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Portland guitar maker Ted Megas adjusts the bridge on a blue arch-top guitar similar to an earlier Megas instrument displayed at the Smithsonian. The blue guitar was inspired by a model by renowned arch-top builder James D'Aquisto, who died in 1995.

# On a blue note

*A top guitar maker in Portland displays one of his masterpieces this weekend*

**B**lue is a mark of distinction for Portland jazz guitar builder Ted Megas, not a state of mind.

Nearly a decade ago, Megas built a blue arch-top guitar at the request of the world's leading guitar collector, the late Scott Chinery.

It became one of 22 blue arch tops on display for a year at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History — and it helped put Megas on the map as a world-class guitar builder.

"His craftsmanship, his wood choices and his design sense are second to none," said Jeff Traugott of Santa Cruz, Calif., a well-known builder of flat-top guitars.

Megas, who usually builds about 12 guitars a year, is putting the final touches on another blue arch top. He will display it at the 28th Handmade Musical Instrument Exhibit from noon to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday at Marylhurst University.

The event gives musicians, woodworkers and the curious a chance to see, hear and, in some cases, test handmade instruments from several Northwest instrument builders.

The show will include a wide range of guitars, including flat-top steel strings, classical and electric. Members of the violin family, woodwinds, mandolins, harps and a harpsichord also will be on hand.

Performers will play some of the instruments during 30-minute sets at nearby Wiegand Hall.

The son of a metallurgical engineer in Buffalo, N.Y., Megas became engrossed by the guitar as a 13-year old. He started playing rock with friends, then gravitated toward jazz, where arch tops are the preferred guitar.

Megas moved to San Francisco with a friend early in the 1970s, hoping to make his living playing jazz fusion. Instead, his woodworking skills with furniture and cabinets put food on the table.

"I was a slacker before it was popular," Megas recalled. He credits Bonnie Gallaty, the woman who became his wife, for giving him the push to pursue his real interest.

"I didn't really love furniture," Megas said. "The two of us pooled our talent, and I decided to go back to guitars. Without her, there would be no me making guitars. Not like this, anyway."

Gallaty, a sculptor and graphic artist, and Megas moved to Portland in 2000 after they lost the lease on the San Francisco warehouse they used as their headquarters.

They bought a home in Northeast Portland's Bridgeton neighborhood with a sizable building in back, which Megas outfitted as his guitar workshop. Then, in 2002, his wife died of a brain tumor.

"I'm just starting to get back on top of everything again," he said. "Life is

settling back down."

Building an arch-top guitar is more akin to making a violin than a flat-topped instrument. Megas starts with a top blank an inch thick and routs away wood from the sides of the top and from the center of the underside to create an arched sound board that varies from one-eighth to one-fourth inch deep when finished.

His shop is filled with unusual and old tools. A large band saw, which he uses to mill maple and spruce logs, dates to the 1890s.

"Some people rescue cats and dogs," Megas said. "I rescue old tools. I hate to see them sitting out in the rust."

Traugott said, "He comes up with some amazing tooling to make guitars. He's got the metal-working skills to build and restore almost anything."

Megas refuses to follow an industry

pattern of giving guitars to performers who will be seen in concerts or on TV. Still, he has a backlog of buyers willing to pay \$5,000 to \$7,000 for his basic models and more for special details.

"Most of my buyers are people who took music seriously at one time and then went off and did other things," he said. "They reach a point when music is important again, and they can afford a good guitar."

First-time buyers often give Megas detailed specifications. Repeat buyers give him more flexibility.

"That's when the real art comes out," he said. "You get to have your own artistic control."

"I want an instrument to be the best that I can make it," he said. "That's what motivates me. If it were purely business, I'd cut way more corners."

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