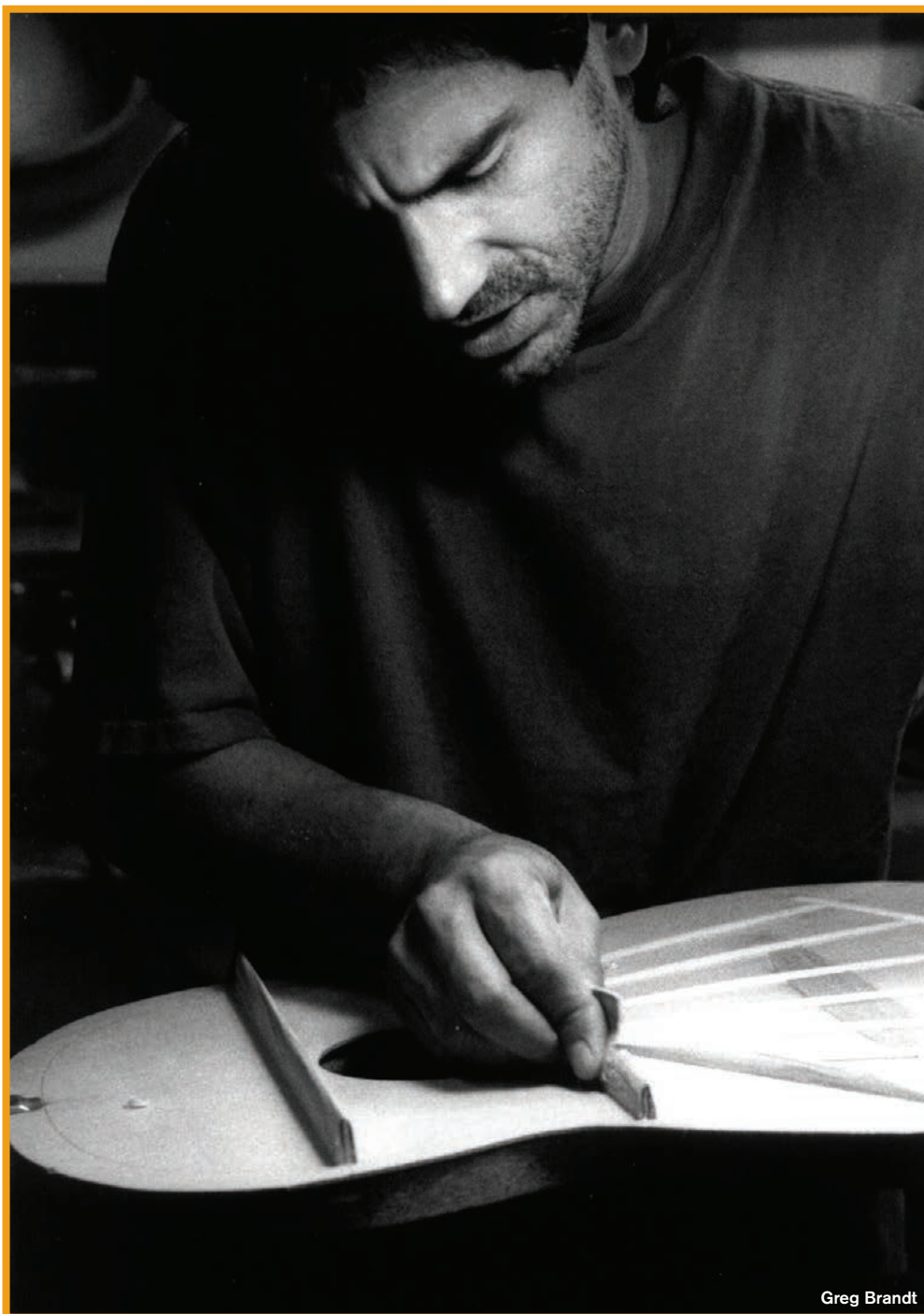


BRANDT'S BOLERO

BY TEJA GERKEN

Southern California luthier builds custom nylon-string instruments for soundtrack musicians & wild-eyed classical guitarists



Greg Brandt



Greg Brandt was just another long-haired hippie kid working in a natural-foods restaurant in 1970s Los Angeles when a customer turned him on to a book that would change his life. It wasn't one of the popular self-discovery texts of the day, like the *I Ching* or *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, rather it was luthier David Russell Young's *The Steel String Guitar: Construction and Repair*. Brandt liked guitars, but it never occurred to him to build one. Then he walked into a guitar shop and had an epiphany. "I thought, 'What could possibly be cooler than playing a guitar that I made?'"

He cracked open the book and has never looked back.

Today, Brandt is one of the most respected nylon-string luthiers on the West Coast (gregbrandtguitars.com). His shop in North Hollywood, now in its fourth decade, produces a limited number of top-quality guitars for some of the finest players in the business. He's built instruments for musicians ranging from Filipino classical and rock guitarist Perfecto de Castro to jazz-guitar great Barry Zweig to Hollywood studio legend Tommy Tedesco, known for his familiar riffs on such classic TV themes as *The Twilight Zone* and *M*A*S*H*. If you've ever seen the movies *Goodfellas*, *Blade Runner*, *Field of Dreams*, or *The Mexican*, you've heard the sweet sound of Brandt's handiwork—his guitars are in the soundtracks to all of them.

"There is something about a handmade classical guitar that is so intimate and delicate," Brandt says, "while at the same time, so vibrant and powerful."

WITH THESE HANDS

Brandt was only partway through his first build, at 18, when he realized that his hands already knew what to do. He quit his restaurant gig and took a job in a woodworking-supply shop, where he not only got to talk to experienced craftspeople, but also got an employee discount on tools. One of his customers was a local luthier, Bob Mattingly. "I had hair down to the middle of my back, and this guy had a buzz cut," Brandt says. "He didn't like me."

Still, Mattingly eventually warmed up to Brandt's enthusiasm and reluctantly agreed to teach him the basics of guitar building.

Meanwhile, Brandt had struck up other fortuitous friendships. His father worked in the movie industry, so Brandt was able to gain access to film-scoring sessions. At one, he met Tedesco, who ended up buying the seventh guitar Brandt made. (Tedesco would later purchase two more of his instruments.) Having a player of Tedesco's caliber as a client not only

added credibility to Brandt's work, it introduced the young guitar maker to an illustrious new crowd.

"One day, Tommy called me and said he was doing a session at a movie studio with a group of guitar players and that I should come down and join them," Brandt remembers. "He left my name at the gate, and I was taken to a gigantic sound stage. As I remember, there were five or six guitar players and a 120-piece orchestra being conducted by Carmine Coppola. They were recording the soundtrack for *The Godfather Part III*."

Turns out, Brandt's guitars made the cut.

NYLON-STRING LOVE

During his earliest days as a luthier, Brandt built both steel- and nylon-string guitars, but he soon decided to concentrate on the latter. After all, nylon-strings were what most of his Hollywood clients were looking for, and Brandt realized this was a market that had not been flooded. "I figured that factories could build great steel-strings, but not so much nylon-strings," he says. He started building standard classicals, but also experimented with seven- and ten-stringed instruments, as well as guitars that were geared specifically to studio players rather than typical recitalists. "A lot of the studio guys want things like narrow necks or cutaways, and I'm happy to build that way," he says.

Classical virtuoso de Castro was taken by Brandt's willingness to be adventurous. "I convinced him to build me a ten-string guitar in 2009, and it is a magnificent instrument," de Castro says. "He drew out the design while we attended an Andrew York concert, and by the end, he showed me his rendering, drawn on the night's concert program."

Brandt isn't afraid to look beyond the Andrés Segovia school of nylon-string classical guitars when he's building instruments for idiosyncratic players like de Castro, but his designs are rooted in the European tradition. He uses fan bracing, and his favorite wood combination is Indian rosewood for the back and sides, and a spruce top. Instead of building with a traditional Spanish heel, though, he uses a modified mortise-and-tenon joint to attach the neck to the body, which he says gives him more control over the neck angle during construction. "It also makes it easier to bind the body and to add a cutaway," he says.

The tone Brandt aims for comes from vintage classicals. "Over the years, I've been very lucky to have some stunning instruments come through the shop—amazing old Fleta and Miguel Rodriguez guitars, as well as more contemporary guitars like Humphreys and Gilberts," he says. The strongest influence on his



Brandt's Concert Model

Besides working directly with customers to create one-of-a-kind instruments, Brandt is known for his standard Concert Model (see video on AcousticGuitar.com), which often forms the foundation for his design variations.

The Concert has a starting price of \$6,700, and includes Indian rosewood back and sides, a spruce or cedar top, ebony fingerboard, Sloane tuning machines, and a gloss lacquer finish.

The standard scale length is 650 mm., and the guitar has a 52 mm. nut width. Brandt has also become known for his small-size alto guitars, which are tuned a fourth above a standard guitar, and which he builds in both steel- and nylon-string configurations.

He sometimes builds a batch of these guitars with plain appointments, selling them for as little as \$1,500, but he finds that many of his customers want these guitars to be as “high-end” as his full-size instruments, so he often uses Brazilian rosewood or koa, and uptown appointments.



own style, though, is Hermann Hauser (the legendary luthier who built guitars for Segovia and many other notable players) and Hauser's son, Hermann, Jr.

Brandt remembers the first time he saw a Hauser guitar. “Compared to other guitars I had seen and talked with Bob about, this was very simple—almost plain and basic,” he says. “And then I heard the guitar and was thunderstruck. Seeing these guitars helped teach me the sound I was most interested in pursuing.”

THE NEXT GENERATION

Brandt never forgot his first teacher. He remained in contact with Mattingly until his death in 1991. “Every year I would go and build a guitar with Bob to keep up with his new ideas and to help him in the shop,” Brandt says. After Mattingly died, Brandt completed his mentor's

outstanding orders and purchased as much wood and tools from Mattingly's widow as he could afford.

Today, Brandt has his own apprentice, Chace Miller, who not only helps with various tasks in the shop, but also created an “Apprentice Model” classical guitar, sold through Brandt's shop at a starting price of \$3,500. “Chace is very intuitive,” Brandt says. “She reminds me of myself at the beginning, and she is going to be a very good maker.”

Brandt also never forgot the book he was told to read by that customer at the natural-foods restaurant, or his maiden experiments with guitar making. “The first one I built was the first one I'd ever held,” he admits. “I was amazed at how light and sensitive it was. At the same time, I was taken aback by the energy and voice of it. I am still reminded of that first impression every time I string up a guitar.” **AG**



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