

# MARKETPLACE

*Mansel Davies*

## **ALBERTA LUTHIER: FRANK GAY**

Born in the village of Marcelin in Saskatchewan and now based in Edmonton, Frank Gay is an instrument builder with over twenty-five years' experience. One cannot describe Frank solely as a luthier because he can and will build any stringed instrument. However, he is known primarily as a guitar builder, producing instruments of high quality for the concert guitarist, the folk guitarist and the country guitarist. Two of his guitars are in the Nashville Hall of Fame in Tennessee.

It was through the demands of country musicians that Frank first gained recognition as a guitar builder. He has made guitars for Johnny Cash, Carl Smith, Faron Young, Don Gibson, Hank Snow, Johnny Horton, Webb Pierce and many others. Frank recalls the creations of the earlier days with some amusement but the fact remains that at one time the players of his guitars amounted to a "Who's Who" of country music.

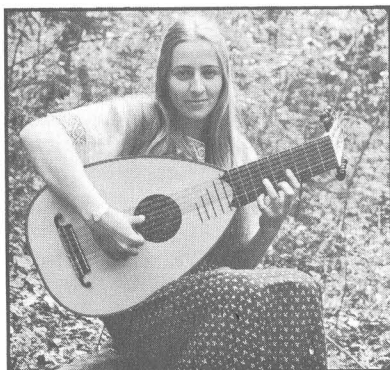
Frank was not initially a guitar maker; he apprenticed and qualified as a watch maker. But the ability to work in fine detail stands him in good stead in guitar construction. He began guitar building at the age of thirty after serving a guitar building apprenticeship with R.S. Williams, a Toronto instrument manufacturer. Frank was already an accomplished classical guitarist, having graduated

from the New York School of Music following two years of study. In Toronto he struck up a friendship with Norman Chapman, a well-known classical guitarist, and the two were involved in a great deal of concert work. But Toronto was not the place for him and in 1953 Frank moved to Edmonton, to commence his own guitar construction career. His first "studio" was a garage which provided a workshop, spraying booth, kitchen and sleeping quarters. I am sure that I was one of many who wondered if I was at the right address when I first met Frank—I still wonder how such fine instruments could emerge from such a location!

This studio was set up as a one-man operation, which perhaps accounts for the high quality work characteristic of Frank Gay. As his guitars became more popular, there was enough work for more than one person, but Frank could not (and still cannot) find an apprentice willing to learn the trade from beginning to end. There have been a succession of people willing to learn parts of but not the total craft.

Frank introduced the classical guitar in Edmonton with his own show "Frank Gay Guitar" at CKUA, a program which ran for more than five years. He also founded the first Classical Guitar Society in Edmonton in the early sixties. It may be that this Society and the exposure to visiting "greats" such as Carlos Montoya and Elirio Diaz influenced Frank on his decision to concentrate more fully on the construction of the classical

guitar. Carlos Montoya gave Frank a beautiful old Ramirez flamenco guitar, and this gift, together with a 1929 Esteso classical, served as models for construction. Frank noted the specifications of each of these fine instruments, and then embarked on his venture. Frank still uses the Ramirez for his own performances. Both Montoya and Diaz expressed great admiration for Frank's work, and placed orders for a guitar each. Frank's famous country guitars were giving way to classical and folk-style guitars.



Guitarists have argued, and will continue to do so, about the relative properties of woods. Some are believers in mahogany-bodied guitars; some claim to be able to distinguish tonal differences between Indian and Brazilian rosewood, while others prefer maple-bodied instruments. It is generally thought that Brazilian rosewood provides as good a sound as any, but with the present embargo imposed by the Brazilian government on rosewood, it is difficult to locate such wood. Frank wrote directly to the Brazilian authorities and was offered a 4'x4'x8'

rosewood log, but importation presented monumental difficulties, and Frank had to decline the offer. There would have been enough wood in that one block for thousands of guitars! Frank does, however, import high quality rosewood, maple, mahogany and spruce for his guitars. He has been using cypress from northern British Columbia for guitar tops for some time. Interestingly enough, many of the leading Spanish builders are now using Canadian cypress for their guitar tops.

Frank Gay's guitars, lutes, mandolins and banjos show a great deal of innovative thinking. Frank is not afraid to experiment with woods, construction methods, etc. in his quest for better sound. His goal is "the scientific construction of better and better quality instruments," and this means continual modification of his methods. I recently saw a classical guitar with an interesting inner construction involving an extra internal sound chamber which greatly increases the volume without at the same time altering tone. As this is a



"trade secret" I cannot elaborate more fully.

Many classical guitarists are playing Frank Gay guitars. His folk-style guitars are found throughout the country, and his lutes are used by the Music Departments of the Universities of Calgary and of Alberta. One of his custom-made mandolins compares very favourably with the 1925 Gibson F2 in my possession. There are examples of both tenor and five-string banjos made by Frank in the Alberta area. Exquisite inlay work is characteristic of his custom instruments.



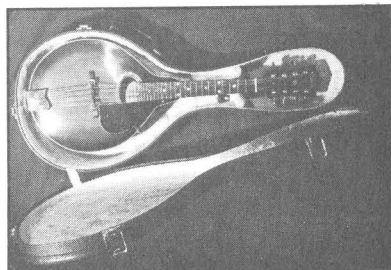
This article would not be complete without a mention of Frank's playing ability. Although he performs classical guitar music at a high level of complexity, his forte is his individual style of playing the music of Django Reinhardt, Les Paul, and Chet Atkins, though Frank can play in any style.

His appearances at the Calgary Folk Club always attract a full house, with a great response to his music. He has had considerable TV and radio experience and has been the subject of many film documentaries and articles. In short, Frank is one of those characters people like to talk

about, listen to or marvel at in this region of the country. He can be contacted at 10135-84 St., Edmonton, Alta. T6A 3P9 (403-465-2371). Written enquiries about guitars, prices, etc. should be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope—like many other talented craftsmen Frank tends to forget the mundane routines of everyday life!

## POSTSCRIPT

Frank tells me that he's now involved in researching and making renaissance guitars. These instruments were made as far back as the sixteenth century, and Stradivarius himself made a few. They were very much smaller than classical guitars, though very ornate in design. They carried ten strings in five courses, the two strings each in the 4th and 5th courses being tuned in octaves, and the scale divisions, or frets, were fashioned after the lute. Like the lute, too, the bridge was very far at the back. Frank says that the sound produced by these instruments is far more compatible with renaissance music than that produced by classical guitars. He's at present working on a prototype, built from ebony reinforced with very thin cedar.



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