

Luthier Rob Engel

by Marc A. Ybaben, Ph.D.



Photo courtesy Paul Johnson

Thanks to the wonders of YouTube, a friend sent me a video of an East Coast guitarist named Bob DeVos. I immediately noticed two things: that Bob was a monster player – incredible lines and sound! – and that he played a very cool-looking guitar. When I checked him out online to start buying his recordings (highly recommended, by the way), his guitar was prominently featured on the site and on his CD covers, and thus I learned of luthier Rob Engel. Rob took some time out of his busy schedule to answer some questions for JJG.

JJG: Thanks for doing the interview for Just Jazz Guitar. I appreciate it.

RE: Well I appreciate it! Free press is always a beautiful thing to have.

JJG: Good! Now, I don't know your background so tell us how you got into building guitars.

RE: I was working in a guitar studio in New Jersey for a guitar player named Lenny Argese – he just passed away last October – back in the mid-to-early 1980s, and we got to be friends. From talking about guitar playing and stuff, he said to me one day, “Why don’t you stay for dinner?” – the studio was in the basement of his Victorian style home – and I said, “Well, fine.” And then he said, “I’ll show you the guitars I made.” And I said to myself, “Yeah, this is gonna be something!” You know, I had seen stuff that people made – being in the cabinet business before – and people would say, “Hey, come see my stuff,” and I’d say, “Yeah, that’s OK,” but it was seriously amateur stuff, you know. So after dinner, Lenny brought me up to his

attic – he had a sort of workshop up there – and he started taking out these guitars, and they were just phenomenal pieces of work! I mean they were beautiful; each one was an original piece. Some of them he had worked on with a guy named Tom Doyle – he’s a guitar maker and pickup maker from New Jersey – they had been buddies and they had worked together on different stuff, and the bug bit me right there! I started looking at the guitars and I guess he saw the expression on my face, and he said, “Well, you can do this, you know.” And I was thinking, “Yeah, right!” but I really had to give it a shot, so I did. I went out and bought all kinds of books, and I already had a garage in the back of my house that served as a wood shop – which is what I did for a living anyhow – and I got started by bringing wood home from jobs that were scraps and left-overs, basically practicing until I started to understand how things worked. Then Lenny introduced me to Tom Doyle, and he got me a job with Tommy; I worked with him for about three years. I really wasn’t making any money there, so I went back to cabinet making and carpentry for a short length of time until I got enough bread together to start my own shop. I needed additional tools and materials and the whole routine; I opened up the place I’m still at it now, and that was about 13 or 14 years ago. That’s how I got started doing it.

JJG: You have a different design. How did that come about?

RE: Well, the design itself was a collaboration between Lenny Argese and me; he brought me the basic shape and then I altered it to fit the purpose. The first one was made for Bob DeVos. At the time Bob was working with Charles Earland, the organ player from Chicago – I think that’s where he’s from – but anyway, Charles played loud, so Bob needed something to compete with the organ, the sax player, and the drummer. Bobby’s forte is the organ trio thing – just about every decent organ player knows who he is and has played with him – so he needed something that wouldn’t feed back and would still give him that hollowbody sound and vibe. So that’s basically what we came up with. I had to do some alterations to make it work the way we wanted it to, and it’s evolved a bit from the first one.

Regarding the shape – the guitar looks like a guitar, it has the traditional shape, but then it doesn’t. It has a definite modern appearance, which was important for me. I didn’t want to lose the traditional guitar perspec-

tive. I mean, there are lots of guys who make these wild shapes – believe me, I can come up with all sorts of crazy stuff! – but that doesn't necessarily make it what it is; it would just be a guitar with a crazy shape. For instance, one time in Tom Doyle's shop, we went out and bought one of those fake Mother of Pearl toilet seats, and we made a guitar out of it! We put a pickup on it, fastened a neck to it, and it played! It played fine, actually. My point being, you can do anything you want, but it doesn't necessarily make it valid. I'm trying to make something that is actually a true, valid idea that anyone from any genre of guitar playing will be attracted to. The typical, hollowbody archtop thing is such a tradition that it's hard for a guitar maker to break out of that and still have relevance. It's not your typical hollowbody guitar — which is my slogan on my web site and everything else — but it will do all the stuff that your hollowbody will do.

JJG: So is the shape more an acoustic/physics thing rather than aesthetic?

RE: Well, no, the current shape is really for aesthetic reasons, but the guitar wasn't built to be acoustic – it's strictly a hollowbody electric guitar; it's made to be amplified. Does it have acoustic qualities to it? Yes, it does, but it's not engineered to be an acoustic guitar. You know, the fact is, all the so-called "jazz guitars" or hollowbody archtops in the past – whether they're electric or not — are built like hollowbody acoustic guitars. Nobody bothered to change the construction to accommodate the electronics, so basically they built an acoustic guitar with holes in it, put in a pickup and said, "OK, we're done!" And then what happens to it? It feeds back like crazy! It's awful. There are no guitarists now who play that music seriously- whether they are jazz or even blues guys — who can even compete with the drums or bass player or organ player or horn players or anyone else they're playing with, at that volume level. They would all have to turn down in order for the guitar to be heard, and typically nobody likes to do that. The only way you're really able to use the thing is if you use an anti-feedback device, but that usually changes how the guitar sounds and responds, so a lot of guys don't like that kind of stuff. There are devices, physical devices that you can stuff in the sound hole, but they only work minimally. For years I played an ES-175 and I had that thing stuffed with sheets and towels and all kinds of stuff, duct tape over the holes, and it still fed back. It's the nature of what it is, so we came up with our design. The structure of the

guitar was actually originated by Tom Doyle; I basically copied how he made his guitars, and then I elaborated on the design, and got it to work the way I wanted it to work. So that's how the design part of it came about.

JJG: What are the basic dimensions of your model?

RE: I make three different hollowbodies – a 14" across the lower bout, 15" and a 16". Typically I use a 25.5" scale, and the nut is 1 11/16". And the models all sound a little bit different, of course, because one's pushing a little more air than the other. It also depends on what materials they're made out of; that's a big factor in how they sound and respond. For instance, you can have mahogany sides and back, a mahogany neck, an ebony or rosewood fingerboard, and a spruce top. That would sound very different from, say, butternut sides and back, mahogany neck, and a redwood or cedar top on it. The basic rule of thumb is, the more dense the wood, the more highs you're going to get out of it. So, you'll get more high end out of a maple top than, say, a spruce top or a cedar top. And as you go down in their specific gravity, that's how you change how the guitar works. For instance, a piece of cedar, like Western Red Cedar – they make a lot of flattops out of that – is probably around 24 lbs. per cubic foot, a piece of spruce is between 26 and 28 lbs., and redwood is probably 24 to 26 lbs., so you can see that you can change it by how heavy or light the wood is. A piece of maple can be 45 to 48 lbs. So that's a drastic difference between a piece of cedar or a piece of spruce, and depending on what type of sound you're looking for, you'd be building with particular woods in mind.

I build a lot of models on spec, so I try out two or three woods to see which you think sounds best. I just came from the King of Prussia Guitar Show in Pennsylvania, and I had about five or six guitars there, but I had them all built out of different materials. Everyone who played them was pretty surprised at the difference in response and sound they got out of each one. We played them all through a standard Blackface Twin Reverb. Basically we plugged into the guitar and plugged into the amp so there was no way to alter the natural sound of the instrument.

JJG: You seem to use several wood combinations – cedar, maple, spruce, redwood, mahogany, butternut, etc. What drives the decision for the choices?

RE: Well, that took a lot of experimentation and time. There were plenty of guitars that I made that could be

used as kindling! – stuff that I just didn't like. One of my favorite combinations is using butternut for the sides and back. It's a relatively light wood, but it's incredibly acoustic, and I also use it on the back of the solid bodies. It's very resonant stuff, and it reproduces the lows and the low-mids real well, so when you blend it together with a piece of maple or a piece of spruce, you really get a nice response through the pickups--a very even sound. As I said, a lot of it was through experimentation; I found that the butternut for the back and sides was a good starting point. And of course mahogany or maple for the neck – that works real well.

I also like to use cherry because it's a little bit lighter than maple, so you get a little different response from it. Of course maple on the top will brighten up any of the guitars.

I also make the typical archtop combination, which is maple sides and back, spruce top, maple neck, and ebony fingerboard.

That tends to be a little bit brighter electronically, but sometimes we compensate for that by changing the electronics a little bit, with the capacitors and such. But that's how I started to learn all the combinations, so I could recommend something to you if you came and said, "I want to have this particular sound." And of course that also has to do with what volume level you're playing at. If you're playing at a deafening volume level, it really doesn't matter what you're playing out of – it's basically just electronics from that standpoint. But if you're a guy who plays traditional blues style like BB King or Albert King or Albert Collins, even Robben Ford, where the volume level is loud but not deafening, all of those conditions will make a difference. It'll definitely make a difference for a guy playing jazz because you're not playing that loud.

The other side of the story, is the electronics have something to do with the sound in the sense that they're magnetic pickups that, in theory at least, are not supposed to pick up any of the vibrations that come out of

the guitar. In other words, they're only supposed to pick up the disturbance of the magnetic field due to the strings passing through the magnetic field. We all know that the Les Paul sounds different than the 335 – and I'm only using these examples because they are established guitar types; I'm not trying to say one is any better than the other – it's just what most people understand. Mine is a bit different than this standard, but still, it's similar in regards to how it works.

Anyway, the point is that if they all sounded the same it wouldn't matter what materials they were made out



Photo courtesy Paul Johnson

of. According to theory, the pickups are doing everything. But we all know that's not true, When you put single coils in a Les Paul-type guitar, it doesn't sound like a Telecaster, it doesn't sound like a Stratocaster, and if you put humbuckers in a Strat-or Tele-style thing, it doesn't sound like a tele-caster or a

Stratocaster. The fact is, the type of body mass and materials are factors in how the guitar sounds.

JJG: You mentioned the different sizes of your models – the 14", 15" and 16". Are those hollow, or semihollow, or do you make both?

RE: OK, without giving out too much of a description of how I make the stuff, because it has to be somewhat proprietary, just like anybody's stuff ... well, sometimes I don't carve anything out of the inside – in other words, it's flat. In other cases, I make it a bit more acoustical, or to push a little bit more air, I'll carve the inside of it out to a certain degree. And this has all been done by experimentation – you can take it to a certain degree, but at some point it's going to start feeding back because you build up sympathetic vibrations on the top. It's kind of like standing at the edge of a cliff and hanging your feet over the edge; you can go so far, but eventually gravity's going to take charge and you're going to fall over! So you have to be careful with how much you remove and it also depends on

what the material is on the top or the back. The lighter stuff, woods like butternut, spruce, redwood and cedar, you can't take as much out of as you can with maple or cherry. So again, it could be very minimal or no carving at all on the inside, and of course I make a sound block that goes underneath the bridge and tailpiece, and it's a perforated block so it's kind of like honeycomb. There are numerous reasons why we do that. Of course, we try to keep the guitar as light as we can, and also we try to get the air to flow through it.

JJG: So do you do all carved tops or do you use laminated woods?

RE: No, I don't use any plywoods or laminated woods or anything like that. Everything I have is, for lack of any better description, "real wood"! I make everything myself, so I don't buy premade fingerboards or anything. I carve everything, of course with the help of a copying machine that's handled manually. I don't have any CNC machines or anything. Naturally I work with routers, a table saw, a band saw, and all that kind of stuff, but there aren't any big computer-driven systems in here. In the future I may like to have something like that to help me produce, but right now I don't have anything like that.

JJG: What pickup combinations do you like?

RE: My favorite is the Lindy Fralin pickups, the humbuckers. In terms of my favorite output level, there's a certain thing I like about the 8 and 9K outputs (an 8k in the neck and a 9k in the bridge): they not only give me a good blues or rock sound, but typically you can get a good jazz sound out of the neck because there's a lot of output. Also, the bridge pickup, if you do a combination of the two, helps to sort of clip the highs a bit if you're playing a little bit louder by having a stronger output on the pickups. But then I also like the 7.5 and 8.5K, which is a lot better for a guy who is playing maybe an R & B sort of sound or a straight-up blues sound. That's a little less output, but you get the amp to do the work. The single coil stuff is real good, too; I use Fralin P-90s, which are real good. Then with the solid bodies, the typical thing is Seymour Duncan "Pearly Gates" they have a really great sound on a solid-body guitar. I've put the Fralin pickups in solidbodies for clients in the past, but standard application is the Seymour Duncans. And sometimes in the hollowbodies I'll use his '59 pickups or sometimes his jazz pickup. Seymour makes real good production stuff, so you can't go wrong with them.

In terms of the electronics of the guitars, I wire everything standard except the P-90s, which have four conductor cables, so you can get three separate sounds out of each pickup. So in other words, if you had two pickups, your typical two humbuckers with two volume and two tone controls, and a pickup selector switch, each pickup would also have a mini switch connected to it, which would give you series, parallel, and single coil for each pickup. So you can see that if you were using two pickups at any time, the number of combinations you would have. There are lots of sounds possible. I try to do that to give some versatility, so if you're a working musician, and you're doing a typical sort of gig – blues, club dates, something like that – or you're a jazz guy doing the same thing, and you're playing a little R & B or some blues tunes and then go back to playing some standards, a lot of guys would end up bringing at least two guitars, you know, a Telecaster or Stratocaster and then a hollowbody with humbuckers in it, but with my guitar you can at least dupe some of those sounds. I'm not saying that it sounds typically like a Strat or a Tele, but you can do the sounds well enough to get through a gig with just one guitar.

JJG: I see you use both wooden bridges/tailpieces and metal, stop-tailpieces.

RE: I do a more traditional-style guitar with a wooden tailpiece and bridge, and that's sold exclusively through Lou Del Rosso in New Jersey – he has a store called "Guitars 'n' Jazz." That style came about again with Lenny Argeese. He wanted something a little bit more traditional, so I made him the guitar with the wood tailpiece and bridge, one pickup, and just a volume and tone control. It still has the same output and vibe as my other models, though.

JJG: There seems to be a lot of debate in the guitar world about which sounds "better." What's your side of the debate?

RE: Well, I know that if you have a wooden bridge, intonation will be difficult – not that you won't have decent or acceptable intonation – it's just difficult to come by. Also, you get a lot more sustain with a metal bridge and stop tailpiece than you ever will on a trapeze tailpiece and wooden bridge. You'd have to work a lot harder on it with your hands. One of the reasons the jazz guys like the response time on the wooden bridge is for the quicker, maybe staccato sort of feel, since on the wooden bridge the sustain isn't that great, and the notes don't tend to run together as closely as

they might through a metal tailpiece. On Bob DeVos's guitars, we originally installed a metal tailpiece and bridge, and still do, but we changed the saddles a number of times – originally from the metal saddles to nylon saddles, and then from nylon to graphite material. Then we changed the nut on his guitar from typical bone to ebony because he wanted a softer sound and a quicker response time. On the second guitar I made for him, we changed the saddles on the bridge to graphite and we left the nut as bone.

JJG: So it sounds like you still do quite a bit of experimentation?

RE: I'm trying to succeed at what I do, but if everything becomes an experimental, custom situation, it's difficult to make a living not only because it's experimental – we don't know if it's going to work! – but also it takes longer to do because it's outside the realm of jigs and templates. That's the typical process I would use to make guitars, so it ends up taking more time, and time, as in everybody's business, is money. I still try to keep the guitar down at a reasonable price because, well, number one, I'm the new kid on the block, but number two, I try to make something that's affordable for guys who are interested in having a good-sounding, good-playing, and good-looking instrument, for an affordable price.

I recently had someone ask me about a 7-string guitar. Now I've done that before when I worked with Tom Doyle and I've done it myself, but that's outside the realm of any templates and stuff that I have. I mean, it joins the body at a different width, the nut is a different width so there's no template for the fingerboard or for the neck dimensions, the bridge and tailpiece have to be made for the seven strings, the pickups are a different size – the whole thing is different from a normal guitar. So, when strictly doing everything by hand, it takes a lot of time. And again, I would still make it basically my guitar, but it would be different dimensions so I don't know how it would turn out. For instance – I've used this explanation with other clients in the past – just because it looks good on paper doesn't mean it's going to work. You know, they build vehicles to take people to the moon, and they fly jets that take three or four hundred people to fly around the world, but before they put them into service they test them, even though they look great on paper. So you really have to test everything out first.

JJG: Now you mentioned prices – what are your starting prices?

RE: Well, the hollowbodies all start at \$3175, and the solidbodies are \$2650. But right now, I'm trying to do the "guitar show" circuit, so I've lowered them by about 10%. That means I've been selling the hollowbodies now for \$2850 and the solidbodies for \$2450.

JJG: Wow, that's a steal for a handmade jazz guitar!

RE: Yeah, well, as I say, I'm the new kid on the block and I'm trying to make a living, and I'm trying to get my guitars into people's hands. I realize that the only way to do that is not only to make it affordable, but it has to look good, sound good, and play good. I figure if I can cover all those bases, eventually something will turn up! In terms of the financial thing, everything's difficult right now – there's not much disposable income in the economy for most people. It makes selling anything – cars or guitars – difficult right now.

JJG: What's your current wait time if someone were to order a guitar from you now?

RE: It's a minimum wait of three months. I don't think that's a real long time, but I don't think it's short, either.

JJG: I think that's pretty good! Most quotes I've heard for custom work are at least a year or more.

RE: Well, I think that those are better-established guys who already have pre-existing sales and they're doing relatively well. Again, I'm the new guy on the block even though I've been doing this for 20 years! Not many people know my stuff yet. The Tri-State area – Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey – is basically where I've made most of my sales, and up until a short while ago, it was done by word of mouth, and I was still able to make and sell guitars through that process. Once the economy fell apart, though, it became real difficult to get the sales for guitars. I advertised in a magazine for a while, but that didn't really turn out so well, and I decided that the way to go would be to get it out there physically by going to some of the shows.

JJG: How many hours does it actually take to build an entire guitar?

RE: For the hollowbodies it takes a little bit longer than the solids, obviously, since there's quite a bit more work in the hollowbodies. But I would say that if I were to start on a Monday, by Friday afternoon I would have a guitar that was playing. It wouldn't have finish

on it, of course, but when I'm building, I usually put the guitars together first, and string them up and play them while I'm carving the neck. This way I know that I have something that works. I know a lot of guys who carve the neck to a template size, and they don't have any strings on it, and they do the fretwork after they actually complete the guitar. But I do all the fretwork when it's at what I call the "white stage," which is when it's been sanded out, but there's no finish on it. So whether it's the solid-bodies or the hollowbodies, again, I'll put all the frets in, make it play, make sure all the fretwork is good, then I'll take the strings and everything off – the tailpiece and bridge, and everything – then sand it out and decide about the colors and everything, which is another process entirely itself. Anyway, after the fretwork and finish comes the buffing and sanding out. You can get the total amount of finish on it in probably something like three days, but then you need to let it shrink out for five to seven days at a bare minimum before you can buff it, because it has to get hard enough so it can take a nice shine. So, if you look at it start to finish, probably two to two-and-a-half weeks total time, but a lot of that is hurry-up-and-wait stuff. So if I only had one guitar to work on at a time, it would take about that long. Typically, then, I tell people three months because I'm working on more than one thing at a time.

I only spray nitrocellulose lacquer; I won't use anything else. For a while I had been using water-based stuff, but I didn't like the results that I got from it, and I didn't like the sound I got from it, either. When I was working for Tom Doyle, we sprayed a number of different finishes in his shop, both water-based and nitro, and urethane and that kind of stuff, and some acrylic lacquer, mainly because you had to match a lot of the repair work, so you had to learn all those different finishes and how to work with them.

JJG: You mentioned working with Bob DeVos and Lenny. Who are your typical customers?

RE: I guess I get mostly professional or semi-professional guitar players. I think that in some respects — and I don't mean this to sound pretentious — the guitar is a little bit hard for the typical, everyday hobbyist to understand. It's not like picking up the typical guitar you might see at the big chain guitar stores, and then playing it. I think it is attractive for most people to see and play one, but it's not the typical shape, you know, even though it's a single cutaway. It's not just the arch,

but it's carved. So from that perspective, and especially with all the electronics options, it's a bit hard for the typical guitarist to understand.

I think it's something that once you do get it in your hands and play it, you like it because of several things: the non-feedback issue we discussed, you can get a lot of different sounds out of it, and it plays like an electric guitar instead of a hollowbody acoustic. Typically, a lot of those hollowbody archtops, because they *are* hollowbody acoustic guitars, have a higher action, a heavier gauge string on it, etc., which makes it a bit more difficult for a guy to play if he's not playing it every day for a living. I'm not trying to say that I just put light gauge strings on them, because I don't. I mean, a guy like Bob Devos will play with 13s or 14s, and sometimes Ill string them up with a set of 12s. Typically, on the hollowbodies I'll put a set of 10s, because they appeal to a different genre of player. But, you know, Bobby (DeVos) likes a little higher action in the nut, and he'll play with a heavier gauge string. Then again, I typically put on 11s and keep the action and playability as easy as possible because I think most guys want to be comfortable with their playing and don't want to work too hard at it. Now that's not to say that there haven't been hollowbody electric archtops that have nice, close action and you play them with 11s or something; we all know they exist. But when you're really playing your typical, older style hollowbody archtop, it does have more of an acoustic feel to it than it does when you play an electric guitar. My intention is to make an electric guitar, I'm not trying to make an acoustic.

JJG: In what direction do you see jazz guitar building going?

RE: That's a very good question, because most of the builders that I see are coming out of or copying the John D'Angelico and Jimmy D'Aquisto, and now John Monteleone and Bob Benedetto schools of hollowbody archtop guitar building. Those guys essentially still build acoustic, archtop guitars. Most of the time they're equipped with a floating pickup, and that's the style they build. Of course, I'm not criticizing anything or saying that style doesn't work — it does! — but I know that those guitars will feed back in a playing situation, depending on what volume level you're playing at. Again, maybe if you're doing a duo gig or playing with a singer, then you're fine, but I'm trying to make a modern, electric hollowbody guitar that you put

through your 100-watt Twin Reverb and turn it up! And then you can stand three feet away from it and have it not feed back, just like a solidbody, but still get that hollowbody vibe and sound out of it.

There are other innovations I've seen in hollowbody archtop guitars – asymmetrical shapes or oval sound holes that are in the face of the guitar or on the sides to accentuate a particular frequency response the builder's looking for ... but for me, I just look at it from the sense that it's an amplified situation, and I don't think that's ever going to change. I think that you need to build something that's compatible with amplifiers because that's how modern music is made. That's not to say there aren't great acoustic guitar players around, because there are, but it just seems to me that the modern trend is amplified music. I just conform to the fact that the instrument's going to be played at a louder volume level, so you're going to have to suit the instrument to that situation.

JJG: My first real jazz guitar was a 1988 Gibson L-4 CES, a beautiful, big hollowbody, and I was in a very loud, drummer-led quartet near Chicago, and there was nowhere on stage where I could stand without getting howling feedback all night!

RE: Well, yeah, that's exactly what happens! I can relate to that – as I told you, I played a 175 and I had the same problems. That was in the 1970s when I was playing in a fusion band, and it was pretty loud and the guitar fed back like crazy! I had to find someplace where I could stand, but a lot of times everyone was crowded together on a small stage, so that was impossible. I guess that you can easily relate to the things I've pointed out about where the music is going in terms of amplification. Even acoustic guitar players now play with the electronics built into the acoustic guitar. That's a different sort of thing, the piezo style pickup, where sound pressure reproduces the sound as opposed to a magnetic field doing it. It's a different approach entirely. I've had guys ask me to put a piezo pickup in the bridge, but I really don't like that sound that much. It's a very different kind of thing. I guess I'm looking at it from the perspective of, "It's an amplified guitar; let's play it like it's an electric and forget the acoustic stuff!"

JJG: You mentioned at the beginning that when you first got into building, you bought some books and started looking into it. Who are or were your

influences in the luthier world?

RE: Well, I guess going back as far as you can, the modern dimensions of the guitar go to Antonio Torres, because he really nailed down the size of the existing classical instrument of the day. I guess in some way I can relate to him because he had a history of being a carpenter and cabinetmaker, and he traveled around Spain for a while before he settled in one place and really started to build guitars. He really developed the fan-bracing thing for flattop, classical-style guitars, and also the bridge, and he developed the tying of the strings down there. So, he was definitely an influence on me. Of course, even Orville Gibson – I appreciated his way of developing his own instruments; he was big on building mandolins and stuff before he got into guitars. And he also really built the first archtop, acoustic, hollowbody guitar, albeit with round sound holes, but it was basically his innovation, which he pulled right out of mandolin building. At the time, I think it was a strange thing for guitar players in terms of how they looked at what he did, so I guess I don't find myself in too much of a different bag!

Other builders ... of course I always appreciated just the straight-out beauty of D'Angelico's work, his sense of form and shape – you know, the art deco kind of approach that he had, which was in vogue in the day when he was working on those guitars and building them. But he carried the design right through the 1960s until his death, and people have copied his styles and still use his stuff today. It's sort of a timeless shape and style. Even his pearl work was very art deco, and people still copy it. I guess the clients and the public in general still associate that with the archtop, hollowbody guitar. It's kind of like it's not truly a real archtop guitar unless it has those appointments on it! So he's definitely an influence.

I try not to worry, though, or be involved too much in what everyone else does. I try to focus on just what *I* do and develop what *I* do; I don't think about it as a competition. It's easy to get sort of drawn into a situation where you evaluate it in terms of, "Is one thing better than the next?" I try not to look at it from that perspective; I try to look at it from the perspective that it's different from X-Y-Z. I don't think that it's a good idea to put yourself in the position where you're competing with some other builder or even if you're a guitar player or other musician, where you're competing with other musicians. It's just different; it doesn't make you



Photos courtesy Paul Johnson



“My sound is integral to who I am as a musician. With a Rob Engel guitar, I attain the sound I hear in my head, both performing live and on my recordings. They are beautifully crafted, flawlessly finished, and extremely evenly responsive instruments. The neck is especially comfortable to play, and all of this with no feedback problems! I’ve used mine on all of my recordings, and it’s easy to get a good sound in the studio. Many of my fellow guitarists and students try my Engel guitars, order their own, and are extremely happy to own a custom guitar of the highest quality at a price they can afford.”

— Bob DeVos, musician / recording artist

any better or worse. It just means your perspective or viewpoint is different. I think that’s probably the most important thing.

When you see my archtop electric, and you see somebody else’s archtop electric, you realize the differences almost immediately, they are so obvious. I’m not trying to compete with them; I’m just trying to do what I do. They’re really trying to pull their thing from the D’Angelico and D’Aquila type of design and shapes and theory of how you reproduce the sound. You know, those guitars were made for jazz guys and guitar players back in the day when there weren’t pickups and amplification like we have. You had to cut through a band of saxophones and trumpets and piano players, so the guitar was made big and had sound holes and was built to accentuate the high end and the high mids. Of course, the size of the guitar helped it be loud and reproduce the sounds. I think the size of my guitars doesn’t necessarily make it loud, because I don’t make it to be acoustic; I try to make it a size that is comfortable, and that’s how we got the three different sizes.

I think that the jazz guys and even some of the blues guys like the 16" model since they’re a bit more accustomed to playing a bigger guitar. The 14" and 15" will probably be for a bit more modern player who’s used to playing something a little bit smaller. The 14" again, is great for guys who plays blues or fusion-style stuff, especially if they want a woodier sort of sound, because they’re pushing more air than if they were playing a solidbody. Of course, just the general feel of playing something that’s arched is different than playing something flat, basically because the neck is pitched closer to the body. Playing an archtop guitar for a lot of people is a little more comfortable because the neck is pitched a little bit, and that means the furthest point away from the neck to the body is actually a little closer to you, compared to playing something that is straight. You don’t have to reach out as far. That kind

of feel is important for players doing that kind of music.

JJG: So with all the choices out there for guitarists, why go with a custom guitar from you?

RE: I think that one of the basic reasons is the unique shape and style, for one thing; the other side of the story is that if you get something from me, it plays right out of the box. It won’t need any setup, whereas when you buy a guitar at your typical guitar store, it’s not likely going to be setup by a professional who knows how to do that. Experienced players expect a new guitar to play correctly and respond a certain way, and someone at the typical store won’t know how to deal with fretwork, etc., so you’re not getting a guitar at its best. Again, it’s kind of hard for me to qualify that kind of question and I don’t want to be negative about stores, because I need to get my guitars in stores, too! But, my guitars will do what they’re supposed to do right out of the box, and you won’t need to adjust anything.

JJG: Anything else you’d like to tell our readers?

RE: Buy my guitar, that’s all I can say! I use the best materials, I use extremely figured or highly figured maple for the tops and side and neck; I use quarter-sawn redwood, cedar, and spruce; I use high quality woods for the fingerboards, whether they’re rosewood, pau ferro or ebony, I’ll use some good substitutes like bloodwood, which is really beautiful, and has the sound and feel of ebony. I wouldn’t be put off because I use some woods that aren’t your typical guitar wood; there are other tone woods that the typical makers don’t have because they’re either not aware of them or they’re hesitant about using them because the wood is different. People have the tendency to judge something that’s different, “Well, I don’t know what it sounds like.” I’m a little bit more adventurous, so I’m willing to take a shot, and you can get good combinations.

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— Tom Doyle, luthier / musician

JJG: Thank you for your time today!

RE: Sure thing.

Rob Engel can be reached at <http://www.engelguitars.com>

Dr. Marc Ybaben is a psychologist by day in order to support his lifetime habit of being a musician. He recently relocated to the Salt Lake City area, and is starting to perform in the local jazz scene.

Chris Adkins, JJG contributor, is a graduate assistant at the University of New Orleans and is the 2010-2011 recipient of the ASCAP Foundation Louis Armstrong Scholarship. He is currently completing a book of Johnny Smith solo guitar transcriptions and is studying with Hank Mackie, Steve Masakowski, and Brian Seeger. His debut album will be released this fall. For more visit him on the web: www.chrisadkinsmusic.com

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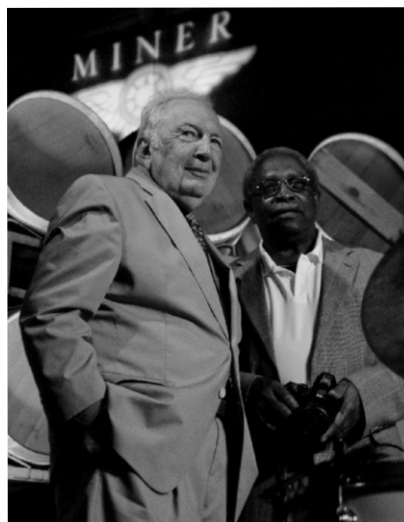
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Bucky Pizzarelli and Savannah's premier bassist Ben Tucker at the Miner/Benedetto Concert this past summer in CA. Photo by Mike Oria.