



Master guitar maker Stephen Marchione, above, and his renowned 16-inch archtop acoustic guitar, left.

# a gift for making guitars

## Naropa Music Graduate Finds His Path

by Jane Rubinstein

At one time in his life, Stephen Marchione spent six hours a day playing the guitar. Now he makes them—in fact, since beginning his career as a guitar maker in 1989, Stephen has created more than three-hundred guitars for some of the best guitar players in the world. The journey from high-school jazz devotee to “the finest young guitar maker working today,” according to Chamber Music America, was a rich and complicated one that included a two-year stint in the late 1980s at Naropa University, from which Marchione received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Music and Religious Studies in 1989.

Marchione effortlessly embodies many contrasts. Born in Boston and raised in Houston, he is the son of a proud Sicilian-American family. He was brought up to revere the Roman Catholic tradition, but at the same time began meditating in a Zen community, where he first tagged along with his father—a Buddhist scholar and translator—when he was 11 years old. During those years in Houston, Marchione studied with several Buddhist teachers from China and Korea. He was also exposed to the early writings of Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, Naropa’s founder, through his father’s work.

At the same time, Marchione—like many of his peers—acquired the Texas tradition of woodworking, which dovetailed neatly

with the history of fine Sicilian cabinetmakers in his family. In fact, Marchione says that “Many of the handtools I use every day I inherited from my Uncle Joe and my Grandfather Angelo.” His nuclear family lived in northern Italy for a time, during which Marchione became fascinated with the Italian violin makers he would see working in their shops in Bergamo, Milano and Cremona.

The other major force that propelled Marchione as a young man was his love of jazz guitar. Not content simply to play the guitar, Marchione learned a lot about the instrument itself by continually assembling and disassembling various guitars “for entertainment,” in his words.

Marchione spent three years at the University of Houston as a music performance major, honing his skills by playing in jazz ensembles with a “small big band style,” according to Marchione. But somehow that wasn’t enough and he felt himself inexorably drawn to Naropa, which, at the time, was a dynamic center for improvisational jazz as well as the study of Buddhism. Marchione found these aspects of Naropa magnetizing.

While at Naropa, Marchione worked with a wide range of talented faculty, including musicians Jerry Granelli, Robben Ford and

Steve Tibbetts, who visited Naropa during the summer to augment the faculty talent represented by Bill Douglas, Art Lande and Mark Miller, among others. During the summers, especially, the music scene came alive at Naropa, and for Marchione it offered the opportunity to fully explore contemporary jazz.

“The jazz ensemble lessons at Naropa were amazing,” Marchione says. “We learned to really play in the improvisational style by getting up on stage. I felt as though this was the kind of energy that jazz must have had during the ‘40s.”

But gradually, something was happening to Marchione. He was beginning to lose his drive to play jazz guitar. After graduation, he moved with his future wife to New York City, and within three months, had landed himself a job with Pensa-Suhr, a company that hand made electric guitars for rock musicians. He immediately excelled at the craft. Marchione cites his abilities to observe; notice and retain details; and remain open-minded—abilities he traces to his meditation training—as key advantages in his rapid progression. “Detailed observation and execution are essential in this business,” he emphasizes.

Within a year, Marchione had learned everything he could, although he stayed with the firm for another two. Meanwhile, he began making acoustic guitars and mandolins at home, in his spare time. He also amassed a voluminous collection of books about violin and guitar making as well as blueprints of antique violins. He studied these avidly, believing that techniques for violin making could and should be applied to guitars.

In 1993, he founded his own guitar studio in Manhattan and never looked back. Marchione believes that his experience at Naropa gave him the skills he needed to build his business. “I learned how to interact with all different kinds of people in an

approach. “When you have your own business, you have to do that every day,” Marchione says.

Six years ago, Marchione began to play the guitar seriously again. This time, his instincts took him in another direction. He taught himself classical guitar and soon homed in on Italian Renaissance court music as his particular area of interest. Originally composed for the lute, this music is now often performed on guitar. Marchione has also immersed himself in Early



Whitfield and Marchione share a moment while playing together.

Baroque liturgical music and Spanish music, including flamenco. “Learning this music has completely changed my relationship to the guitar,” Marchione says. “I want to play music that people want to hear.”

Now once again located in Houston, Marchione makes archtop jazz and classical acoustic guitars and electrical guitars for customers who request them. He is considered one of a very few leading-edge pioneers in the design of guitars that combine elements of both jazz and classical construction, intended to improve guitar tone and playability. His guitars range in price from \$22,000 for an archtop guitar to \$4,000 for an electrical guitar. Widely known in his field and with an impressive client list that includes musicians John Abercrombie, Erich Avinger, Joel Kipnis (JK) and Mark Whitfield, Marchione also sells guitars to collectors.

Quality is a paramount value for Marchione. “When you buy a guitar from me, you will always get my best,” he says. He considers himself a professional artist and lucky to have found his life’s work.

“I’ve never had a technical or intellectual problem I couldn’t solve,” he says. “I feel really blessed.”

For more information about Marchione guitars, visit [www.marchione.com](http://www.marchione.com).

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Left to right: R&B star Joel Kipnis (JK), jazz guitar phenomenon Mark Whitfield and Stephen Marchione pose with their Marchione-made guitars.

open and receptive manner,” Marchione says. In his experience, the environment at Naropa encourages a student to explore his or her own areas of interest. He found that working on independent projects while at Naropa helped him learn about goal setting and follow-through; he feels he benefited from that