

"Jimmy D'Aquisto – Luthier Extraordinaire", but Stephen Stern, pub. Frontline magazine, fall '95;

In March of '93, I was being interviewed by John Page, the general manager of the Custom Shop. He asked me, "what type of position are you looking for?" I told him I wanted to build custom Strats and Teles. John said, "I've got lots of guys that build Strats and Teles, but I need someone to start an incredibly challenging new project: the D'Aquisto line of archtop guitars. If you want the job, it's yours." I took it. Needless to say that day changes my life, for I had the privilege of meeting and working with perhaps the greatest guitar builder this world has ever known – James L. D'Aquisto.

The Young Apprentice

Jimmy D'Aquisto was born November 9, 1935 in Brooklyn, New York to James and Mary D'Aquisto. From an early age, whether drawing, carving or model building, Jimmy had shown an artistic aptitude. The D'Aquisto home was filled with classical music, but as Jimmy grew older his tastes shifted towards jazz. He studied with Anthony Antone, a prominent New York guitarist, and formed groups with friends from the neighborhood – one of whom introduced him to legendary guitar-maker John D'Angelico. D'Angelico hired him on as an apprentice at the age of seventeen.

D'Aquisto started out like any apprentice running errands, sweeping up the shop and so on. Soon, however, he began improving pickguard and headstock templates. "When John made a pickguard (and you can see this on older ones), he never made it uniform. I made new templates and changed that; so all the steps angled the same way. The same thing with the headpiece. The Excel headpiece was my template. The notch and design were John's idea; the uniformity of the shape of the headpiece was mine." It was around this time in the mid 1950's that Jimmy met and married his wife Phyllis Fezza. They were blessed with six children: Paula, Lisa, Pamela, Jamie Lynn, Michelle and James II.

Jimmy was a demanding apprentice in that he was on John to teach him more and more. So, by the early '60s Jimmy was performing a lot of the critical aspects of the guitar, i.e. carving the tops and backs, shaping necks and bending sides.

It was also at this time that John's health started to fail. "I went down to the shop one day and it was still closed," Jimmy recounts. "He had already had three heart attacks and I was worried. I walked to his brother-in-law's, where his brother, Alfred, told me John was dead. He had died in his sleep. I couldn't believe it." Jimmy was devastated; at 59, John had been like a second father to him. "I was completely lost – emotionally crushed," Jimmy said.

On His Own

This was a very low point in his life; not only had he lost his best friend and his mentor, but through a poor business decision he also lost the right to the D'Angelico name. After weeks of mourning and with encouragement from John's brother, Alfred, Jimmy started doing repair work at the shop on Kenmare Street. It wasn't until a year later that he found the confidence to build a guitar.

"There had been a set of pre-bent sides sitting in the shop for a year. I took the sides and completed the process. The instrument that I made was an exact D'Angelico guitar, the only difference was that the headpiece read 'D'Aquisto.'"

In 1965, Jimmy moved his shop to Huntington. As the demand for his guitars grew, so did his confidence as a builder. He began to make cosmetic changes; redesigning headstocks and "F" holes. By experimenting with the bridge, tailpiece, carving, neck angle, etc., he also began to improve the performance of the instruments. One of the first things Jimmy stressed to me was, "just don't stop at a certain point, experiment – always experiment." This is very evident from his work; he replaced the metal tailpiece with an ebony one, then took it a step further by making it

adjustable up and down and forward. The change in string tension and downward pressure on the bridge modified the tonal characteristic of the instrument.

Another innovation of Jimmy's was the way he enlarged the bridge base and created an adjustable bridge free of metal parts; a system which allows full contact between bridge base and saddle, creating more sound transfer to the top of the instrument. "I'm not an expert on detailed scientific structures of wood – I never even considered that. Art is not confined to rules. There are no definite rules to my method of creating an instrument. I build upon the ideas I learned in the beginning with John and the discoveries I make with my own instruments."

The Fender Years

Fender approached Jimmy in 1982 to design a line of arch top guitars. Jimmy worked very closely on all facets of the project and by 1983, the guitar line was ready to go into production. The 17" acoustic Ultra and the 16" acoustic/electric Elite (with plywood top and back) were first produced in Japan. In 1993, Fender decided to move the project to the Custom Shop.

Jimmy and I first started working together in July of 1993. We began on the telephone. Speaking to him was like speaking to an old friend. He was very open, warm and supportive. He put me at ease right away, never talking down to me but talking to me "builder to builder."

Jimmy would come out to the Custom Shop where we would work out details and the finer points of making arch top guitars. Aside from the knowledge the Custom Shop received from Jimmy, the great thing was that we got to know Jimmy as a person with a marvelous sense of humor and an incredible way with words.

Though he lived apart from his family during the week, he spent his time with them on the weekends. They were in constant communication; I have never witnessed a closer family than the D'Aquistos. Jimmy passed on at the age of 59, on April 17, 1995, in the middle of the night due to complications from epilepsy; a disease from which he had suffered since his early twenties.

Jimmy was a simple and honest man who put his life into his work. "I always tried to put all I believed in into my work. It can only work if one strives to better one's self. I never tried to be better than John. He was D'Angelico making D'Angelico guitars. I am D'Aquisto and I'm making my guitar. It is not on the same level as a competitive sport or something. The only competition that should take place is with yourself. I want to share that I make good instruments for players who appreciate and respect them. By realizing the instrument they realize me. This is a way I can hopefully make the world a better place."

Jimmy, you definitely made our world a better place.