

Ken Parker Acoustic Archtop Guitar

By David C. Stephens

I had trouble starting this review, partly because it's more of a story than a review. I was torn between telling the story of the man and my visit to his workshop or just telling you about the guitar that first attracted me to the man. Let me just let the story flow and, hopefully, you'll find it useful on a number of levels.

My connection with Ken Parker begins on my favorite jazz guitar internet newsgroup; rec.music.makers.guitar.jazz Google Groups is a great way to visit rmmgj. The group is supported by several pro luminaries and a broad group of jazz guitar aficionados. Like all newsgroups, occasional skirmishes break out among the participants, but adult behavior generally prevails so that the site remains very helpful to players of all levels. Anyway, a few months back someone posted a link to Ken Parker's site at <http://www.kenparkerarchtops.com>. When I visited the site I was blown away by the visual beauty of Ken's "Olive Branch" acoustic archtop, but then I listened to the sound clips by guitarists John Hart, David Acker and John Guth and almost fell out of my chair. I'd never heard a more dynamic, clear toned, acoustic archtop.

You've got to visit Ken's site. It's as well designed as I've seen and it really conveys what the Olive Branch is all about. It pulls you in emotionally and leaves you wanting more, not because it's incomplete, but because it's so good.

Within a few minutes, I was writing Ken to talk about his new guitar. Writing because he's not an email kind of guy and his site, wisely, doesn't provide a phone number. He got back to me very quickly, nonetheless. Man, he's an enthusiastic guy. Dumb guy that I am, I wasn't aware who he is. He's THE Ken Parker that designed the revolutionary Parker Fly guitar, combining light weight tone woods with a thin carbon and glass envelope with a unique neck and special neck joint. Rock guitarists and kids all over the USA know who Ken Parker is. I knew of the Fly, but I didn't know of the man. I'd seen the guitar at shows and heard Clint Strong play some astounding jazz guitar on his Parker Fly.

Ken enthusiastically expressed his love for the acoustic archtop guitar. It's really his first love. He spent many years repairing and building archtops before he developed the Fly. If you look at the Parker Fly site, it's not clear that Ken is no longer associated with that company. He left them in 2003, leaving his rights behind and certain rights to use his name. Leaving gave him the time to refocus on his first love, the archtop guitar.

Early in his career, Ken was influenced by his friend, the legendary luthier Jimmy D'Aquisto. With his new guitar, Ken applied his understanding of modern materials to construction of an archtop guitar. Ken asked himself, if Loar or Gibson or Stromberg were designing a guitar in the 21st century, would they have used the materials that they did? Spruce and maple as tone woods are still unsurpassed for the classic jazz guitar tone. Is it more important for the neck to be heavy and stiff or just stiff? Ken thought that stiffness was the most important criteria, combined with the appropriate tone wood character. Would you glue the neck in a set joint, if you could make it stiffer and also provide for easy adjustment with a new arrangement? Ken thought not.

Ken's approach is to use modern materials to achieve superior stiffness and low weight combined with traditional tone woods to build an instrument with superior response while retaining traditional tone. I could see unusual design elements in the wonderful pictures on Ken's site and I could hear the magical tone in the excellent sound bites provided. I had to see for myself.

Ken invited me to see and hear for myself. However, he did say something like, "Dave, I'm not much of a player myself, how 'bout you?" I said that I was probably worse than he as a player, but could hear well. Next Ken said something like, "I've been blessed with lots of great guitar playing friends, would it be alright if I invited John Hart, John Guth and some other friends to be here when you visit?" "Oh man, please do" was my immediate answer. I would not regret that.

One more reason to visit Ken's web site is to read the wonderful *New Yorker* article by Burkhard Bilger, *Struts and Frets, Building a Better Guitar*. Burkhard captures the spirit of the man, Ken Parker. Also, you get a little of the spirit of one of Ken Parker's, jazz guitar parties from the piece.



The Olive Branch Photo by David Slagle of Manhattan Island

We decided that I would make the trek to the Hudson River valley, just North of Manhattan in May, the weekend before a work conference. When I arrived one Saturday morning in May, John Hart was already playing Ken's latest guitar, an unfinished Olive Branch that Ken stayed up late to complete the night before. It didn't have its own bridge, tailpiece or neck and it had been strung for the first time less than an hour before I arrived. Ken has nerves of steel and/or lots of confidence. Anyway, the guitar already sounded like it'd been played-in for three years, not just one-hour.

We had the original Olive Branch that you see on the web site, plus a brand new, unfinished to compare. It was amazing to hear great players move from one to the other and back, trying to decide which was best. It's a tribute to the builder that this was so hard. He's only made two of these guitars. The second was a customer order, not truly finished, with a couple of changes (most notably the sound hole placement onto the upper bout) that made them quite different, yet everyone had a hard time choosing a favorite.

Back to my visit. Ken immediately welcomed me with a giant bear hug as soon as I arrived. He's that kind of guy, with close friends in all walks of his life. He's open, genuine and honest. Look at his picture on the Contact page of his site. That's an accurate image of the real Ken Parker. He's a few inches over six-feet, somewhat athletic, with strong hands and arms from working them for decades. Lots of his friends were there and it was clear that they enjoyed being there as much as I did.

What a treat it was for me to sit inches away from John Hart, John Guth and other great players as they put both guitars through their paces. This wasn't a "play off" between Parker and D'Angelico, D'Aquisto, Gibson and other legendary luthiers. Read Bilger's article for the feel of a session more along those lines. This was an all-Parker show. Besides the original Olive Branch and the one strung up minutes before the "show", there was one of Ken's early archtops of a classic design. As the day progressed, some incredible Fly prototypes came off the shelf, including one so thin that the sides of the ¼" output jack protruded. The range of Parker's body of work is astounding.

Visually the Olive Branch is stunning. The photos by David Slagle on the web site accurately represents the

guitar. There's no trickery there, other than the efforts of a talented photographer to accurately capture his subject. Playing a guitar is a tactile as well as visual experience. Just holding the Olive Branch is a treat for the senses. It's elegantly simple in appearance, yet complex in execution. It took Ken a year to develop the incredibly stiff neck-to-body post design. Ken's goal was not to do something different, but to do something superior, increasing stiffness while lowering mass.

It was overcast when I visited Ken's shop, which is largely lit by natural light from several large windows. If you hold the Olive Branch toward the window light it's translucent. It's a beautiful thing to behold. As you'd expect from a top luthier, the guitar is as beautiful inside as out, with not a drop of stray glue or the least bit of rough edges inside. The top is astoundingly thin. Ken takes them right to the cusp of ruining them to achieve perfection. He must have nerves of steel on the days that he finishes a top.

When I first picked up the Olive Branch I was floored by its lightness. I'd read that it's only three and a half pounds, but the experience of first picking it up adds an exclamation point. The frets are perfect and the action is low and comfortable, more like you'd expect on an amplified guitar rather than acoustic. The play testing was done by the pros in attendance, but I did play the guitar a bunch throughout the two days I was at Ken's shop. It responds to a light touch. Even the lightest pick stroke results in a sustain of several seconds. I'm a trumpeter and like to play single-line on guitar. I really like a lot of sustain when playing single-line so that I can hold a note and let it decay naturally. The Olive Branch allows this type of playing, actually encouraging it.

The tone as you bend your head over the guitar while playing is beautiful and rich. As you move your picking from the neck position to the bridge, the tonal change is very dramatic. At the neck position you hear a classic, midrangy archtop tone. Moving to the bridge yields a more lute-like tone.

Most of you know that great players are constantly approached by builders and equipment makers seeking endorsements. The best players have their choice of lots of fine instruments and once they've been playing for twenty-years or so they've seen it all. Players like John Hart and John Guth may have their heads turned

by a good looking guitar, but after a few minutes of playing they'll drop it like a hot potato if it's not great playing and it sounds incredible. Players of this caliber are lined up to play Parker's guitars. They love to play the Olive Branch.

What a special treat that Ken had two Olive Branches available. Bassist Paul Nowinski was there to back up whatever combination of players that we had. We heard solo, duo and even trio when Ken's old "traditional" archtop was brought out, with and without bass accompaniment. The concert was exuberant, introspective, avant-garde, mainstream, straight ahead, crossover, fusion-based and few other things in between.

Of course, the sound changed from player to player as each has a different touch, uses different picks, etc. Despite these differences, the Olive Branch had a consistent character from player to player. First, it's an archtop and sounds like an archtop. Ken isn't trying to come up with a different sound. He's trying to make a guitar that we'll recognize upon hearing as an archtop. He's done that while enhancing the responsiveness at least a couple of orders of excellence.

Toward the end of the first day someone said to John Guth something like, "I'll bet that new guitar (the one

strung for the first time right before I arrived) still has a few notes that have never been played." John seemed to take that as a challenge and picked up the guitar and proceeded to cover the whole neck. It didn't take long for all the possible fretted notes to get played, but then John launched into harmonics and artificial harmonics. This is an area where the Olive Branch excels. The chime of the harmonics is crystal clear and they ring forever. It's beautiful to just listen to those notes, but John was making real music, as he played all the possible notes. I'm certain that none were left when John finished.

Ken tells me that he hopes to build about eight guitars per year. He's pleased with the Olive Branch but he wants to keep time available to continue advancing the art of building acoustic archtops. At \$30,000, the Olive Branch is priced with the very best archtop guitars. I believe that it belongs in that elite group. Potential owners will need to be open minded. Traditionalists need not apply, but if you want a really remarkable guitar with performance and tone at the highest level, then write Ken Parker a letter and have him start on your guitar. There's already a waiting list.



Paul Nowinski, Ken and John Hart