

The Benedetto Story



“My roots are in jazz guitar...it’s the only guitar I ever wanted to make.”

“Since I was a little boy, I was interested in only two things: music and wood. Guitars were all I ever thought about. I played guitar on weekends in a local band and I’d pour over Gibson & Gretsch guitar catalogs – and knew exactly which archtop model and its endorsers were on each page.”

Bob, 1960

The Inspiration

It was his Uncle Mike’s archtop guitar that first caught Bob’s eye.

Sunday afternoon, New Jersey, circa 1958: Weekends and holidays, the Benedetto family, like many Italian-American families of that generation, would gather to eat...and play music. The music of course was provided by uncles Frank (mandolin) and Mike (guitar).

On one occasion, after a few hours of playing all the popular Italian songs (and a few originals), Frank and Mike decided to take a break to enjoy the usual Italian pastries which always followed the meal. The instruments were laid on cousin Jerry’s bed (never in cases). Inquisitive eleven-year old Bob soon found himself in the bedroom standing over, and staring, at his uncle’s guitar. Minutes later Mike walked in. Perhaps it was his artist’s intuition or perception that prompted Mike to take the youngster’s hand and place it on the guitar’s top, as he lightly brushed the strings. The guitar never left the bed as Mike talked about the vibrations that Bob felt emanating from the guitar to his hand.

At that moment, Bob’s journey had begun.

“My uncle put my hand on the top while he plucked the strings so I could feel the guitar vibrate; he explained the bracing, how the sound comes out of the f-holes, everything. From that point on, all I ever wanted to do was make archtops; I daydreamed about them constantly.”



Uncles Frank and Mike, Family Picnic



Artist Michael Benedetto designed Fifth Avenue store window displays in New York City in the '50s and '60s



Bob's Family, New York City, 1955



Uncle Frank "directs" the Benedetto family band

The First Guitar

The very next day, young Bob combed the floor for wood scraps beneath his father's table saw. He carved tirelessly with a small knife he had made previously from one of his grandfather's old files. (one of the many stories he heard growing-up was how his grandfather Antonino would make chisels and blades for his planes, from old files...the steel was that good.) His first creation was a miniature replication of his Uncle Mike's guitar.

"Bobby sat there and whittled away, oblivious to everyone — he was happy to be left alone."
Bob's Aunt Sadie



Miniature Guitars Bob made as a young boy

It's in the DNA



As was typical with so many Italian families, the Benedettos had an inherent appreciation of the arts.

Bob's mother, Marie Benedetto. A talented seamstress, she loved to draw. Her parents and uncles were all schooled in Italy.



Muro Lucano, Italy

Domenico & Josephine (Tavarone) Altieri, Bob's maternal grandparents, emigrated from the ancient town of Muro Lucano in the province of Potenza in Southern Italy. Domenico Altieri was a tailor in New York City. Bob's great uncle Vito Tavarone was one of the most in-demand tailors of his time, with clientele including such luminaries as Jackie Gleason and Mickey Mantle. His great Uncle Luigi Tavarone was trained in Italy as a woodcarver/cabinetmaker and worked in New York City. In time, many of Luigi's carving tools would be passed down to Bob.



Domenico and Josephine Altieri



Luigi Tavarone's carving tools



His father, Salvatore, a skilled cabinet maker, was the direct link to a sound, fundamental education in fine woodworking. Formal training was not to be part of young Bob's education. He learned by watching his father sharpen tools to create perfect wood joints. He was taught such fundamentals as matching grain, spreading glue, tightening clamps and sanding correctly...all while listening to stories about his grandparents' experiences in Italy and later in America. Young Bob was acutely aware of the respect his father had for the tools he worked with, many of which belonged to his own father Antonino, tools someday to be handed down to the family's newest artisan.

Bob's father, Salvatore Benedetto, from whom he learned woodworking



Bob with his father at the Clearwater, Florida shop, 1980

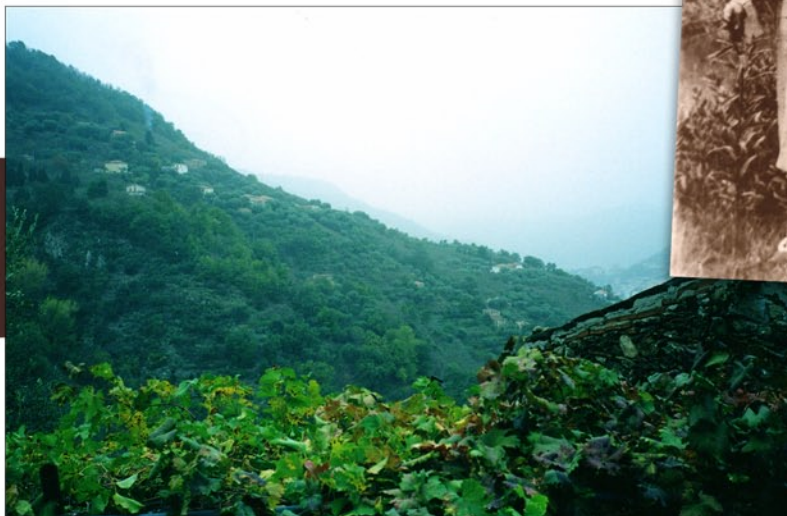


Antonino Benedetto's Handmade Planes

Bob's paternal grandparents came from Sicily: his grandmother Gesuarda Alfieri from Caltagirone, famous for its ceramics; his grandfather, Antonino Benedetto, from Sant'Angelo di Brolo in the province of Messina, a beautiful mountain village abound with olive groves. As a young boy Antonino was sent to live and apprentice with a master cabinetmaker, as was common in those days. There he learned joinery, woodcarving and french polishing and became a master in his own right. He later emigrated to America and worked for several piano companies, including the Steinway Piano factory. He had a great influence on shaping young Bob's career.



Antonino and Gesuarda Benedetto



View from the back of Antonino's home in Sant'Angelo di Brolo



Bob Benedetto was born in the Bronx, New York, October 22, 1946. At the age of 9 ½, the Benedetto family moved to Lake Hopatcong, New Jersey. There, the young Benedetto became more acquainted with his uncle Frank...the musician of his generation. An accomplished violinist, Frank taught music to his two sons as well as Bob, his brothers and sister. All the Benedetto children played a musical instrument. Bob, of course, learned the guitar. Often, they would join their Long Island cousins Mike and Eugene who, with their father Mike directing, would play together as the "Swingin' B's".

18-month old Bob, NYC, 1948



Bob with siblings and cousins, Lake Hopatcong, NJ, mid '50s



The Swingin' B's

Gigging

Bob's father soon bought him a guitar, and weekly lessons began with Uncle Frank.

“[Bobby] fell asleep with his hand on that guitar, a Stella, every night...it was kept under his bed.” Uncle Frank

While in 8th grade, Bob and a few friends formed a small band, The Velvet Tones, and began playing at every opportunity. Often they played for nothing, but soon learned if they “passed the hat”, they were sure to go home with some money. Playing “professionally” was a thrill for the shy youngster, who would often play with his back towards the crowd.



Performing with The Velvet Tones, early 1960s

“We played mostly for the older generation. I liked the music better — we played standards which allowed room for learning music and how to improvise. Although we occasionally played teenage dances, I never enjoyed them...the teens were more demanding. The “rock tunes” had to sound like the record, and I didn’t care for rock’n’roll. By contrast, the older crowds loved us! And we were cheap! (laughs) When they couldn’t afford a good group, they hired us.”



Bob with The Stardusters, 1968

It was Bob's good fortune that his family became acquainted with Carmine Coppola, employed in a supervisory capacity at the Gretsch factory in Brooklyn, New York. The intoxicating experience of visiting the Gretsch factory further fueled Benedetto's passion to make guitars. Bob picked a Chet Atkins 6120 which he played from 1960 - 1968.

“I was fortunate to be living and playing nearby the busy New York/New Jersey music scene and had many occasions to listen to and play with some great musicians. These were the days when club owners would let young kids sit in and enjoy the music.”

"One highlight was when my buddy Ed Grogan and I sat in with pianist Jimmy Carmichael...Hoagy's brother. Of course at the age of 13, I had little idea what chords I should play. But I'll tell you, that was the kind of experience every aspiring young musician should have. It was the inspiration...that precious vibe that pulls you in the groove. Later I realized how fortunate I had been that Ed Grogan's father was willing to drive 20 miles in the snow (he actually drove a jeep with a snow plow attached) to transport us to the club. How fortunate we were that it was a time and place where the club owner allowed a couple of 13 year old kids to play. And, that Jimmy Carmichael so graciously welcomed us."

After high school, Bob served four years in the Air Force during which time he played occasionally, and continued to do wood carvings in the barracks when he had time off. In 1968 Bob was discharged from the Air Force and began making his first guitar.

Bob served in the US Air Force from 1964-1968



The First Guitar (a "real" one!)

"I lived in wood shavings up to my knees...."



H.L. Wild's store, New York City, supplied D'Angelico with wood

"I made my first guitar in my bedroom in New Jersey in 1968. I bought the European cello woods for the top and back from H. L. Wild, 510 E. 11th Street in New York City, one of John D'Angelico's old sources. One day while sitting at the kitchen table having coffee with my father, I mentioned that I didn't know where to find old, well seasoned hard maple for the neck. He looked down at the 30 year old maple table, knocked it with his knuckles and said 'It's right here. Cut it up and use it for necks....I can always make another table'."



Old furniture proved to be a good source of wood for the aspiring luthier. Bob cut-up the kitchen table to make the neck for his first guitar (and, years later, a kitchen spoon for wife Cindy). He later cut-up his sister's bed, and a book-case.



Headstock of 1st guitar

When Bobby Met Cindy

Cindy: *"Bob and I met at a wedding reception at the Martinsville Inn, New Jersey, August of 1974 so we always thought that was a good omen! He was playing in the band and I was the wedding photographer. We were seated at the same table for dinner and Bob was the only one I had eyes for. It turned out the rest of the band was married or had girlfriends except him — just meant to be! We were engaged that New Year's Eve and married the following June. (Incidentally, Vic Juris played in the band at our reception, filling in for Bob)"*

Cindy Benedetto, 1974, worked as a wedding photographer when she met Bob



Bob with the band "Limelite", 1975, Neil's New Yorker, NJ

Bob: *"I was interested in Cindy the first moment she burst into the wedding reception hall — "il colpo di fulmine" as the Italians say (which means to be hit by "the thunderbolt"!)* It was raining very hard and she was soaking wet and laughing and she had everyone else laughing. We met again about a month later at another function I was playing at...again, she was the photographer. She stuffed her phone number in my Tux pocket. The rest is history."



June 7, 1975

Behind every good man...

"During those earlier years, Cindy didn't have much to do because I was unknown, the archtop market was terrible, and I had only a few orders. It is amazing, though, what people can do with a little determination. Fortunately for me, Cindy was not only a great bookkeeper but also loved to write letters. She loved corresponding with people whether or not they ordered a guitar. Everyone that met her loved her enthusiasm for jazz guitar and her honesty. Most of all, they just loved her! Years later, Scott Chinery dubbed her "The First Lady of Jazz Guitar!"

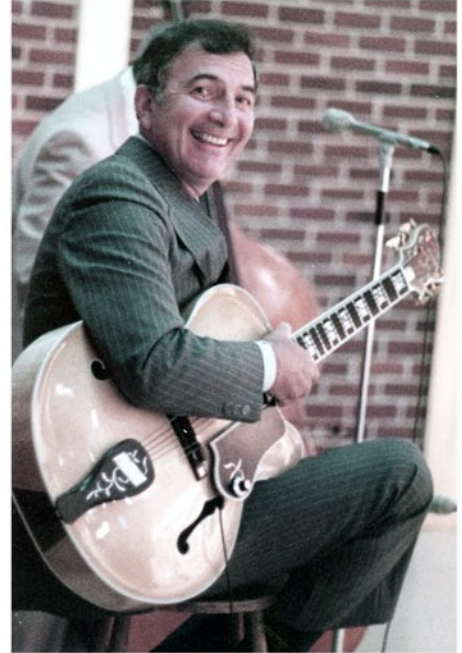
Benedetto's early years included repairs and restorations on old Gibsons, D'Angelicos and New York Epiphones. He was the youngest and least experienced archtop maker of the day which included Bill Barker, Jimmy D'Aquisto, Roger Borys, Phil Petillo, Carl Barney and Sam Koontz.

"It was a small community of guitar makers trying to stay busy in an ever shrinking market. Cindy and I knew from the beginning that the only way to gain international acceptance as a premier maker was to have well-known players playing Benedetto guitars....as many as possible. Yet, it was not at all a cold, calculated strategy. The endorsers we acquired were truly our heroes, and each played a major role as an inspirational source."

"We met Bucky at a jazz lounge in Florida around 1977 ... we didn't have money to eat dinner at the club he was playing at so we brought sandwiches and a thermos of coffee to eat in the car. He was, as always, very gracious. I made him a 7-string in 1978. We have been good friends ever since."



Bob with Bucky and Tony Mottola, NJ, 1980



Bucky Pizzarelli, on the Today Show, 1978, was Benedetto's first endorser

"Bucky and Chuck Wayne were the first well known players to influence me, and have a profound impact on the development of my guitars."



Bob, Sandy DeVito (center) with Chuck Wayne at Benedetto's Kapp Drive Shop, Clearwater, 1981



Chuck Wayne (with guitar Bob made him in 1982)

"This continued with other greats like Howard Alden, Cal Collins, Frank Vignola, Jimmy Bruno, Joe Diorio, John Pizzarelli, Ron Eschete, Johnny Smith, Jack Wilkins, Martin Taylor and Kenny Burrell. And Stephane Grappelli!"



Benedetto Players Concert, 1997

"Most of my orders have been from mainstream jazz players, so I've been able to focus and continue my pursuit of the ultimate jazz guitar."

"It has been a personal high for me and also for Cindy to have become friends with such legendary players."



Jack Wilkins, 1997

"Jazz Guitar to me was always much more than the instrument by itself. It was the player, formally dressed, poised on a stool, caressing his full-bodied archtop in a dimly lit lounge. That was jazz guitar. In my mind, that was the complete picture of my guitar. I think we instinctively make what we love."