

## BILL COMINS

By Joe Barth

**B**ill Comins has built guitars for artists like Steve Herberman, Rick Stone and Vic Juris. A native Philadelphian he lives and works not far from the neighborhood where he grew up. I met Bill at his shop.



### **JB: What first intrigued you about building archtops?**

BC: I was a jazz guitar major in college and I fixed up and sold a few guitars to make a little money. After college I was traveling through Europe, doing the youth hostel thing. I guess it was day after day of visiting great museums that instilled in me a desire to create something tangible with my hands. I saw that those ancient artifacts still held special meaning for people, and I think I saw merit in pursuing the path of an artisan. After that trip I really got into repairing guitars and studying everything I could find about repairing and building the instrument. I also worked in a violin shop and became intrigued with the similarities between the violin and the archtop. At about that time I met Bob Benedetto who lived not far from me. He graciously allowed me into his shop and we soon built

a guitar together. Afterward I continued repairing and building on the side until, after a few years, I had a small line of archtops that I had built.

### **JB: Let me ask some general construction questions, what woods do you select for the top, sides, and back?**

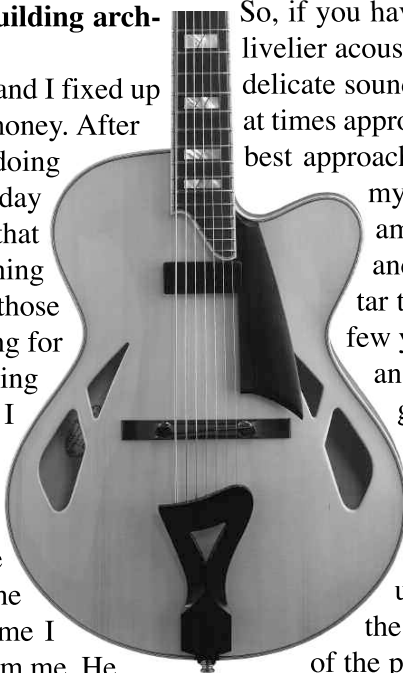
BC: For archtops, we are big on spruces and maples. Of course, spruces for the top and maples for the back and sides. The neck is usually rock or hard maple. I use ebony for the bridge, fingerboard and often the other appointments.

### **JB: How do you approach carving the top and back?**

BC: I've spent a lot of time thinking about the shape of the arch, and that alone, regardless of the thickness or thinness, has so much to do with the voice of the instrument. I came from a good starting place, what I learned from Bob, and over the years have taken it in my own direction. My earlier work reveals more signs of experimentation with arch modeling, but now the changes tend to be more subtle and less frequent.

Relative to the thickness of the plates, I tend to not like a guitar that is carved too thin. I like there to be some beefiness to the notes. The jazz archtop is typically an acoustic instrument that is intended to be played amplified. This has some inherent difficulties such as dealing with feedback and inconsistency in terms of response.

So, if you have thinner plates you might perceive a livelier acoustic quality, or maybe a prettier or more delicate sound. These can be desirable qualities and at times appropriate, but to my ears it may not be the best approach for an electrified jazz guitar. I think my customers appreciate this about me. I am kind of known for building a punchy and warm sounding acoustic archtop guitar that works well amplified. Over the last few years especially, I feel I've honed in on an efficient arch modeling that moves a good amount of air while retaining some girth.



My first hundred or so guitars were completely hand carved, but now I use a CNC machine to remove much of the waste material before the finer points of the process are executed by hand.



**JB: How do you shape the sides? How much do you wet the wood?**

BC: Ninety percent of the time when I purchase the material for the back I also get the materials for the sides to match. I cut them to size and briefly soak them, then use a bending apparatus that consists of a form, two heating blankets, and steel sheets to help distribute the heat. Once the sides are bent to shape, the temperature is lowered and the moisture is allowed to slowly bake out. Any touching up of the shape is then done using a small stationary iron.

**JB: Talk about your necks.**

BC: I generally use hard maple for the archtops and I laminate the necks. Some are three piece, some five piece and my Chester Avenue model has a nine piece neck. Jazz guys tend to use heavier gauge strings, and there can be a lot of tension so I want there to be some strength and stability. Over the years my necks have become a little meatier too. This is in the thickness not in the width. I have come to believe that a thinner neck can detract somewhat from the tone. There is definitely a thickness zone that most players find acceptable, but I've been leaning toward the heavier side of it. This of course is negotiable on custom orders. And comfort has a lot to do with the overall neck shape and the finesse of the setup too. Again, I rough carve them using a CNC machine and then do the final shaping by hand. Most often I use a 25 inch scale length but it varies.

**JB: Do you use wood or plastic binding?**

BC: That is a great question. I used several different types of plastic binding on my earlier guitars but I have come to really like and only build with wood binding. Plastic has a nice look but I feel it doesn't quite jive with the instrument like wood binding does. I think wood binding ages better and to me looks more appropriate. It's really just a matter of taste. I usually use a harder material like maple, rosewood or cocobolo, and sometimes ebony or koa. I make all the binding here.



**JB: Talk about the inlay that goes into your guitars?**

BC: Mother of Pearl mostly. I have some standard designs and I will also do something custom that a client may desire.

**JB: On your tailpieces, what woods and shape do you use?**

BC: On the archtops, I primarily use solid ebony or a multi wood tailpieces that float like they would on a violin or a cello. Mine are completely suspended in the air. There is a small saddle built into the binding that raises the tailpiece off of the guitar. I prefer tailpieces that have some mass to them. Nothing too heavy, but I feel that a tailpiece that is too light can actually absorb some of the energy of the strings. I use a small brass claw to retain the ball end of the string that is mounted in the underside of the tailpiece. I know that I do not make an overly bright guitar, and people tell me that my guitars are mellow, sublime, smooth, or have a broken in sound. I believe this is due in part to the suspended tailpiece configuration.

**JB: With your bridge, do you try to get some mass into it?**

BC: Some builders want their bridges small and lightweight and others favor theirs big and beefy. I've experimented a lot and feel there is something to both approaches. The bridge is one area where you can really alter the character of the voice and I don't believe there is one style of bridge for every guitar. I do generally prefer a bridge base that makes total contact with the soundboard, rather than the ends only, and the bridge posts I've been using are coupled with threaded bushings that anchor into the base. This is just something I've come to through experimentation. I think it works very well for my guitars, but it is by no means the only way to go.

**JB: Do you use hide or aliphatic resin glue?**

BC: I use Tightbond brand aliphatic resin glue for many areas of construction. I also use a marine epoxy for some things like gluing the fingerboards and peg-head overlays to the neck stock. And I do use good old fashioned hide glue for a few applications as well.

**JB: With your finishes, do you use U-V cured finishes, or traditional lacquer?**

BC: I primarily use nitrocellulose lacquer on my instruments, but not exclusively. It is held in high regard for having great acoustic properties. It also has a great look but there is an art to applying it well. My current method starts with a very thin coat of shellac as a sealer, then two clear coats of lacquer. Much of this clear lacquer is then sanded back for a smooth base to apply color coats to. At this point the binding is masked off. After very thin color coats are applied, the binding mask is removed and the binding is inspected for a

clean mask line. Then the application of clear top coats can begin. Ultimately the goal is a thin finish, pretty much just enough build to avoid going through to the color coats during the wet sanding and buffing process, plus a few thousandths more to withstand some wear and tear over time.

**JB: What pickups do you use?**

BC: The pickup I use most often for acoustic archtops is made by Kent Armstrong. It's a floating PAF style humbucker with 12 adjustable pole pieces. For built-ins I've used many different pickups as there are so many options.

**JB: When you meet with a customer, what kinds of things do you ask them so that you produce the best guitar for them personally?**

BC: That's another great question. Sometimes I spend time talking with them about the guitars they already own and the things they like and dislike about them. That gives us both a point of reference. I may ask them to send some measurements. I may ask about their hand size and overall stature. I try to find out how they intend to use the instrument because there isn't one guitar that works perfectly in every environment. If someone is going to be playing in a small living room size environment, I will likely sway them toward a different instrument than if they plan to use it in an organ trio where a pickup or two built into the soundboard would be more appropriate.

**JB: How many guitars a year do you produce?**

BC: It's always been about fifteen to twenty guitars a year.





**JB: Tell us about your new solid body guitar?**

BC: The Lyryst model is a project that I've been working on for several years. My roots in music involved a lot of solid body guitar playing, although I was never really interested in building them unless I felt I could make a unique contribution. Some time ago, I really began to appreciate the magic inherent in vintage Les Pauls and Strats, and I guess it became a goal to build

a modern instrument that captured some of the same kind of magic. I think great solid bodies allows you to play very lyrically. They sustain well and facilitate nuanced articulation that can be conveyed at higher volume levels. So I came up with a design that has a bit of a violin aesthetic, and I began trying it with different woods, body depths, body chambers, neck materials, and eventually hardware and pickups. While I initially stumbled upon numerous paths worth pursuing, I finally settled on my current specifications. I am very excited about the model and it's gotten a good amount of interest.

**JB: What pickups are you using for the solid bodies?**

I'm mostly using Peter Florence and Lindy Fralin pickups.

**JB: Tell me about your line of amps?**

BC: First, let it be known that I know very little about electronics. The amp that is marketed under the Comins name is made by George Alessandro. I have always liked Alessandro amplifiers, but at the time of our collaboration he wasn't yet building one that I felt was ideal for archtop jazz guitars. We experimented with electronics, speakers, and cabinet design, and in the end I think we came up with a product that is really great. What I brought to the process was simply my ears. George Alessandro was the wizard who made it happen.

**JB: Do you play gigs, even as a hobbyist?**



JJG subscriber Tony Pavilonis and Bill Comins

BC: Up until about five years ago I was still playing some gigs but then I just got too busy. Lately I seem to have a renewed desire to practice and do some playing.

**JB: There are a lot of luthiers out there**

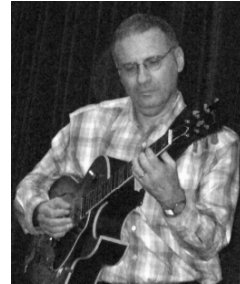
**as well as the big custom shops (Gibson, Hofner, Heritage, etc), tell me the unique things that someone receives when they order a guitar from you?**

BC: First of all, I love so many of the other archtop guitars out there. There are many fine archtops and each have their own wonderful characteristics. My guitars have their own unique qualities that have evolved out of my perceptions as a builder and player. My instruments seem to be known for possessing a thick and round top end, a broken in old wood sound, and a good amount of warmth and punch. I'm also known for executing clean work, great setups, and for building a very comfortable guitar. I enjoy a cordial one on one relationship with my customers and it pleases me to know that there are many people who appreciate what I do.

[www.cominsguitars.com](http://www.cominsguitars.com)

Dr. Barth is author of VOICES IN JAZZ GUITAR: Great Performers Tell about Their Approach to Playing (Mel Bay books) which is available at Amazon.com and other fine outlets. He can be contacted at PJosephBarth@aol.com

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