

Johnny Smith Goes Full Circle

by Charles H. Chapman

Johnny Smith was born in Birmingham, Alabama, on June 25, 1922 and his initial interest in music came from his father who played 5-string banjo. His major influences were Django Reinhardt and Andres Segovia—as is very evident in his incredibly precise chord voicings and at times machine gun-like 16th note solo phrasing. He gained his first musical experience playing in a country group called the "Fenton Brothers" in 1939. In 1940 he moved to Boston to perform in the burgeoning jazz scene and stayed there until he was drafted in the air force. After his discharge in 1947, the NBC network in New York City hired him as their staff guitarist, and during the next seven years he honed his craft playing in multitudes of venues from small setting to full orchestras. He also achieved legendary stature during this time for his ability to sight-read virtually anything and to perform burning improvisational solos over any type of chord progressions (Still a rare commodity in 2002.)

In the 1950's he achieved critical acclaim for his newly formed quintet with tenor saxophonist Stan Getz. The quintet went on to have the number one jazz album of 1952, *Moonlight in Vermont*. During this era, Johnny won every jazz award possible: Downbeat Best Jazz Guitarist, Best Jazz Record, Jazz Critic's Award, Metronome Poll, etc.

He semi-retired from the rigors of a performance career in 1960 and moved to Colorado. There he owned and managed his own music store/studio only surfacing occasionally to conduct jazz seminars and a few rare appearances with the late Bing Crosby.

When I was growing up in the 1960's most of my friends' guitar heroes were Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck and Eric Clapton. Mine were Wes Montgomery, Howard Roberts and most especially Johnny Smith. I never dreamed I would ever meet any of these guitar icons and Johnny is the only one that I actually have. I had the distinct honor of interviewing him in 1995 and to my delight have been able to meet him a few times since. When I heard that he had gone full circle and once again would be placing his moniker on a Guild Guitar, I took the opportunity to give him a call. Johnny, as always, was a gentleman and took me on his lifetime journey with guitar manufacturers and also shed some light on other aspects of his life besides music that makes him the man is.

Charles Chapman: How did you initially become associated with Al Dronge (President and founder of Guild Guitars)?

Johnny Smith: When I first met Al, Guild guitars were based in New York City. I was working as a staff guitarist for NBC and through mutual acquaintances we met and got along quite well. We always talked about guitars and I would often tell him things I would like to see in an instrument. So Al and I entered into a verbal agreement for me to design a model for Guild. In the summer of 1955, I was playing an engagement in Detroit, MI., and drew up the design and specifications and sent them off to Al. I had been thinking about it for a long time so while I was staying at the Wolverine Hotel I just sat down and did it.

CC: I know that the Guild Johnny Smith Award never really got off the ground. What happened?

JS: After I sent the plans they immediately started working on it. They had altered two aspects of my design and I could not get Al to change them back.

CC: Can you tell me what these aspects were?

JS: They were just small technical problems in the inner workings of the instrument. I felt these problems would not let the guitar get the balance and sustain I was looking for. In my guitar playing I always did a lot with chords and was always striving for the best legato sound I could get. To do that you have to have an instrument that has an exceptional balance between strings and sustain equally throughout the entire neck. We just couldn't come to terms so we mutually decided to go our own ways on this project.

CC: When did Gibson start making your signature guitar and how did that come about?

JS: Gibson had been after me for many years to design a signature guitar and in 1961 Ted McCarty came to visit me in Colorado. He spent several days with me and right on my kitchen table I drew up what I was looking for in a guitar. I believed in Ted and was also interested in starting my own business so the collaboration at that time made sense.

CC: Did they give you a free hand in the design and construction of the instrument?

JS: Yes, I designed everything myself. I designed how the guitar would be braced, how the top would be carved, the dimensions, the binding, and you name it. The only aspects the company did were some of the cosmetic touches which really did not matter to me.

CC: Where did you acquire the knowledge of guitar construction?

JS: An innate curiosity of finding out how things worked and during the years I lived in New York I spent a lot of time in the workshop of my dear friend John D'Angelico. He made the finest guitar I had ever played and really headed me in the direction of achieving the sound and playability I was looking for.

CC: You were with Gibson for many years and then you took your signature guitar to Heritage and then left them. What's the story?

JS: Well, let's just say I am very particular about instruments with my name on them. Companies often change things as different carvers and different foremen of the factories take over. It's not even that it's particularly bad, but it is not what I originally designed or wanted and that is mainly why I withdrew my name. I know what I want and if my name is on it I want it that way!

CC: How and why did you decide to go full circle and take your signature guitar back to Guild?

JS: Two main reasons. The first one is Bill Schultz (CEO of Fender) and the second is Bob Benedetto. I have known Bill for many years and have the utmost respect for him. We were talking a little while back and Bill said very casually: "How would you like to endorse Guild again?" I think I shocked the hell out of him when I said yes. I feel confident about going back with Guild because I believe in Bill Schultz's leadership and with Bob Benedetto aboard I know it will be done right and stay that way. In my opinion Bob is the finest guitar maker alive today and bringing him aboard is one of the best things Guild ever did. I think he has done as much as can be done with making his instruments as close to perfect, both acoustically and electrically.

CC: I know you own a Benedetto. What model is that?

JS: I own the Cremona model and it's just exquisite. I have owned it since the early 1980's and have only played it for myself, but it is a joy to behold.

CC: What are some of the players out there today that have caught your ear?

JS: There seem to be a lot of really fine players out there today but a few that have really impressed me are Jimmy Bruno, Howard Alden, Jack Wilkins and Martin Taylor.

CC: Speaking of Martin, I was talking with him a while back and he told me you have a room in your house with signed dollar bills covering the ceiling. Martin said you had him sign one and then put it on the ceiling. He claims you have the most incredible array of musician signatures he ever saw. Had Martin perhaps had one too many beers and was teasing me?

JS: Martin may have had one too many beers, but he was not teasing you. When my kids grew up and moved away I made one of the rooms into a little bar. When anyone visited us we had them sign a dollar bill for the first drink and then the rest was on us. We then stuck it up on the ceiling just for fun and the whole ceiling is now completely covered. It really turned into a great idea because now I never have to paint the damn thing.

CC: Your passion for flying and fishing is legendary. When did you become involved in flying?

JS: I started flying well before World War II. In fact, I was supposed to be a pilot when I went into the Air Force. I had a problem with my left eye that grounded me and they gave me a choice of going to Biloxi, Mississippi for mechanics school or going into the band in Macon, GA where I was stationed at that time. I went over to see the band director and being a guitar player didn't exactly make me popular with him. They gave me a coronet, an Arban's book and told me to go into the latrine to practice and he would audition me in a couple of weeks. Let me tell you that you get quite a bit of motivation when you have a choice of staying in a nice place and playing music or going to Biloxi, MI to become a mechanic! I did manage to get in the band and actually met quite a few very good musicians.

Once I got out of the service and moved to New York I started to fly again. In fact, I became a flight instructor and continued with that profession, along with music, when I moved to Colorado. I was a flight instructor for over forty years and always thoroughly enjoyed anything to do with flying.

CC: Do you still fly your own plane?

JS: I had to give it up a few years back so I just stick to fishing now.

CC: Speaking of fishing, the last time we met you showed me a picture of this huge fish you caught. Please refresh my memory of how you caught it.

JS: In 1965 my wife and I decided to take a little time off from our music store and go on a vacation. With my little sixteen foot boat in tow we headed for Mazatlan, Mexico to where the big fish are. We used to go twenty five or thirty miles out to sea....

CC: WOW! Isn't that an awful long way to go out to sea in a sixteen foot boat?

JS: Well— I guess God takes care of idiots and little children. Anyway— we got out there and that is where we caught our first big fish. It weighed in at 365 pounds and I had it mounted and it hangs in a little place here in Colorado.

CC: I was speaking with Bob Benedetto last week and asked him if there was anything he thought I should ask you. He thought for a second and said, "Sure, ask Johnny what was the biggest fish he ever caught? " What is it with you guys and fish?

JS: I always knew Bob was a smart man. Actually, the biggest fish I ever caught was just last October. It was a blue marlin and was just a little bigger than the one I showed you, and took almost four hours to bring it in. The only way I was finally able to do it was that the fish died as it got near the boat. It must have taken a heart attack and I think that fish only beat me by about five minutes. He sure was a strong one and I don't know if I could do that again.

CC: Johnny, you are a delight to speak with and I truly hope to see you again in the near future.

A personal note...

Besides being one of the greatest guitar players that ever lived, Johnny Smith is a remarkable human being and one who makes you proud that you play jazz guitar. Because of his exemplary stature as a musician and citizen he has been presented with such prestigious awards as The James Smithson Award by the Smithsonian Institution, The Duquesne University Lifetime Achievement Award and "The Guild JazzMaster Award" presented by the Fender Musical Instrument Corporation. I spoke with Johnny the night he received the award from Fender and he looked very perplexed and I asked him if anything was wrong. He stated: "I am honored to get this, but I just don't know what I have done to deserve it."

The truly great never do and that is probably what separates them from us mere mortals.

(Discography on next page.)

SELECTED RECORDINGS

Johnny Smith Quintet —Roost 410
JS Johnny Smith—Roost 413
In A Mellow Mood—Roost 421
In a Sentimental Mood—Roost 424
Johnny Smith Plays Jimmy Van Heusen—Roost 2201
The Johnny Smith Quartet—Roost 2203
Beverly Kenny Sings for Johnny Smith—Roost 2206
Moods with Johnny Smith Guitar—Roost 2215
The New Johnny Smith Quartet—Roost 2216
Ruth Price Sings With The Johnny Smith Quartet—Roost 2217
The Johnny Smith Foursome—Roost 2223
The Johnny Smith Foursome Volume II—Roost 2228
Jeri Southern Meets Johnny Smith—Roulette R-52016
Flowerdrum Song—Roost 2231
Easy Listening—Roost 2233
A Perfect Match Art Van Damme Quintet with Johnny Smith—Columbia 8813
Designed For You—Roost 2238
My Little Sweetheart—Roost 2239
Johnny Smith Plus The Trio—Roost 2243
Johnny Smith Guitar and Strings—Roost 2242
The Sound of The Johnny Smith Guitar—Roost 2246
Johnny Smith The Man with The Blue Guitar—Roost 2248
Johnny Smith and Stan Getz Moonlight in Vermont—Roost
The Guitar World of Johnny Smith—Roost 2254
Johnny Smith Reminiscing—Roost 2259
Johnny Smith—Verve 8692
Johnny Smith Kaleidoscope—Verve 8737
Johnny Smith Phase II—Verve 8767
Legends Johnny Smith /George van Eps—Concord 4616