

Mike Kinal

Master Luthier from Vancouver, B.C.

by Vince L. Mendoza

If you read *Bass Player* or *Guitar Player* magazine, you've probably heard of Kinal guitars and basses. Both publications have consistently praised Mike Kinal's world-class instruments, which are played by the likes of jazz bassists Lonnie Plaxico and Chris Tarry. Still, what many perhaps do not know is that Mike is also a very accomplished maker of archtops.

Visiting with Mike at his lovely home and shop in Vancouver, B.C., I found not only a master luthier and teacher, but also a warm, gracious man who indulged my love of guitars by showing me several fine examples of his work from both the past and the present.

To date, Mike has built about 300 guitars and basses. During our conversation, he shared his early beginnings and influence, his building philosophy, as well as his unique perspective on the art and business of archtop guitar making.

VM: Would you tell me how you started as a luthier?

MK: I began building guitars in high school (grade 10). I wanted something different from a standard woodwork project in school. My friend and I decided to build a solid body guitar; he made a Gibson SG type, I built a Fender Telecaster copy. I bought a Yamaha neck, and re-formed it in a Tele style. I built the body, ordered the parts and put it all together. I put an ad in the paper and sold it in a week! When I graduated from high school in '71, I studied cabinet-making for about 3 years. Then I indentured, basically to get some work experience. Later I met Attila Balough of Odyssey Guitars, who was an expert furniture finisher. He sprayed some of my earlier guitars and taught me some finishing techniques. He was my main influence in the early years.

VM: When did you start building archtops?

MK: In 1989 – also under Attila's influence. He coached me through the building of a hollow-body archtop. He said solid bodies are just planks – a dead end compared to a real guitar that produces a tone without relying only on the pickups.

VM: Once you started making guitars, did you still make cabinets?

MK: That pretty much ended in '79, when I resigned from a small cabinet company. But all along, I was building guitars. Beginning in high school in '68, I never really stopped. In the '70s, I was shopping my guitars around to players like Keith Scott and other local professional artists, and doing a lot of repairs – spraying, refretting. I was also playing drums professionally in rock bands.



Standard Voyager Cutaway



Mike shows the flamed maple back of a Mini Voyager

VM: Is there a big archtop guitar making community in Vancouver or in B.C.?

MK: I wouldn't say so. There are a few guys doing it a little bit, like Michael Dunn in New Westminster, and Michael Hyden in Chilliwack (both in B.C.).

VM: What sound do you look for in an archtop? Is there an ideal archtop sound – or should it be as personal as the musician?

MK: It's really more what the player is looking for. You can make archtops sound differently because of the woods and building techniques. The type of arch – how high it is – affects the sound, which can be bright, or even mellow for rhythm guitar work. Much has to do with the woods and what you do with them.

VM: What archtop models do you offer?

MK: Currently, I make four different models – Voyager is the model name of all four. There's the Voyager non-cutaway, which has a symmetrical shape

for a fairly balanced tone. It sounds better than a cutaway guitar because nothing – not the top or bottom – is disturbed. There's also the Standard Voyager, which has a cutaway. Both these guitars have a 17" bout and traditional f-holes with no binding. Then there's the Voyager Deluxe with split f-holes. I also offer the Mini Voyager, which comes in two versions: one with f-holes, the other without. But even the model with no f-holes is fully hollow and carved from solid wood, and has both magnetic and piezo pickups. All my archtops have Bartolini or Benedetto pickups, and come with a nitrocellulose lacquer finish.

VM: What kind of bracing do you use?

MK: I use a parallel brace or an X-brace, depending on the player. If he plays a lot of chunky rhythm, I'd go with a parallel brace. For a soloist, I'd go with an X-brace.

VM: Where do you source your woods?

MK: From all over – there's not really one particular source. I basically use Englemann and Sitka spruce for the soundboard, maple for the back and sides, and ebony for the fingerboard. I don't really do cedar or maple tops; I'm more of a traditional guy when it comes to materials. Even the bridge, tailpiece and pickguard of my archtops are all handmade wood pieces.



VM: Do you offer customized neck shapes, body sizes, and features?

MK: Basically the styles are standard, like my headstock, which is either slotted or solid. But there are options as for inlays, binding, fingerboard radius, neck profile – whatever a guy feels comfortable with. If a guy has a guitar with a neck that he really likes, I'll copy that. I'll just make a template, and carve to that shape.



Enthusiastic students of St. Thomas More Collegiate in Burnaby, B.C. learning from the master.

VM: Typically, how long does it take you to finish an archtop?

MK: It's about 125 hours of labor. It really depends on what I'm doing at a particular time. But for orders, there's a wait of about 6 months. I have some extra help from time to time. They help me on and off with the simpler jobs: they do a lot of the sanding, a little bit of routing. But I still oversee everything and do the crucial jobs, like carving the neck, tuning the top, setups, etc.

VM: Any chance you might be offering a laminated version for the gigging musician?

MK: It's a possibility, but not at this point. Archtops account for just about 15 per cent of my total production. But definitely the demand is going up. Our whole generation is kind of growing up. A lot of people aren't playing rock 'n' roll anymore. They're mellowing out and playing jazz, which is a lot more demanding than rock 'n' roll. So that's opening the door for us. As I was maturing as a musician, I realized I was listening to stuff played on archtops, so partly that was also what got me started in making them.

VM: Have you tried doing something about the feedback problem normally associated with archtops played at high volume?

MK: Yes; it has to do with carving, thickening the back. And on the Mini Voyager, I do parallel braces right from the back to the top. So, it's bridging the two points together. But it's still hollow, so you get that resonance in the space inside.



Voyager Non-Cutaway

VM: Tell me about the guitar-making course that you teach.

MK: It's a full-year credited course offered to grade 10 students of St. Thomas More Collegiate in Burnaby, B.C., and this is our second year of doing it. When I started the course in '81, it was just a 10-week activity program. Students just bought a neck, built and routed a body, and put the two together. Now, they do everything. Students draft a full size layout of the guitar and learn about scale length, pickup placement, and the function of design – what

makes a guitar comfortable, why particular designs have been around for 50 years. Students then learn about the different types of woods and their tonality, understanding the effects of temperature and humidity. Then they construct the body, fingerboard and neck. They watch videos on pickup design and fretting techniques, and learn about famous guitar players. They also take a field trip to Larrivee Guitars. And then they apply a water-based finish on their guitars. After putting it all together, they learn about set-up. We also get into playing.

VM: How does the future of archtop guitar making look to you?

MK: I can just see things improving. Jimmy D'Aquisto brought to the table a bunch of new design ideas that influenced a number of today's luthiers. The Chinery Blue Guitar collection also encouraged many other high-profile luthiers to stretch the boundaries of archtop building. However, one of the greatest challenges for the modern luthier would be achieving consistency in quality. Tone is a subjective thing that varies from ear to ear, but my feeling is that the instrument should project well and have a balanced tone – have even bass and treble response.

Kinal Guitars & Basses 3239 East 52nd Avenue
Vancouver, B.C. V5S 1T9 Canada