



made for each other

Jimmy Foster and Foster Guitars

by Jamey Landry

photography by Thomas B. Growden



JIMMY FOSTER WAS CLEARLY ENJOYING THIS. What had begun as a few chords to demonstrate his signature seven-string Foster guitars had gone way beyond that now. He had passed the point of simple demonstration, and had become absorbed in the tune he was playing. He was now playing for himself, determined to complete the challenging tune he found himself in. The arch-top Foster guitar produced the sweet, fat sounds that have made them the darling of jazz guitar players around the world. It was amazing to watch and listen, for man and guitar responded to each other as if they were made for each other – and, in fact, they were.

When the demonstration – no, the mini-concert – was concluded, Jimmy took me into his Covington workshop. All Foster guitars – now about 20 each year – have been made here since he moved to the northshore about 1984. There, in a large climate- and humidity-controlled room, were several guitars in



various stages of completion. Each Foster guitar takes about six months of work to complete, from the selection of maples, spruces and exotic woods to the hand-rubbed lacquer finish. Each guitar is carefully built, tuned and tested to deliver the most consistent sounds, with none of the dreaded dead spots that can be found in mass-produced guitars or other hand-made guitars that are not as meticulously crafted.

From an early age, Jimmy knew that he wanted to play guitar. When he was about 11, he and his father bought Jimmy's first guitar, a used one, from a shop on Rampart Street in New Orleans. That guitar, Jimmy recalls, was a little worn looking but was otherwise in great condition. His dad was in the auto body and fender repair trade and helped him to refinish the guitar. Jimmy then felt it looked as good as it played, and this sparked something in him. "From that moment on, I knew I was going to build guitars some day," Jimmy says.

As his first step toward that goal, Jimmy learned to make guitar repairs, as well as to repair smashed cars like his dad. "My father was good with his hands, and he could make anything out of a piece of wood or metal," Jimmy recalls. He modestly offers that those skills and abilities were passed along to him as well; he, too, has always enjoyed making things out of wood.

At age 15, Jimmy's abilities and confidence with both guitar and auto body repair had progressed to the point that he opened Foster's Custom Finishes. The seemingly ambiguous name was actually marketing genius. "I was doing body and fender work while taking in some guitar repairs. Somebody called up once and asked if his fender was ready. I had to ask if he meant his car or his Fender (brand) guitar!" Jimmy laughs, and explains that he had two business cards. Both bore the name "Foster's Custom Finishes," but one set of cards featured a picture of a car, the other a guitar. He could get customers for either business with one phone number. Brilliant!

"As a kid, I was doing repair work for Werlein's Music, Tibbet's Music and many other music stores in New Orleans. At that time, in the early 1950s, no one was doing guitar repair work in New Orleans," Jimmy says. He realized a clear opportunity existed, and his reputation for quality guitar repairs got the phone to ring.

He recalls: "Guitar companies like Gibson,



Fender, Ovation and Martin – all the mainstream companies – needed local people to do repairs. So they all eventually tracked me down to do repairs for them." As his reputation grew, Jimmy threw out the cards with the car and, since 1970, has focused exclusively on guitar repairs and manufacturing. Looking back, Jimmy says, "I've never regretted it."

Jimmy is self-taught as a luthier, or guitar maker. He says that there was no one to teach him this art, so he learned from studying the guitars he repaired, noting the features of the guitars he thought had the best sounds and borrowing those features for his own works.



With much engineering and observation, as well as trial and error, Jimmy's guitars, particularly the arch-top guitars favored by jazz guitarists, have evolved into highly desirable instruments.

Although Jimmy purposefully maintains the recognized shape of classical guitars such as DeAngelicos, his instruments are in no way knock-off copies. The wood species, the asymmetrical positioning of the internal cross braces, the placement of the "f" holes on the top, the wood thickness – even the formulation of the finish – are all carefully considered and constantly checked during fabrication to enhance the playability of the guitar. However, it is the innovative seventh string – an extra bass string – which makes demand for Foster guitars so high, particularly among jazz players.

"I always liked jazz, and that's most of what I play. I grew up listening to Chet Atkins, Les Paul and Tony Motola, and I always liked these kinds of (jazz) guitars," Jimmy says. The seventh string permits an extra level of chord "voicing" that is unattainable on a conventional six-string guitar. To me, it sounded as though a separate bass player was accompanying Jimmy as he played, which he says is exactly the idea of the seventh string. Although he did not invent the arch-top seven-string guitars he masterfully makes and plays, Jimmy's innovations, such as a thinner

neck and the crescent shape, help to make it easier to reach the seventh string, thus increasing playability without sacrificing sound quality. Guitar players have responded; 80 percent of the guitars Jimmy makes are seven strings. Unlike other luthiers, he doesn't charge extra for the seventh string. He says it takes the same amount of work to make a six-string as a seven-string. "I'm out to make this town a seven-string town," Jimmy says, with a guitar song in his heart.

Jimmy's seven strings are played by the guitar world's most famous musicians, and also by its up-and-coming players. Paul Simon, Howard Morgen,



Fred Fried, St. Bernard's Louisiana native Ted Ludwig, Pat Practico, Hank Mackie, Clint Strong and numerous others have all taken home Foster guitars to treasure and play. Ludwig, who is currently waiting his turn to add yet another Foster guitar to his collection, says that his Foster guitars are among the most comfortable he has ever played, free from wolf tones and dead spots on the frets.

To try to describe in a magazine the sweet sound of a Foster guitar is as futile as trying to describe a Van Gogh masterpiece over the radio. You simply must experience it for yourself, particularly in the hands of a master like Jimmy. As much as he loves building his guitars, he loves playing them, as well. He can frequently be heard playing at Café Paparazzi in Covington and at other places on the northshore.

To learn more about Foster guitars, or to order CDs of his performances, contact Jimmy at Foster Guitars, (888) 317-4146, or visit www.fosterguitars.com.