

Master Luthier, John Kinnard, Wants to Pass On His Secrets

The master guitar maker wants to pass on his secrets to a few select students.

John S. Kinnard is a luthier who has made guitars for three decades.

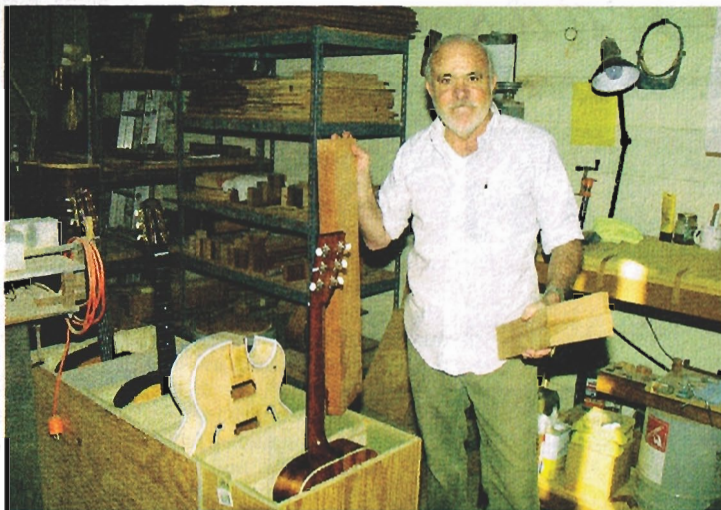
A guitar, as Kinnard points out, is basically "a box." But the creation of this instrument is anything but simple or basic. It is part art and part craft and takes about 80 hours from start to finish.

For those who are interested in learning how to make this most popular of instruments, Kinnard can impart the wisdom of the master craftsman.

Kinnard makes two kinds of guitars, the folk or flattop guitar and the acoustic jazz guitar. Both use steel strings and traditional woods such as Indian rosewood and Honduras mahogany.

The wood ranges in thickness depending on the part of the instrument whether it's the front, back or the sides. The back, for example, is about a tenth of an inch thick.

Kinnard is best known for the Dell'Arte Instruments brand, which has been given considerable notoriety by



several prominent Gypsy jazz guitar artists, including Jimmy Rosenberg and Angelo Debarre, both considered among the best contemporary Gypsy jazz guitarists.

Gypsy jazz (which is also sometimes called Gypsy swing) is a style of music developed and popularized between the 1930s and 50s by Gypsy guitarists working in and around Paris. It is basi-

cally what France did with American jazz.

The Dell'Arte brand is the largest manufacturer of Gypsy jazz guitars in the world. In addition to producing the Dell'Arte brand, he also produces guitars under his own John S. Kinnard Instruments brand.

Kinnard's work was featured on the cover of *Acoustic Guitar* magazine

(Dec. 2008) and he was also profiled in the publication.

Kinnard, who has had his guitar making shop in Fallbrook on Industrial Way for the past three years, has made guitars since he was 18. He is self-taught (there were books on how to make guitars even then) and during the years that he was learning his trade by trial and error, "I made all of the mistakes that it is possible to make!" he says.

Mistakes in those early years included using whatever wood he could find. "In those days I would find a pallet and use the wood, or use something that had floated in to the beach," he recalls.

Kinnard's guitar saga begins when he first moved to North County at the age of 10 years old, when his dad, who was in the Marines, was stationed in the area.

"The hippy thing was full on—everyone was playing guitars," he recalls. He composed some songs, and as a teen and in his early 20s, he

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would often hitchhike up and down the coast with little else to his name but his guitar.

He often thought to himself, "I can build one of these," and so it began.

At age 21 he moved to Fresno, where he made guitars as a hobby. In 1975 he opened a music store in Clovis and started to do repair work on musical instruments. With better tools and more time to devote to the job, he started to make what he calls "decent" guitars. "That's when I went pro," he recalls.

Even then he was only making about ten of them a year—compared to the 44 guitars he made in 2008. Then in 1980, he moved to Oregon with his wife where he continued to repair guitars and to hone his skills.

"Repairing is harder than building," he says. "Someone who does that can make the jump into building them rather easily."

In the late 1980s, Kinnard took a "sabbatical" from guitar making

and repairing to operate a jewelry shop. This detailed work with cutting jewels and making jewelry helped him to further develop his skills as an instrument maker, he believes.

Then in 1996, he opened a shop called Finegold Guitars and Mandolins and two years later met Alain Cola, who was producing Selmer-Maccaferri guitars in Mexico. They became partners in the Dell' Arte Instruments brand.

Few customers come in off the street and want a guitar made. "Ninety-nine percent of my business is wholesale," he says, to a distributor in Japan and one in Europe."

Such handcrafted guitars can cost as much as \$3,000 per instrument.

Kinnard considers what the luthier does as both craft and art.

"When you carve a neck it's a sculpture. You take a piece of wood and sculpt it. I carve them as close as I can but there is something unique about each neck," he says.

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A guitar has two sides, a top and a back. The sides and back are made with a hard wood and the front is made with a soft wood. This is similar

to how a violin is made.

He starts by picking out the woods. The first process is to bend the sides with a pipe that heats up the wood and makes it malleable.

Kinnard's extensive shop is laid out with various stations that show the

step-by-step process of building and carving the guitar from this point.

He is seeking students who want to learn the craft and art of the luthier.

Learn more by calling him at 760-731-3352 or visiting his Web site at www.johnkinnard.com/

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