

# LETTER FROM NEW YORK

By JULIA CROWE

LOS ANGELES luthier Greg Brandt believes that wood has a life of its own, not just in terms of its quality and response but also when it comes to its eventual succession of owners when it's been shaped into a guitar. 'In life I stood silent, in death I sweetly sing,' Brandt says, quoting a line of 16<sup>th</sup> century verse inscribed on an Elizabethan lute (which also inspired the Bryan Johansen piece, *Mortua Dulce Cano*).

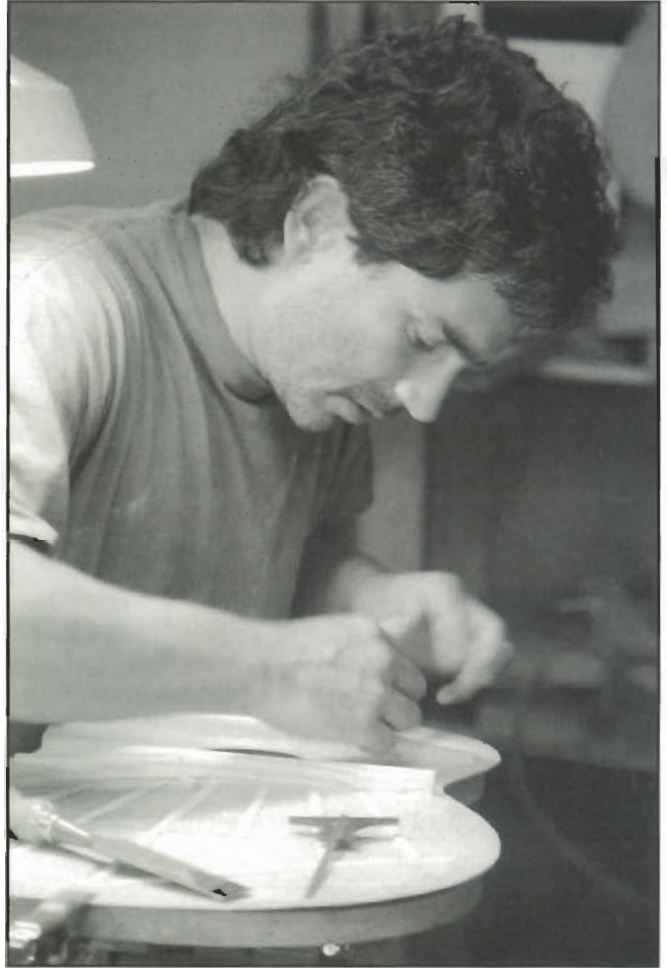
This discussion came up in reference to his decision to finally make a couple of guitars from some Brazilian rosewood he has had in his shop for nearly twenty years, which he purchased from his teacher Bob Mattingly's shop. 'And he had this wood for over thirty years,' Brandt says. 'The back and sides are from the same board, which is very rare to find, so the pattern and colour of the grain matches perfectly. It also is perfectly quarter-sawn. Usually, what I say about Brazilian rosewood is, "when it cracks, not if it cracks." But not this wood! It's as stable as can be! I had three consecutive sets of this wood and this is the last one. I spent about five or six weeks wood-working before sending this guitar off to a finisher in Santa Cruz - I have all finishing done elsewhere with nitrocellulose lacquer and then it's returned to me to take care of the finishing details like gluing on the bridge, etc.'

Brandt used this wood to build a nylon string classical cutaway guitar, using Bosnian Spruce. 'Makers used to talk about German Spruce,' he says, 'but then we realized some of the best German Spruce came from Switzerland, Austria, and Northern Italy so we started talking about "European Spruce". Now, after the break-up of Czechoslovakia and the Bosnian War, the best "German Spruce" is coming from Bosnia, in my opinion.'

I asked Brandt what compelled him to finally make something from this miraculous stash of wood - was it opportunity, inspiration or readiness?

'Two years ago, I used another of the 3 sets on a regular classical for the La Guitarra California Festival to show off my chops. I sold it to a very nice guy who raved about it and later sold two of his Rucks after acquiring my guitar. A year later, he became ill and had to sell this guitar also for half the price in order to cover medical bills. That guitar was purchased by a dentist.'

'Recently, I started making big pieces of wood into smaller pieces of wood, this time with a cutaway shape, pulling out all of the stops in terms of material, intuition and craftsmanship - using the last set of this Brazilian rosewood, a sister set to the first one. I strung up the guitar less than a month ago. So readiness was a factor, along with opportunity and sudden inspiration - if two years



Greg Brandt.

can be considered sudden.' Brandt did originally have a player in mind who had enjoyed playing the first guitar made of this wood but the player had expressly needed a cutaway model.

Oddly enough, several of Brandt's guitars have visited New York and come to reside here though his shop is based in California's San Fernando Valley, just north of Los Angeles.

'I was 18 years old when I first passed through New York. I was a participant in Tanglewood's Young Vocalist Programme choir in Massachusetts with my guitar in tow and the cheapest way to go to the reunion the following December was by Greyhound bus. So I picked up a thirty day bus pass and after four days we reached Port Authority station in New York City to transfer to Massachusetts in the middle of the night. I stood there like a goofball, clinging to my guitar, a Yamaha FG180, and slept with one eye open in a plastic Eames chair - and after five hours of this I got on my bus. That was the extent of my visit in Manhattan. No CBGBs, no MOMA, no Statue of Liberty, no show, no lunch, nothing! If I were to make something up, I wish it could be about seeing Bruce Springsteen playing at The Bottom Line.'

Brandt continues to sing in a local community choir called the Concert Singers at California's Glendale Community College, singing repertoire from Eric Whitaker to Bach cantatas for two annual concerts in December and in the spring. 'I'm a baritone, except in the morning, when I'm a bass.'

Brandt got his start in building while running a kitchen at a restaurant in Van Nuys. A customer who knew he played guitar gave him a book on how to build steel string guitars. 'Later I was with my dad at a takeout food place in Venice when I spotted a guitar-shaped sign that turned out to be builder Ren Ferguson's shop. Ferguson now runs the custom shop at Gibson. The minute I stepped in there, it was as if the cosmic jigsaw puzzle piece had fallen into place for me - just the notion that people made guitars.'

'I also learned that the author of the book I had been given did not live far from me, so he helped answer questions for me when I started building. What could be more cool than playing a guitar you've built yourself? It took me about two and a half years to build my first guitar but halfway through this process, there came a moment when I looked at my hands in awe and said out loud to myself, "My hands *know* this work." It was mystical. Needless to say, that was the end of the restaurant business.'

'My first customer was traveling on to Germany and he purchased this first guitar, a steel-string, mahogany redwood-top dreadnought. I knew that if I did this for a living, there was no use for me to collect the guitars and the way I saw it, the money earned helped me purchase more wood and tools. I started studying with Bob Mattingly in March of 1979. I also took repairwork.'

'My father was a film editor and would often invite me to scoring sessions with guitar players. This is how I met Tommy Tedesco, who bought one of my guitars, a nylon classical guitar made of Indian rosewood and cedar, which was later stolen from him.' Tedesco is a famed session guitarist who has recorded with Herb Alpert, Phil Spector, Henry Mancini, Frank Sinatra, Barbra Streisand, Sam Cooke, Elvis Presley, Olivia Newton-John, the Fifth Dimension, the Monkees, the Beach Boys, Jan and Dean, Frank Zappa, J.J. Cale, the Mamas and the Papas, Doc Severinson, the Everly Brothers and Sarah Vaughan, to name a few. His playing can also be heard on the famed soundtracks for the television programmes and films, *Bonanza*, *Green Acres*, *Jaws* and *The French Connection*.

'Tommy came back and bought another guitar from me. He was the only person I would do housecalls for - and I remember he once answered the door wearing boxer shorts with his wife in the kitchen, making meatballs. They were very sweet people.'

Many Hollywood session players and New York jazz players have discovered Brandt's guitars and given them a bicoastal life, including John

Pisano, a founding member of Herb Alpert's Tijuana Brass, a New York native currently living in Los Angeles. Pisano has performed with Peggy Lee, Tony Bennett, Burt Bacharach, Frank Sinatra, Julie London, Natalie Cole, Joe Pass, and Barbra Streisand and Diana Krall, in addition to working with the Brazilian musical star, Sergio Mendes. Classical guitarist Michael Kudirka, who won the Portland International Guitar Competition in 2000 and currently teaches on faculty at Idlwyld Arts Academy also plays a Brandt guitar.

His other bicoastal players include Broadway guitarist Jim Hershman (an L.A. native in New York) and New York natives jazz singer Diane Hubka and Joe Jewell (both New York transplants now living in Los Angeles). 'I met Jewell by doing repair work for him through a parade of "good guitars gone bad" type of repair work,' Brandt says. 'He was playing some jazz at the time but what floored me was his blues gig with a bass player named Homefry Niles, who later walked away from music altogether to become a therapist. I still pine for Niles' playing. Joe, however, still plays the hell out of anything with six strings, including blues, classical, Django, jazz and musicals and he runs a guitar programme at a small college in Southern California.'

Jewell is an orchestral guitarist who has performed with the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra and many others. He taught at the Onondaga Community College in Syracuse, New York for nine years and was Head of Guitar Studies at State University of New York at Oswego before moving to Southern California in 1988, where he is currently Associate Professor of Guitar and Commercial Music Studies at Fullerton College

And because Brandt lives in the North Hollywood/Valley Village area, it's inevitable that he has also had a few film star clientele - among them, Andy Griffith - who had his driver drop off a guitar for repair. Brandt's guitars can be heard on the soundtrack for the films *Goodfellas*, *Blade Runner*, *Field of Dreams*, *Godfather III*, *Seabiscuit*, and *The Mexican* and his waiting list is 6 to 8 months. When he's not building, he can be found gardening a wide variety of fresh produce in his backyard.

'I own a '72 00028 Martin but find it a busman's holiday to be playing, too. Gardening is my creative hobby. When actor Héctor Elizondo (of the famed Manhattan movie classic *The Taking of Pelham One, Two, Three*) came over to pick up his repaired guitar, I handed him a bunch of my tomatoes and basil. He buried his nose into the basil and said, in that distinctive, dramatic voice of his, "It's from the gods!"'

For more information, audio clips and photographs of Greg Brandt's guitars, please visit: <http://www.gregbrandtguitars.com/>