

Jimmy D'Aquisto

Luthier Extraordinaire

By Stephen Stern

"One of the first things that Jimmy stressed to me was, 'Just don't stop at a certain point, experiment—always experiment.'"

In March of 1993, I was being interviewed by John Page, the general manager of the Custom Shop. He asked me, "what type of position are you looking for?" I told him I wanted to build custom Strats and Teles. John said, "I've got lots of guys that build Strats and Teles, but I need someone to start an incredibly challenging new project: the D'Aquisto line of arch top guitars. If you want the job, it's yours." I took it. Needless to say that day changed my life, for I had the privilege of meeting and working with perhaps the greatest guitar builder this world has ever known—James L. D'Aquisto.

The Young Apprentice

Jimmy D'Aquisto was born November 9, 1935 in Brooklyn, New York to James and Mary D'Aquisto. From an early age, whether drawing, carving or model building, Jimmy had shown an artistic aptitude. The D'Aquisto home was filled with classical music, but as Jimmy grew older his tastes shifted towards jazz. He studied with Anthony Antone, a prominent New York guitarist, and formed groups with friends from the neighborhood—one of whom introduced him to legendary guitar-maker John D'Angelico. D'Angelico hired him on as an apprentice at the age of seventeen.

D'Aquisto started out like any apprentice: running errands, sweeping up the shop and so on. Soon, however, he began improving pickguard and headstock templates. "When John made a pickguard (and you can see this on older ones), he never made it uniform. I made new templates and changed that: so all the steps angled the same way. The same thing with the headpiece. The Excel headpiece was my template. The notch and design were John's idea; the uniformity of the shape of the headpiece was mine." It was around this time in the mid 1950s that Jimmy met and married his wife Phyllis Fezza. They were blessed with six children: Paula, Lisa, Pamela, Jamie Lynn, Michelle and James II.

Jimmy was a demanding apprentice in that he was on John to teach him more and more. So, by the early 60s Jimmy was performing a lot of the critical aspects of the guitar, i.e. carving the tops and backs, shaping necks and bending sides.

It was also at this time that John's health started to fail. "I went down to the shop one day and it was still

