



The Long Island Museum of American Art, History & Carriages, in Stony Brook, is showcasing about 50 of John Monteleone's instruments through Oct. 13.

A rock star to guitar-lovers

Museum show focuses on luthier John Monteleone, who has made instruments for the greats

BY LIZA N. BURBY
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When master luthier John Monteleone begins work on a new guitar, he said the materials — thick boards of maple, spruce and exotic hardwood like Hawaiian koa and Brazilian rosewood — speak to him.

“I just look at the wood and it tells me, ‘I want to be some-

thing and I can’t wait to hear what you got.’ So it’s very rewarding, and that’s what keeps me going,” said Monteleone, 77.

It’s that unique insight, as well as his state-of-the-art designs and the tone he’s able to achieve from his instruments, that have garnered Monteleone international acclaim. Since the mid-1970s, he’s created customized instruments for leading rock, jazz and folk guitarists like Mark Knopfler, Eric Clapton, Julian

Lage, Anthony Wilson and Ben Harper — many from his 2,400-square-foot workshop in Islip. In a 2022 documentary, “John Monteleone: The Chisels Are Calling,” many of these musicians praised the self-trained luthier’s workmanship. Knopfler, the lead guitarist of the rock band Dire Straits, has compared his artistry to that of Leonardo da Vinci and even wrote a song paying tribute to him.

Now, Monteleone is being

honored close to home with an exhibition at the Long Island Museum of American Art, History & Carriages in Stony Brook featuring nearly 50 guitars, mandolins and other stringed instruments that he made between 1971 and 2023. Many are from private collectors, including the “Four Seasons” guitar quartet he built from 2002 to 2006, which is on loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

“Musical Masterworks: John

Monteleone’s Guitars and Other Instruments” runs through Oct. 13. It highlights archtop guitars such as his 1997 “Rocket Convertible” and 2021 “Scarface,” both of which have side-sound holes, an innovation he created to solve the problem of players having to lean over the front of their guitars to hear the sound that the audience is hearing. “I wanted to deliver that sound directly to the

See MONTELEONE on E22



John Monteleone, left, performs at The Jazz Loft in Stony Brook with daughter Sam Monteleone and friend Steve Salerno, who is playing an instrument he built.

RICK KOPSTEIN

The wood speaks to him

MONTELEONE from E21

musician, right in their ears," he said.

There are also other historic guitars in the show that were of importance to Monteleone, made by 20th-century luthiers Gibson, John D'Angelico, James "Jimmy" D'Aquisto and Selmer-Maccaferri.

"This exhibition showcases the artistry of a luthier with deep Long Island roots. John has a transformative story that goes way beyond the world-class instruments that he produces," said Joshua Ruff, the museum's co-executive director and curator of the exhibition.

ROOTS OF A LUTHIER

Monteleone said his family came to the United States from

✶ He doesn't make the same guitar twice."

— Musician and collector Steve Salerno, of Huntington

Palermo, Sicily. His grandfather, Salvatore, was a pastry chef who had bakeries in both Manhattan and Brooklyn, and his father, Mario, was an artist and sculptor who trained at the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design in Manhattan. The Monteleone family eventually settled in Islip, and his father worked as an industrial pattern-maker for companies like Republic Aviation Corp. in Farmingdale. Monteleone frequently worked with his father and, as a teenager, he said he helped to cast lead

weights to balance helicopter blades.

Monteleone said it was his curiosity about how things worked that led him at age 10 to take apart his family's grand piano. "It had key problems, and I was a curious kid who wanted to figure out if I could fix it," he recalled. "With permission I was able to take apart the casings and have a good look at what the problems were. I could see the engineering, and I repaired it back to full service."

By the time he was 14, an

interest in folk music and acoustic guitars "really lit a fire within me."

BUILDING HIS FIRST GUITAR

Monteleone said he dreamed of owning a guitar but couldn't afford one, so he visited music stores and absorbed visually how they were made.

"There were no published books, no information about how to build something like that, so I broke it down into simple terms. I got my dad's yellow pages and looked for wood suppliers for musical

instruments. And that's how it began," he said.

Monteleone, an accomplished player of many stringed instruments, graduated in 1970 from Tarkio College in Missouri with an applied music degree. He was a substitute teacher for a time and worked with his father, all the while continuing to make his own instruments. He was working on his fifth guitar when, in 1973, he said he heard an ad on the radio for the Mandolin Brothers in Staten Island, which bought, sold and



John Monteleone, 77, of Islip, bends a piece of wood in his workshop. He has created unique instruments for musicians including Eric Clapton, Mark Knopfler, Julian Lage and Anthony Wilson.

traded vintage guitars, mandolins and banjos.

"Theirs was a specialty; a whole new industry would be born out of their idea. I was fortunate enough to meet these guys at the right moment," he said. "When they said we need a repairman, my career began."

Musicians who were working for Judy Collins and Peter, Paul and Mary came to the Mandolin Brothers, and Monteleone said he did their repairs. He established a workshop in Bay Shore in 1976. Gradually, he said he began to experiment with his own designs.

266 MANDOLINS

"Along the way, the vintage instruments were starting to get fairly expensive for some musicians, so the opportunity was there to create a replica of a mandolin," he said, adding that the word got out about his instruments. "The opportunity was wide-open to make something they can afford, and that's how I ended up making 266 mandolins to date."

Back then, Monteleone said he charged about \$850 to build an instrument. Today, his archtop guitars — which have a curved top similar to a violin and elevated strings — sell for \$55,000 to \$175,000.

Monteleone said in the early days of his business, he had to be self-taught because there

weren't ways to connect with other guitar makers. "In the '60s I didn't even know the term luthier . . . Slowly the information became available and was shared."

ISLIP WORKSHOP

Monteleone opened his current workshop in Islip in 1990. Ruff said the luthier's workshop is his ecosystem. "It's a place where you can see him at his life's work, and there's a story in every drawer."

In Monteleone's meticulously organized and spotless workshop, there's a filing system made from wooden drawers salvaged from an 1800s hardware store in which he keeps pieces of wood for different parts of the guitar and mandolin. Another set of drawers has tuning pegs, including some in gold he's made with his initial, as well as all the items he uses for custom inlays on the guitar's fretboard, bridge and pickguard: abalone, mother of pearl, ivory, tortoiseshell, gemstones, turquoise and manufactured stone.

Another storage system holds flattop and archtop guitar woods. "I pull pieces that I bring together as a working pair," he said. His favorite combination for an archtop is maple and spruce "for the tonal balance and response

that it can give."

The main work room is designed so he can move around freely. "I built this studio specifically so I could take advantage of northern light over my work benches," he said.

Monteleone also has antique machines he's salvaged and repurposed, including a 1920 milling machine for carving, and an array of other machinery such as a pantograph that can rough carve the pieces of wood he chooses following a

master template. There's a buffing wheel for polishing and a spray booth where he does all his own finishing.

In his office, Monteleone has one of his favorite mandolins, which he built in the 1970s, and the first guitar he ever made. He said he only recently created the sound he wanted from it. It took 60 years, and he recalled tearing up when he heard it.

RADIO FLYER COMMISSION

One of the guitars Monteleone is working on now is an 18-inch "Radio Flyer" for Huntington resident Steve Salerno, a professional musician who plays jazz and Classical music.

Salerno, who is also a collector, wouldn't disclose how much it costs, but Rudy's Music NYC has a Monteleone 1995 "Radio Flyer Deluxe" priced at \$120,000.

"John didn't want his guitars to be out of the reach of players, but just because of his artistry and his great ability in craftsmanship and understanding of tone, the value of his guitars has really shot up," said Salerno, 62.

Speaking about Monteleone's importance to the guitar world, Salerno said, "I don't see anyone close to that as far as the ability to make the instrument, the artistic vision for it, really understanding how each part of the instrument works. John has just continued to advance, and he did so at an early stage."

Monteleone, who has built 228 guitars, also has a great understanding of the needs of musicians and tailors each instrument, according to Salerno. "He doesn't make the same guitar twice; he's making

sure each instrument is a really individual creation."

ARTISTIC INSPIRATION

Monteleone's designs are based on history. He said that ornamentation of instruments dates back to early organ construction, when each was a unique piece of art. "Even in the early Renaissance guitars, some of the inlay work would be more extravagant," he said.

He said his inspirations are the Art Deco architectural designs from the 1920s, as well as toys and appliances from that era through the 1950s. He was also a model train collector, which he said led to a train guitar series, including "The Orient Express," which is finished in royal blue with gold trim to reflect the original 1920 train.

While Monteleone said he doesn't do much in the way of restoration anymore, in the 1980s he explored making violins "for the process and experience of learning the depth of it because I felt that was important in understanding historically."

In the past two years, he has also made two mandocellos, which are similar to mandolins but larger. He said he only builds commissioned guitars these days, though.

Monteleone acknowledged that he is persisting in an industry that has changed, as the market is flooded with mass-produced guitars and there are few remaining shops like his.

"I was in the right place at the right time in terms of this developing as a career, as an art," he said. "The doors opened at the right time for me."



Monteleone has a meticulous organizational system, including these drawers that hold some of the components of his custom inlays for guitars, mandolins and other stringed instruments.