play with the concept of how a sound port might change your guitar's sound if you have one of those large, Fishman pre-amps in the side of the guitar you have access to. They actually pop out rather easily, as I found when I pulled one out of my Cordoba Gypsy King model to see how a sound port would sound in a small-bodied guitar. It makes an astounding difference, even with a port just a few inches in diameter.

A word about payment. Most luthiers have a schedule of deposits as they reach certain critical waypoints of the construction. I am not sure what Michael's were, because I had decided to periodically send him money without his asking. The reason for this is that I was having so much fun that I did not want the delivery to be bittersweet by getting the guitar and handing over a big check at the same time. By sending regular chunks of money throughout the process, I only owed a few hundred dollars upon final delivery of the guitar.

astrous misunderstandings. No matter how much you think about the details or how much you write everything down, you always forget something—whether it is something small, like where the binding ends and begins, or something large, like where the cutaway ends and begins. Michael's new website actually has a section where each client can login and view a complete visual and written history of the guitar's progress. Even simple digital photos at critical junctures can enhance the experience and give both builder and buyer a safety net.

THE ARRIVAL

What a day that was when my dream guitar arrived! Michael had gotten on a plane, bought a seat for my guitar, and delivered it by hand. He spent three days with me running around my hometown of Miami, and even attended a dinner with my extend-



Keller's Dream Guitar. Perfectly proportioned parlor guitar with AAAA Adirondack top and AAAA Brazilian Rosewood. The parlor form is modified only by a sound port, a cutaway, and, of course, an LR Baggs Dual Source sound system (not shown in this picture) accessible for fine tuning through the sound port. The old world meets the new world in one instrument.

ed family. By this point, my family already knew him from the weekly pictures, had joined in on my conversations with him, and had even participated in making choices about the elements of the guitar. The building of my guitar, from start to finish, was a family event, which I think explains why eighty percent of Michael's customers buy at least one more guitar from him. One other thing worth mentioning is about delivery. When I first played the guitar, it had come off of a plane from Minnesota and had not acclimated to almost ninety percent tropical humidity. As a result, it was a little jangley. This didn't worry me, because I had had this experience with guitars before. Within a few hours it was playing perfectly, and it was even better within a day. Don't judge or adjust your new guitar right out of the case. Climate and transportation can make an enormous difference.

A LIFETIME OF MEMORIES AND JOY

I succeeded completely in building my perfect guitar, with dimensions and action accommodating all my physical needs. Apart from its obvious beauty and craftsmanship, its sound is amazing. Accomplished musicians who play it make faces like somebody is dropping chocolate truffles in their mouths. It is loud, and can sustain a note for thirty seconds. With the L.R. Baggs Dual Source sound system installed, I can play it in stereo (the microphone through a California Blonde amp and the piezo through a Fender Twin) or through a processor just like an electric. It satisfies all my needs, though, as one might guess, Michael is making me a second guitar which pushes the envelope of turn-of-the-century parlor design (I couldn't let the extra wood go to waste). The best part is that, rather than being the end of my journey, receiving this guitar was just the beginning. I enjoy the guitar every day, whether I can play it or not. My memories of the guitar's construction add to the enjoyment, and I feel a much richer connection with the guitar-playing and guitar-building community as a result of the experience.

Its value? In another time, a custom guitar like this might have been difficult to sell. But the Internet, and eBay in particular, has revolutionized the buying and selling of guitars. It is now possible to put a guitar up for sale and instantly have it be seen by virtually every major collector in a matter of weeks. Already, small luthiers are finding ready markets on eBay and other websites (accessed through search engines like Google), and it appears certain that this trend will continue for fine instruments as internet shopping becomes safer and digital photography becomes even more commonplace. The comparative value (and indeed, the insured value) of a guitar like this would be around \$20,000, primarily because of the high degree of time-consuming ornamentation and the rarity and quality of the materials. By supplying many of my own materials and choosing a master luthier who is just reaching the peak of his career, I saved a lot of money on the construction. In addition, I have very little doubt that Michael Keller will become one of the top fifty or so guitar builders from this Golden Age whose work will be valued in years to come. In my own opinion, his workmanship compares favorably with the top five or ten luthiers in the industry. However, in that a guitar of a collector's grade is still a musical instrument at its heart, the real value is found in the sheer joy of playing a tailor-made instrument of this magnificent quality. ■