

World Class Archtop Guitar Maker Bob Benedetto Says He Retired. We Know Different!

From Sharp & to the Point

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I only recently learned that we make blades for Bob Benedetto's palm planes. In truth, I don't know much about Jazz Guitar or much about making guitars. When I took my first pass at Bob's website, I admit to being glamorized.

Once you look at photos of Bob's wooden palm planes, you know you are in the hands of a true professional. Each part of the plane's design has been thought out and comes from years of experience holding and using tools designed to perform the way he likes them to.

I wondered first about how a woodworking hand tool becomes more and more an extension of the hand. How a person develops a "way," a feel for using a tool to get a certain result, an amorphous thought but enough to ask Bob if he would agree to an e-interview.



Bob Benedetto

During our emails, I got to e-meet Cindy Benedetto (whom you will get to know a bit in the interview, too). It's just one of those things; you know sisterhood when you see it! I've heard many a woodworker, and Ron, say, "Thank God for working wives!" Wives like we are typically of a certain generation, and mostly, we know a good and worthy thing when we live with it. Cindy and I have a lot in common with our jobs at Benedetto Guitars and Hock Tools. And - just sayin' - it's probably a good idea not to get us laughing while in the same room.

What a thorough delight this little adventure has been for me! I hope you find Bob's answers to my few questions as down-to-earth and charming as I do.

-- Linda at Hock Tools

Q: Like most tools in continuous use, a woodworking hand tool becomes more and more an extension of the hand. One develops a "way," a feel for using the tool to get a certain result, moving the tool ever so slightly to get another result - all unconscious as you become experienced. Do you have any special "relationship" with the Palm Plane that's unique to how you work?



Benedetto teak wood plaque hand carved with pocket knife, circa 1966.

remember as a kid grinding and sharpening screw drivers and old files to make chisels and knives (we've all done that!). Some didn't work too well, others were fine. On one occasion I needed an artist's brush to paint some details on my carvings. Our cat Fluffy donated some hair, which I tied to a 1/8" dowel. Of course it was a crude brush but it worked well enough and I got the job done. We improvise. It suits us, we enjoy it, and we learn by doing.

Getting back to your question—I don't think there's any uniqueness as to

A: It's true a tool is an extension of the hand. In fact, a tool is very much an extension of our selves. Our shortcoming is that our hands have limitations, but our imaginations don't. In our mind's eye we can perceive a procedure like cutting a dovetail. But since we can't cut it with our fingernails, we make tools to help us get the job done. And if the proper tools aren't available, we improvise.



Bob Benedetto's Handmade Knife, 1970.

how I use a palm plane, although I suppose we all unconsciously develop techniques that work for us. For instance; I usually carve with one hand, never used a glove and never got a blister. I used to carve for hours on end and never got



Benedetto's original palm plane with his grandfather's scrub plane.

tired; although I did develop carpal tunnel syndrome after so many years of repetitive work!

So much depends upon the quality and maintenance of the blade. When I was a kid, I learned from my father how to judge steel. He would single-out a cutting tool and explain what made it better than another. Of course it was always the quality of steel that made the difference. I don't remember any textbook information, but I was able to judge the quality of a knife or plane iron by using it. If it held a sharp edge it was good and became part of my small arsenal of tools.

Q: Which tool were you improving and how did you improve it with your first palm plane?

A: I always managed with the tools I had on hand, and early-on became aware how easily we adapt to less than

perfect tools. If I had an array of carving tools to choose from when I first started, I wouldn't have known which to pick. When I told my father about the guitar top and back that I wanted to carve, he gave me his father's wooden scrub plane and showed me how to keep the iron sharp. The size and geometry of that plane was not ideal for the various radii that I had to carve so I soon began thinking about making a smaller version.



Bob Benedetto carving an archtop guitar top using his original wooden palm plane, 2004.

In 1969 I made my first palm plane from pieces of hard maple cut from the kitchen table. To make the blade, I took one of my father's old putty knives. I broke it, then ground it to the shape I wanted. Interestingly, the steel that was used on that putty knife was very hard. It held an edge beautifully and I used it my entire career.

Q: Which other tool do you commonly reach for, and why?

A: There are several knives and chisels I use on a regular basis. One knife I made soon after I made my first palm plane ... that would be about 1970.

As a kid I had a real nice little pocketknife which I used for everything. It was logical that I used that same knife when I started making my first guitar. But I soon learned that my trusty pocketknife had limitations, and as I used it I imagined a more suitable design. So, I made a knife that allowed me to comfortably cut binding miters, inlay cavities, and an assortment of decorative carvings. I made the handle from a piece of Birdseye maple, but I don't remember where I got the steel for the blade. It seems I used that knife almost daily for my entire career, as well as the blade I made from my father's old putty knife.

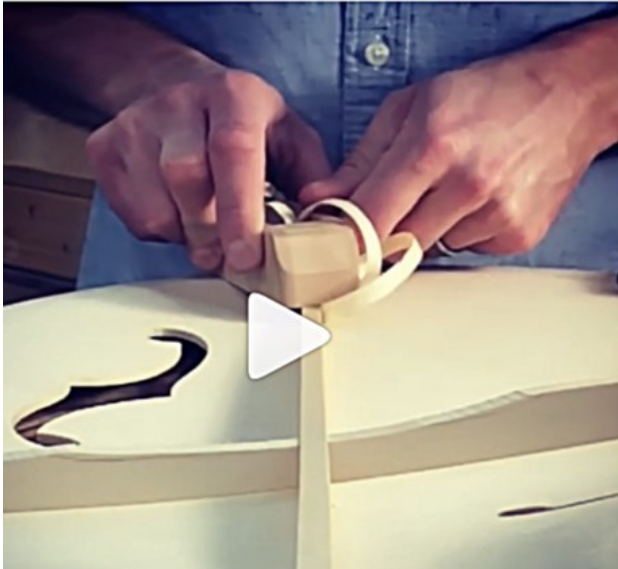
Like so many other tools, it probably wasn't best suited for a lot of jobs, but I got used to it. Just like musicians adapt to less than perfect instruments, we adapt to less than perfect tools. Of course, life is much easier when you start-out with a good tool.

On that subject, the palm planes that I'm now making are a fun project and keep me active in the lutherie community.



Benedetto Palm Planes: Left, CS100 – Curved Sole Palm Plane; Middle, Demonstration Video; Right, FS100 Flat Sole. Planes Available at both [Steward MacDonald](#) and [Luthier Mercantile](#).

During the planning stages I knew where to get hard curly maple for the bodies and brass stock for the fittings. My only concern was the blades. For years I knew about Ron Hock and had a few of his blades on my bench but never had occasion to do business with him. When I started making my first few planes, I approached Ron about supplying me with blades. Needless to say, the blades arrived and were perfect. Over the first few months I made a few changes in the design of my planes and of course the blades had to be changed too. Every change Ron made was perfectly on spec. I was a happy guy!



Making shavings with a Benedetto FS100 Palm Plane while making an archtop guitar.



Bob Benedetto packing his first shipment of palm-planes.

Q: You've achieved phenomenal success as a guitar maker - Benedetto guitars have been played by five generations of jazz masters, appear on countless recordings, videos, and TV and film soundtracks, concert stages and jazz festivals around the world, and have been featured in books, magazines and museums, including the permanent collection of The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. How do you approach your bench with that amount of recognition hanging around each day?

A: Although I appreciate the recognition, I always loved standing at my bench making guitars. The first twenty years were quite a struggle. I was fortunate to have Cindy doing everything behind the scenes. She did all the paperwork, correspondence and made sure all the bills were paid on time. It's no joke when I say she worked around the clock. She also loved jazz guitar and the players as

much I did. I never had to worry about anything except making guitars ... she did everything else.

An occasional shot in the arm like a big-name endorser or a high-priced guitar sale kept us going. But, at any point in time, every morning at my bench was thrilling.



Although Bob spends time at his bench doing other types of luthiery and woodworking, he spends a great deal of his time in tool production—making his palm planes with the same personalization, meticulous care and artistry as his iconic archtop guitars.

Q: Who was your greatest influence and why?

A: At a very early age I never felt restricted or obligated to use any particular tool to do a specific job. My father was a skilled cabinet maker. He was my source of information and inspiration, and he never forced me to do anything I wasn't comfortable with. I remember asking him about sharpening chisels. He explained that a good tool was made from good steel and would hold an edge better than a lesser quality tool. He demonstrated how he sharpened and honed his chisels. Only when I got older and saw other woodworkers sharpening their tools did realize how good my father really was. The surfaces of his sharpening stones were unevenly worn. Yet the cutting edges of his chisels were square and razor sharp. He used to

hone them on the palm of his left hand and showed me how to use the side of my shoe to hone. He taught me to respect my tools and used to say "if you can work with your hands you'll never go hungry".

Unlike my father (and my siblings) I was never good at math. If I had to follow a formal plan on how to make something I probably would have been discouraged and given-up. My father must have known this. So, when I asked him one day how to cut a guitar neck dovetail and body mortise, he showed me. There was no discussion on the science or math involved, he simply took his dovetail saw and a few chisels and demonstrated in very little time how to do it. That worked for me. I learned by watching and doing ... not by formal study.

Q: What would you say younger luthiers are bringing to making instruments and what advice do you have for them?

A: Things don't always have to be perfect. New generations of young luthiers in one way have an incredible advantage. There are lots of lutherie schools, books, DVDs ... all kinds of learning material available to them. Out of the gate, their first guitars are much better than mine was.

Their disadvantage is that there is so much competition ... and it's global. So, I would suggest that any aspiring self-employed luthier treat it like a business. The temperamental artist may have appeal in the movies and in books, but in real life it doesn't work. If people don't like you, you'll never make a sale. Treat people fairly and professionally. Never criticize the competition, always deliver on time, and if something goes wrong during the building process never make excuses. Most importantly, don't sleep late!

I also think it's important to keep the romance in your work. Whether you're a maker, player or simply an onlooker, lutherie is a very real art form, which most people appreciate.

Q: You designed your palm planes specifically for carving your signature archtop guitars. Do you use the planes for any other carving or planing?

A: No. Except for a few years of making violins, I never lost my focus for making archtop guitars. It was important to me to make a living as an archtop guitar maker, and I never felt I could develop my skills to their highest potential



Wood shavings left by handplaning with a Benedetto palm plane. Photo Credit Damon Mailand, 2018. Luthiers International recommended Damon Mailand to Bob in 2006. After working with Damon, Bob decided he'd found a guitar maker he considered the next generation's greatest guitar maker! Damon worked side-by-side with Bob, eventually taking over Bob's own workbench and inheriting his personal chisels. Definitely, the new generation!

if I did too many things. I've dabbled in furniture and cabinet making, but never let it distract me from what I really wanted to do.



Wyatt Wilkie Using his Benedetto CS100 To Shape the Back of a Guitar by Darcy Muenchrath on Vimeo

Q: Are there any other woodworking projects you do or would like to do? What is it that Bob Benedetto aspires to in so-called retirement?

A: I really like retirement and still get up early and stay busy most of the day. But the difference is I don't have to adhere to a schedule. In fact, all that energy that I used to have making guitars is now directed towards making planes. I love staying busy!

Thank You Bob & Cindy Benedetto!



Cindy & Bob Benedetto.



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