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Ken Parker Guitars Profile

Innovative archtops from the inventor of the Parker Fly electric guitar. **With video.**

By **Baker Rorick**

Acoustic Guitar senior editor Teja Gerken plays the Parker Spot

Ken Parker is best known for shaking up the electric guitar world with his revolutionary Parker Fly in the early 1990s. Having sold Parker Guitars in 2004 (to US Music, makers of Washburn and other brands), he has returned to his first love—hand-building acoustic archtops in the solitude of a one-man shop. Parker's archtops, like his radical electrics, hardly follow any existing mold, and he continues to pursue his mission to explore the unrealized potential of guitar design. Fusing aerospace materials with fine woods and old-world craftsmanship, Parker's archtops are featherweight, expressive, loud, and versatile. He believes that a properly designed archtop guitar is the true universal steel-string, suitable for any style of music.

Parker is a guitar iconoclast who has spent his life questioning conventions, but there's method to his madness and a sound reason behind every approach. Raised on Long Island, New York, Parker, now 55, worked in a Rochester, New York, grandfather-clock factory in his early 20s and began building banjos and other stringed instruments while working with noted furniture-maker Richard Newman. Guitar lessons led to an obsession with archtop guitars, and after building one, he moved back to Long Island to make more, sharing a shop with a lute maker in the mid-'70s. From 1979 to 1983, he repaired guitars and other stringed instruments at Stuyvesant Music in Manhattan, then spent years in his own shop studying the development and construction of violins, cellos, and especially Renaissance lutes, which are often built of incredibly thin and lightweight veneers, reinforced with linen or even papier-mâché. Using a shell of carbon and glass fibers, he developed the Parker Fly and continues exploring similar ideas with his line of handmade acoustic archtops.



Advancing the Archtop

Parker says he's trying to pick up where Lloyd Loar (whom he calls his "hero") left off after his development of the Gibson L-5 in the early '20s. Most later archtops were designed to be amplified with pickups and had to be made stiffer and heavier to reduce feedback; the "traditional" acoustic archtop became codified and soon gave way to the overwhelming popularity of flattop guitars. "A good acoustic archtop is the most versatile kind of acoustic guitar, exactly the opposite of the reputation they have," Parker says. "It's really an open form. My design goal is to reveal the voices of the acoustic archtop by merging ancient instrument-making sensibilities with modern materials."

The most arresting detail of Parker's new work is his neck-to-body joint. The core of the neck is lightweight Douglas fir, which he covers with a thin veneer made of the same wood as the guitar's back and sides. Carbon fibers are sandwiched between these two elements and flow together at the end of the neck to form a square pin. The pin fits closely into the body's minimal neck block, and action height can be adjusted with a screw at the back of the body. This arrangement has many benefits. On a normal archtop, bridge height is adjustable to suit a player's action preference. But Parker believes that without the complexity of adjusters, he can make a better-sounding bridge, a simpler, lighter part that does a better job of delivering the complex energy of the strings to the top. "Having the action adjustable at the neck eliminates compromises," he says, "and I can make a bunch of bridges to see which works best—make them hollow to reduce weight. I've got some options." Because there is no heel and the cutaway is extended toward the center of the guitar, players have unprecedented access to the upper reaches of the fretboard. The neck can be easily removed, so Parker can build a different neck (for a different scale, a baritone, a seven-string, etc.) for any guitar body and players can switch between them as they like.

Old-Style Shaping

Parker hand-carves and shapes his tops, backs, and sides the old-fashioned way—shaving, tapping, listening, flexing, and feeling, which can take days for one plate. The edges of the top and back overhang the sides, violin-style, and everything is held together with hide glue. A look inside the body reveals that only the top is braced, with straight, spruce X-braces that do not connect or touch, each brace bridging over the other. There is no kerfing, no visible neck block, and only minimal lining to hold the back and sides together. A bright light almost shines right through the paper-thin sides, and the two-part soundport on the player's side of the body's upper bout leaves more vibrational real estate for the top and directs sound to the player's ears.

Parker's current guitars all have red or Sitka spruce tops, though he offers customers numerous exotic wood combinations for the back and sides: koa for the body and matching neck veneer with pernambuco for the fretboard, bridge, and decorative elements; curly maple with snakewood appointments; figured aspen back and sides with ebony appointments; and European sycamore (aka German maple) back and sides with curly ebony appointments. Instead of serial numbers, Parker gives each guitar a name, like Spot, Mrs. Natural, or Grace. Cost for a Parker archtop is \$30,000, which includes any of the possible wood choices or design options.

Weighing only 3½ pounds, these gossamer guitars have a sound that, while distinctively unique, will remind players of a fusion of qualities found in a variety of great guitars. Because of the guitar's huge dynamic range and beautiful, woody tone, individual notes seem to bloom and develop when played fingerstyle, and with the action raised for hard strumming and aggressive flatpicking, the guitar could dominate a bluegrass band. Parker says that his archtops "sound different in every player's hands," proof of their versatility, and adds,

"I'm hoping my work will inspire some younger builders to lighten up their construction and see what these guitars are capable of."

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Photo, top, courtesy Ken Parker

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