Kim Walker is “a great maker – fantastic,” says Bob Benedetto, the fabled archtop maker whom the *Washington Post* has called a “modern day Stradivari.” In a recent interview, Benedetto recalled first meeting Kim Walker. “Kim brought me a guitar to critique. Well, the minute I saw it, I knew he didn’t need any critique from me. The guitar was perfect. It was the sort of guitar that only an experienced archtop maker could make. So, I asked him how many he had made. It was his first one. I was at a loss for words. I just shook my head. That really set him apart from anyone else’s work that I had ever seen, mine included.”

Kim Walker is a solo luthier who builds about twenty guitars per year in his shop in North Stonington, Connecticut. Archtops account for about one third of Walker’s production; flattops make up the other two thirds. “Kim Walker is unique in his ability to make quality guitars in all genres, be it flattop or archtop,” says the Smithsonian Institution’s Randall Kremer. Kremer, the Public Affairs Director for the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History and the producer and of the Smithsonian’s “Imax & Jazz Café,” was “taken with the sheer beauty and playability” from the moment that he first saw and played a Walker guitar.

The late guitar collector Scott Chinery was equally impressed with Walker’s guitars. Walker was one of the twenty one luthiers whom Chinery commissioned for the “Blue Guitars” – a project inspired by one of Jimmy D’Aquisto’s last archtop guitars. “Scott was only going to commission twenty guitars for the Blue collection,” says Walker in recounting his inclusion in that project. “George Gruhn [vintage guitar guru and owner of Gruhn’s Guitars in Nashville] had sold Scott a Larson Brothers harp guitar, possibly the first -- it matched the patent drawings - - that needed major restoration. George told Scott that I was the guy to do the restoration. I went down to Scott's house to pick up the harp guitar and show him some of my archtops. When Scott saw and played my guitars, he asked me to participate in the Blue Guitars.” For twelve months in 1997 and 1998, the Smithsonian exhibited the twenty two guitars, including D’Aquisto’s original, all finished in the same “Mohawk Ultra Blue Penetrating Stain.”

Chinery was obviously pleased with his decision to include Walker’s guitar. “Scott loved [Kim Walker’s] guitar,” said the Smithsonian’s Kremer in a recent interview. “It was one of his favorites.” Chinery described the guitar in the “Blue Guitars” companion book as “the lightest and most delicately made 18-inch guitar that I’ve ever seen. The wood is, seemingly, paper thin.” According to Chinery, the guitar was half the weight of any of the others in the collection. Guitarist Steve Howe, quoted in same book, described the light weight beauty as having a “very lutey – medieval – an original strong sound.”

So impressed was Chinery with Walker’s work that he told the Smithsonian’s Kremer that he was going to order another guitar from Walker. Sadly, Chinery died before he placed the order.
Kim Walker’s “love affair” with the acoustic guitar began when he was a teenager in the late 1960s. “After hearing Doc Watson play, my life was changed. I spent countless hours trying to learn his music, both his fingerstyle and his flatpicking style. What I found was that, although I never became a great musician, I was totally taken by that wooden sound of the acoustic guitar.”

The love of the acoustic guitar led Walker to build his first guitar in 1974 and to move to Nashville and take a repair position in George Gruhn’s shop in 1979. While with Gruhn, Walker restored instruments that had once belonged to players like Hank Williams, Sr., Merle Travis, Gene Autry, Ray Whitley, and Clarence White. By 1984, Walker was running Gruhn’s six man repair shop. In 1986, Gruhn, who had become a principal in the Guild Guitar Company, asked Walker to build prototypes for new models for Guild. A year later, on Gruhn’s recommendation, Guild hired Walker as head of the company’s research and development and custom shop, where Walker built prototype guitars for guitarists Eric Clapton and Brian May. In 1988, Walker became Guild’s assistant plant manager. Walker went solo and started Walker Guitars in 1994.

Gruhn holds Kim Walker in very high esteem. “Kim Walker is one of the finest craftsmen I have ever met.” “He was already a good craftsman when he came to me,” says Gruhn, but, “like any good craftsman,” he took advantage of the opportunities at Gruhn’s “to learn from the great guitars of the past.”

Today, says Gruhn, “Kim is one of the absolute best” and “one of the most talented builders out there.” What Kim does is to “take the best of the old ones, eliminate the problems – not everything is perfect on the old ones – and make the right stuff.” “Too many people who start out [building guitars] don’t even know what makes an old Martin great.”

Kim Sherman, one of the owners of another great guitar shop in Nashville, Cotten Music, seconds Gruhn’s opinion. “I think that he’s a genius.” “Before I was a shop owner, I was a player. When I played a Walker, I knew that it was a guitar that I had to have.” Sherman adds, “Walkers are deeper, bigger, and louder sounding than they ought to be for their size. His ‘twist’ is just the right twist. They have an ‘old world’ sound about them pretty quickly.” Sherman is also quick to praise the aesthetics of Walker’s guitars. “He doesn’t take away from tradition, he enhances it. He takes established designs, adds his twist, and makes remarkable guitars.”

The Smithsonian’s Kremer is even more effusive in his praise of Kim Walker’s sense of aesthetics. “There is a movement today away from inlays in favor of emphasizing the appearance of the woods. Kim has been able to reach a happy medium between the simple, elegant look and a more decorative style. Kim really is at the forefront of American design. He is influenced significantly by Art Deco design elements. He has incorporated that aesthetic into his guitars in a way that I find very exciting.”

Walker says that his designs “are more evolutionary than they are revolutionary.” “I operate within a tradition, sort of like violin makers,” says Walker. “If you look at what violin makers are doing, you don’t see them making revolutionary changes on the basic violin form. They make subtle improvements and refinements. That’s what I try to do.”
This respect for tradition informs nearly every aspect of Walker’s work. For example, he bases his flattop designs on the “historical shapes” of Martin 0, 000, and OM and Gibson L-00, small jumbo, and jumbo body styles. “I depart from the basic shape only to change the tone.” Thus, Walker may increase the depth of a body style “to add a bit of bass -- an eight of an inch makes a dramatic difference.” But, otherwise, the historical dimensions prevail. “Guitars with slightly different proportions just look a little bit ‘off’ to me,” observes Walker.

Walker’s archtops are similarly rooted in tradition and exhibit the influences of John D’Angelico, Jimmy D’Aquisto, and a hint of Lloyd Loar. Mix those ingredients together, says Walker, “add a twist of ‘Walker,’ and voila!”

Tradition also impacts Walker’s choices of tone woods. “For the most part, I use the ‘tried and true woods.’” For tops of both flattops and archtops, this means that Walker typically uses one of “the three spruces”: Adirondack, Sitka, and German. “I really like the sound of these top woods,” says Walker. Of these three, Walker observes that Sitka is often disfavored by customers because of its “association with inexpensive guitars.” But, “Sitka varies tremendously from tree to tree and a really good piece of Sitka makes a great, all purpose guitar top.” Otherwise, Walker favors Adirondack for its “great dynamic range” and German for a slightly more responsive top. Walker occasionally uses Englemann spruce for “fingerstyle” flattop guitars designed for a “light attack,” but believes that Englemann spruce, like cedar, works better with nylon string guitars because “the energy from nylon strings is easily transferred by these softer woods.”

For backs and sides of flattops, Walker usually selects rosewood, mahogany, or maple. For archtops, he also honors the great guitars of the past and almost universally uses maple. Walker describes rosewood as having a “wet, almost reverby” sound. Within rosewood species, Walker hears Indian rosewood as being on the “cleaner, clearer” end of the spectrum, Brazilian having the “ultimate reverb” quality, and Honduran and cocobolo falling “in between.” Mahogany is a “good middle ground” between rosewoods and maple; koa “falls between mahogany and maple.” Walker is quick to add, though, that these are generalizations and that all of the “design elements” of the guitar work with these tone woods to produce a unique, overall sound that, regardless of variations among his guitars, always features what he describes as “fat trebles.”

Walker admits to being a recent, reluctant convert to maple in flattops. “I was always in the Martin camp and Martin’s maple guitars never really moved me. Kim Sherman [of Cotten Music] was the person who convinced me to build my first maple flattop, an L-00. And, I thought about all of those great archtops and mandolins that have a real woody, woody sound. So, I thought, ‘why not.’ And, I loved it.” A lot of other folks have discovered the wonders of Walker’s maple guitars, which exhibit a surprisingly warm tone with an equally surprising amount of sustain. And, that first maple L-00, a virtual Kim Sherman signature model, now occupies a position of honor on Walker’s website as an example of the wood combination that has become one of the most common choices for buyers of Walker’s L-00s.

Walker’s aesthetic choices also bow in the direction of tradition. “I don’t try to make an artistic statement with every element of a guitar,” he says. Rather, Walker tries for a subtle
updating that fits with the traditional appearance of his guitars. His wood-bound models echo
the style -18 Martins of yore, but feature a more modern, wide maple purfling. One of his most
striking headstock inlay designs, the flowering vine, though his own unique creation, reminds
one of a contemporary, more sophisticated version of the lovely inlays that graced the 1920s and
1930s creations of the Larson brothers. And, Kim’s stunning, hand-dyed sunbursts call to mind
a subtler version of the Loar era Gibsons. Perhaps Stan Jay, owner of the Staten Island based
Mandolin Brothers, in the prose that has made that his musings in the shop’s Vintage News
publication a must-read for guitar enthusiasts, best describes a typical reaction to the appearance
of a Walker guitar: “When we first saw Kim Walker's guitars we were unable to speak for a full
four minutes, which constitutes a new record for lingual paralysis around here.”

Walker builds guitars in batches that range for two to twelve, building more intricate
guitars, especially archtops, in smaller batches. A batch takes Walker an average of four months
to complete, but the time varies with the complexity of the guitars and the batch size. Walker tap
tunes and voices every guitar for the playing styles and string gauge preferences of the owner.
The same body style and woods, built for different players, will have dramatically different tonal
characteristics.

Though tailored to the individual player and instrument, Walker’s notion of the perfect
tone for a guitar is also rooted in the past. “I based my primary flattop bracing pattern on 1934
and 1936 Martins that came through George Gruhn’s shop while I was there.” Walker adds that
he “mapped out the bracing of all of the vintage guitars that impressed me and settled on a
pattern that is my starting point for voicing a guitar.” That starting point is a “very advanced”
placement of the bracing’s “X,” within approximately ½ inch of the top’s soundhole. Walker
couples this bracing with dramatically radiused tops and top woods that he graduates from
thicker in the center to very thin near the guitar’s edges. He also tap tunes each piece of wood
that he uses in a guitar.

The final ingredient in this recipe is Walker’s unique finish. Eschewing the lacquers and
polyurethanes that most luthiers use, Walker instead finishes his guitars in a gloss varnish. “The
interaction between the wood and my varnish finish,” says Walker, “has a lot to do with the tone
of my guitars.”

From this starting point, Walker voices each guitar to the player’s needs. “I ask first
about the string gauge that the player will use,” says Walker. “Then I want to know that player’s
style. Does he or she need a really responsive instrument? Will they flatpick or fingerpick?
What thickness of flatpick? And if the guitar will be used for fingerpicking, I want to know if
the player plays bare fingered, with nails, or with fingerpicks. Or, will it be a combination of
several of these techniques?”

The result of these efforts, as Stan Jay puts it, is that “Kim's guitars define perfection in
the six-string modality.” Indeed, Jay is effusive in his praise. “Kim seems to have been blessed
by the elusive but beloved Goddess of Depression-Era Luthiery who, although not the most well-
dressed Goddess in the stable, knows her stuff. His six-strings achieve, in a new instrument, the
understated eloquence of both appearance and tone of the finest M- and G- word vintage gems
which have had 65 years to mature.”
Walker's most recent batch of flattops spanned a broad stylist range, both visually and sonically. Visually, the guitars ranged from the elegant, all wood, "Specials" with Brazilian rosewood bindings and fine maple purflings to a couple of his gorgeous, “Loar-style” sunbursts. The recent batch even included a black, “retro” small jumbo with customer-supplied “mother-of-toilet-seat” headstock overlay. Sonically, the guitars, matched to the individual buyers, ranged from loud, bass-driven flatpickers to crisp ragtime machines to responsive fingerstyle guitars.

Walker’s ability to match player and instrument comes not only from a talent for guitar building, but also from an impressive ability to communicate with players. Says the Smithsonian’s Kremer, “Kim is also one of the best communicators of the art of guitar making. That is why we invited him to take part in the Smithsonian’s Internet-broadcast jazz guitar concert.” Broadcast in New York City and Los Angeles in 1997 and 1998, the event was the first live, Internet jazz broadcast. “Kim is very cerebral and is very able to talk about the guitar on an intellectual level,” adds Kremer.

Walker’s skill in talking about guitars has led to a number of speaking engagements. Last fall, a Yale University architecture professor asked Walker to speak to his students about the tonal properties of wood. In the winter of 2000 and spring of 2001, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts engaged Walker to conduct two guitar making demonstrations in conjunction with the Museum’s extraordinary “Dangerous Curves” exhibit. “By the second demonstration, word had gone out over the Internet, on the guitar making grapevine, that he was doing the demonstrations,” said the Museum’s Barbara Martin. “So, we had a fair number of guitar makers in the audience. The presentation was interesting to them and to people who didn’t know how to bend wood. He is straight-forward and eloquent. He spoke on all aspects [of guitar building], from how you do it to why you would want to do it.” The demonstrations were so successful that “they reinvigorated” the Museum’s commitment to artist workshops.

The growing reputation of Walker’s guitars and, in Walker’s words, “mysterious market forces,” have left him with a three year wait list. Walker sells most of his guitars directly to buyers, but he also sells through Cotten Music in Nashville and Mandolin Brothers on Staten Island. Cotten has taken orders into 2004. At Mandolin Brother’s, says owner Stan Jay, the demand is astonishing: “It would not be an exaggeration to say that for every Kim Walker acoustic guitar that enters our inventory, we are besieged by no less than 30 avid supplicants.”

Walker is modest about his accomplishments. “From my standpoint, I'm just a guy making guitars for a living. Yes, I think about it constantly and it is my passion. But, I don't dwell much on the past except as to how it relates to my present or future projects.”

As to those future projects, Walker concedes that he has had some pressure from dealers to employ an assistant or two to take production “to the next level.” At this time, though, says Walker, “I plan to remain a one man shop so that I can go on devoting my energies to refining my guitars one at a time.”

Walker is currently at work “refining” a trio of archtops. The nearly matching “Classic Model” guitars feature European cello woods for the bodies, curly maple bindings, and exotic
wood overlays for the headstock, pickguard, and tailpiece. “These guitars,” says Walker, “are all about the wood!”

Perhaps the Smithsonian’s Randall Kremer best sums up the appeal of Walker guitars. “He goes beyond the mere combination of materials and puts real soul into a guitar. That’s why I’ve always found his work so intriguing.”