

Marchione taps the wood to create vibrations that will tell him how much more carving must be done to create the best sound.

MAYRA BELTRAN: CHRONICLE



Oct. 14, 2006, 8:34PM

Artist specializes in turning wood into sound

Guitar maker shares the work he loves with art festival crowds

By SARAH VIREN

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In a Montrose bungalow, where Flamenco music and wood shavings fill the air, is the studio of one of the world's top guitar makers.

Stephen Marchione, a 40-year-old of Sicilian descent, has a two-year waiting list for his hand-carved guitars, which can sell for \$20,000, depending on the design, wood used and construction time required. His customers include Playboy, which just hired him to design a line of guitars; professional musicians; and collectors, including two Houstonians who have paid \$100,000 for instruments they treat more like works of art.

Tall and slim, Marchione has shoulder-length hair pulled back in a ponytail — and he speaks Italian and Spanish.

"Women really like me and guys find me threatening and intimidating," he joked Saturday, while demonstrating his craft under a tent at Houston's Bayou City Art Festival, which continues today downtown.

Unlike other festival artists selling jewelry, paintings and, in one instance, 14-foot cactuses, Marchione was paid by the Art Colony Association, which puts on the annual downtown event, to participate this weekend. The idea is to educate the public about specific arts and crafts.

"It is so children and adults, people of all ages, get to see that's how you build a guitar," said Susan Farb Morris, a festival spokeswoman.

Began in childhood

While explaining his art, Marchione took a small knife to the f-hole curves in a half-finished archtop guitar. Little curls of wood collected in the grass by his feet. Beside him, Taka Moro, 29, French-polished a solid wood electric guitar.

Both men's passion for guitar making began in childhood. Marchione, whose uncle is a Sicilian cabinetmaker, remembers family trips to northern Italy, where he loitered outside local violin and guitar shops, watching the masters. In high school he'd get old guitars and take them apart, just to see how they worked.

Moro comes from a family of *miya daikus*, Japanese carpenters who specialize the construction of wooden temples and shrines. He studied music in Japan, then moved to New Orleans to take gigs in bars. One day he came across a guitar Marchione had built for jazz guitarist Mark Whitfield, and he decided that guitar making was his calling.

The pair have been working together for more than two years in an age-old tradition: Marchione as the teacher, Moro as his gifted, but unpaid, apprentice. Some days they can stay all afternoon in the corkwood-floored studio, cutting, sanding and glossing. The intricate and detailed work demands their complete attention. When they do talk, they stick to three subjects: technique, music and girls, Marchione said.

Attracted to Montrose

A divorced father of a 5-year-old girl, Marchione compares his art to women, cars and the perfect pair of jeans. A graceful curve at the guitar's neck is like an expertly plucked eyebrow, he said. Having the right length of guitar strings, he said, is like the perfectly designed Ford Mustang GT he just bought.

"How do you think you sell a guitar for \$20,000?" he asked rhetorically. "You've got to love it. It's got to be real sexy."

Raised in Houston, Marchione went to the University of Houston for two years before transferring to Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. He worked for musicians in New York until the Sept. 11 attacks shut down his guitar studio for months and got him thinking about relocating.

He chose Montrose because he wanted to live in an affordable artist community again. The mortgage payments on the house he bought next to his studio here cost about as much as rent on his old 400-square-foot apartment in Greenwich Village.

"Montrose is this true artist community in a big city that doesn't exist anymore in New York," he said.

In the eclectic neighborhood his work is understood as an art, he said, though his and Moro's parents have questioned their career choice. Others have asked how Marchione can make a living selling guitars.

But guitar players and enthusiasts always understand.

William "Bud" Arnot, a retired appeals court judge, stopped with his wife, Emily, to admire Marchione's art Saturday afternoon. Emily's eyes widened at Marchione's

asking prices, but her husband simply nodded. He's been playing guitar since he was a kid and has nine of his own.

"I can tell he is quite a craftsman," he said after leaving the demonstration booth. "I've always been fascinated by people who can take a piece of wood and turn it into sound."