

John Mello

San Francisco Bay Area luthier specializes in the fusion of classical and steel-string designs.

By Doug Young

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VISITORS TO THE QUIANT COMMUNITY of Kensington, just north of the college town of Berkeley, California, might be surprised to discover a luthier's workshop—overflowing with tools, stacks of wood, and partially built guitars—tucked away behind a large set of wooden doors in the back of a boutique pottery shop. This creative environment is a perfect fit for John Mello, who brings an artist's sensitivity to his classical and steel-string guitars, while also restoring and repairing instruments old and new.

From Oberlin to Berkeley

Mello's guitar-making journey began when he built a guitar for an independent study project while attending Oberlin College in Ohio. Excited by the experience, he began apprenticing with the late Richard Schneider after graduating in 1971. Mello recalls showing the legendary classical luthier two guitars he had built. "It wasn't that they were particularly good," he says, "but I think he was impressed that having done it once, I wanted to go through the process again!" After a year of study, Mello opened a shop in Detroit, Michigan, with another Schneider apprentice, classical builder Jeffrey Elliott, before moving to California in 1973.

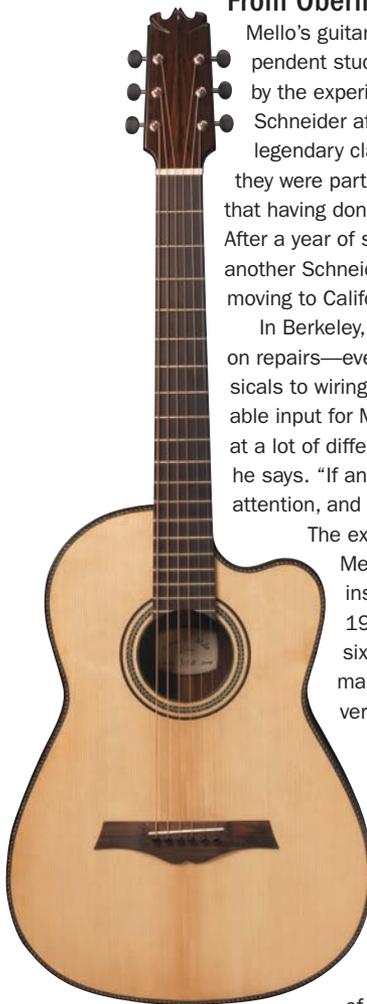
In Berkeley, Mello set up his business in a music store and focused on repairs—everything from restorations of vintage acoustics and classicals to wiring pickups in electric guitars. The experience provided valuable input for Mello's own designs. "Repair and restoration let me look at a lot of different instruments and see what worked and what didn't," he says. "If an instrument came in sounding good, I paid really close attention, and if it came in sounding bad, I paid even more attention."

The exposure to many different instruments helped refine Mello's philosophy and sparked his interest in small-bodied instruments. He remembers someone bringing a little 1920s all-mahogany Martin 12-fret into the store: "I hit the sixth string, and it boomed out! I realized that you could make a small guitar sound very clear, very balanced, and very loud."

Classics and Steels

Today, Mello builds four basic instruments, one classical and three steel-string models. His classical design uses a 650-mm (25.61-inch) scale length with 12 frets to the body and an optional cutaway. Mello modifies the neck profile to fit the player's choice.

Mello's steel-string guitars are small-bodied 12-fret designs. The 00-size Veranda model is Mello's version of a parlor guitar. "I wanted it to be intimate enough so you can play it in the living room, but loud enough that you can take it out on the porch and share it with the neighborhood," Mello says. The Grande model is Mello's largest model, about 000-size, but with a more curved shape than a Martin. In addition to their relatively small bodies, Mello's steel-strings also feature a shallow 3.7-inch depth, which he



Mello's Classic Steel Cutaway model is a fan-braced steel-string guitar.

believes gives the guitars more definition and makes them more comfortable to hold.

Perhaps the most unusual guitar Mello builds is the Classic Steel model, which is approximately the same size as his classical instruments and, like all his steel-strings, shares some of the classical instrument's design characteristics, including fan bracing, a Spanish heel, and very light construction techniques. "I try to get the bass side and the midrange and the treble to vibrate independently," he says. "I want a small guitar to operate like a big guitar; I have a larger area of the top vibrating than you'd think, given its size." Mello's light construction approach extends to the guitar's back, which he feels should vibrate as well. Both the Classic Steel and Grande are also available as 12-string guitars.

Mello strives to bring a classical sensibility and responsiveness even to his steel-strings. "A guitar that has a wider breadth of expression will lead the player to places he or she might not go otherwise," he says. Mello draws inspiration from the best classical instruments he has encountered in his restoration work. He describes the sound of these guitars as, "very clear, but with a wide dynamic range. They have a big sound stage, where the bass and the treble seem to be coming from different places. They've got a natural reverb, and are very responsive under the right hand."

Spruce and Rosewood

When it comes to wood choices, Mello prefers European spruce tops for steel-strings, though he has built a few with cedar, and he recently built a Sitka-topped guitar



Luthier John Mello works on a guitar top.

for the Sonic Sitka project (see "The Sonic Sitka Project," October 2010). He prefers European spruce or western red cedar for his classical guitars' tops. For backs and sides, Mello favors Indian, Brazilian, or Honduras rosewoods, although he has also built with mahogany. Mello finds that the reduced weight of Spanish cedar necks helps balance the instrument, because his overall construction is so light. In spite of these wood preferences, Mello says that "the techniques and the goals of the builder are more important than the species of wood. I do believe there are differences in woods, but how they're treated can make a dramatic difference."

Visually, Mello's instruments have an old-world charm that reflects his approach to building, which includes hand-bending the

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sides. He prefers to use nitrocellulose lacquer as a finish, applied as thinly as possible. His instruments have simple appointments with classic lines, and Mello generally avoids extensive inlay.

Given the environment he works in, it's not surprising that Mello thinks about his role as a builder in artistic terms. "Our job is to give someone a palette to paint with," he says. He aims to create an instrument that interacts with the player, and explains that "a musician is constantly having a conversation with the guitar. With a good guitar, you can play a wide variety of things and it will respond, just as an intelligent person is willing to respond wherever the conversation goes."

Mello builds about a half-dozen instruments a year, and his base price is currently \$9,800, which includes an optional cutaway, a European spruce top, and Indian or Honduras rosewood back and sides. Mello's artistry can be heard on an eclectic album titled *My Guitars—Their Music*, which showcases his instruments on everything from Bach to Fats Waller, with contributions from nine guitarists, including William Coulter, Woody Harris, and Alex de Grassi. **AC**

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