

# LUTHIER RICH DiCARLO

by Ed Benson



Rich with some unfinished guitars.

**O**n a quiet, tree-lined street in Massapequa Park, New York, some of the finest guitars are being made. Players of the caliber of Jack Wilkins, Vic Juris, Carl Barry, Bob Gallo and Michéle Ramo play Rich DiCarlo guitars. On a recent visit to New York I had an opportunity to visit Rich in his basement shop.

*EB: How long have you been building guitars?*

RD: I got into it seriously, I would say, about 1981. Before that I would just tinker around.

*EB: Classical guitars only?*

RD: Yes, just classical; never archtops.

*EB: Lately you've been selling a lot of guitars to jazz players, which is a little different for a guy who makes classical guitars. How'd that come about?*

RD: It came about through Carl Barry, actually. He wanted to know if I could make a nylon string guitar that plays like a steel-string. Basically, what I did was join the neck to the body at the 14th fret, like a steel-string or an archtop instrument. On a classical, it's at the 12th fret. And I just made the fingerboard a bit

more narrow.

*EB: Did it change the acoustics of the instrument or anything like that?*

RD: No, not at all. The scale is shorter than the typical classical. A typical classical is 650mm; this is 640mm. I used this because steel string-players are not used to the longer scale, and actually, a 640mm is, I believe, what Jimmy D'Aquisto used on all his guitars. It's a short-scale and classical and steel-string players seem more comfortable with that.

*EB: Whom have you made them for so far?*

RD: Carl Barry, Vic Juris, Jack Wilkins, Joe Carbone, Bob Gallo, Dr. Frank Forte, and many others.

*EB: Do you make numerous models of the jazz style?*

RD: Well, there are a couple of models. There's a 14th-fret cutaway and a 19th-fret cutaway. I don't use the regular cutaway style; it's sort of a chop, instead of a gradual cutaway. This is to keep the basic shape of a classical guitar. It's still built like a Spanish guitar, but the sides are cut into the neck instead of the neck being glued or bolted on. The neck width at the nut is 1 7/8". Some players like a narrow nut, so I've used 1 3/4" on some instruments.

*EB: What about amplification. Do any players take it without any amplification?*

RD: A couple of players have taken it strictly acoustic. For amplification I use a Highlander or RMC pickup. I think RMC(Mclish) is the best. It's the best reproduction of acoustic sound. Richard Mclish and his staff at RMC are a pleasure to deal with.

*EB: Tell me about the woods that you're using on the guitars.*

RD: Believe it or not, most of the nylon-string jazz players like maple, because of its bright response, and I think they're used to that from their archtops. Rosewood has a darker, more lush sound. The classical players prefer the more traditional rosewood instrument--Brazilian, Honduras, East Indian. Although on many occasions the classical player will request a maple instrument. The flamenco players will choose cypress or a rosewood.



Rich DiCarlo with a finished guitar.

*EB: Can you get Brazilian rosewood anymore?*

RD: Oh yes, but the price is unbelievable. There are some wood dealers who still have old batches of it from the '50s and '60s. I am now in the process of constructing a Brazilian rosewood/cedar instrument for Dr. Frank Forte.

*EB: Would anyone hear a difference in the sound?*

RD: I think the big thing with Brazilian rosewood was its abundance. No doubt it's a great-sounding wood, and it's beautiful but great-sounding instruments can be made from almost any wood. Actually, the classical guitar Francisco Tarrega used was a maple instrument. Maple classical guitars sound terrific, but it's just not a traditional-looking wood.

*EB: Do they hold up as well as any other?*

RD: Yes, better than Brazilian rosewood. Nine times out of ten, Brazilian rosewood instruments are going to develop cracks because of the wood. But as I was saying, at the time, Brazilian rosewood was in abundance

and it was a pretty wood. I've made guitars with cherry, with purple heart, and the instruments sound wonderful. And a lot of makers are doing that now. Most of the modern makers are exploring the alternative woods with great results.

*EB: I don't know if you know this story: I was at Bob Benedetto's many years ago, and he built a guitar out of wood from Home Depot. It sounded and played great. You would never know the difference. But people who came to the house didn't know what it was as it had no name on the headstock. They played it and loved it!*

RD: I was talking to Bob at Frank Forte's party, and we were talking about that. We were talking about different tones and woods. Now they have Master grades, 5A, 4A, 3A, 2A, and 1A. It's all cosmetic.

*EB: Would anyone hear the difference in these different grades?*

RD: No, because it's just cosmetics; just the way it looks. But I find, the low-grade soundboards I use have the best sound. I think it's just the grain orientation in the wood. A lot of people don't like it. Again I'll point out--it's all cosmetics!

*EB: Tell me about some of the price points on the jazz guitars. What do they start from?*

RD: The basic is \$3500; that's acoustic.

*EB: With a RMC pickup?*

RD: For RMC, add another \$600. With a Highlander, add \$300.

*EB: How long does it take to get one of those?*

RD: It depends on how busy I am. actually. Right now waiting time is 18 months.

*EB: How many do you make in a year?*

RD: Last year was a great one for me. I made 20 instruments. I usually build in batches of 3 or 4.

*EB: Same models?*

RD: It varies. These right here are all classical. They're for a dealer in Japan. He wants me to make him 10 instruments in 18 months.

*EB: Different models?*

RD: No, just classical. But I don't use traditional rosettes anymore, and that's what he likes about my



Rich DiCarlo and Michéle Ramo at Rich's shop.  
The guitar is an 8 string Rich recently made for Mick.  
The bottom two strings are fretless.

*EB: What are you using now, instead?*

RD: Whatever comes to my head. Like one of a kind.

*EB: You do all the work yourself?*

RD: Oh yeah. Everything. Nothing is sent out of my shop.

*EB: How'd you learn this? Did you apprentice with somebody?*

RD: I actually didn't apprentice. But in 1969 I met Jimmy D'Aquisto and I ordered an archtop from him, which I still have. I got it in 1971, so I waited 2 years. It's an Excel. But the minute I walked into his shop in 1969--he was out on Jericho Turnpike at the time--my whole life changed. Just his whole demeanor, just his shop and all the guitars in their various stages. It was breathtaking. Jimmy was an inspiration to me. I think of him every day.

*(Michele Ramo and his wife Heidi arrived while Rich and I were talking.)*

*EB: Tell me how the Ramo's "Hei-D Mostro" 8-string model came about. I know you built him a couple of 7-string guitars.*

RD: I built him one 7-string and two "8s."

*EB: So how did you guys ever hook up? Did you know him before?*

Ramo: I met him through a magazine ad.

*EB: And you asked him to do a 7-string for you?*

RD: He called me up. You know I'm always getting calls from crackpots--"could you do this, could you do that." So to make a long story short, he comes in from Detroit at 8:00 o'clock one Saturday morning, he calls me on the phone, and says, "We'll be right over." My wife Linda and I were running around the house. So he comes down here with Heidi. And as soon as he picked up the instrument, he said he wanted this, he wanted that, and can you do this, can you do that. And I said, I don't do that; I just make classical guitars. So I didn't see him again for maybe two years. He had gotten a 7-string from Gary Zimmnicki--a real masterpiece--and I had never built a "7" before.

*EB: So why did he need another "7" if he had the Zimmnicki?*

RD: Because I wanted to make him an acoustic instrument. I said, "Do you have anything for recording, without plugging in?" Ramo said, "No, everything I own is with electronics." So I made that one totally classical acoustical.

*EB: And that worked great?*

Ramo: Beautifully. And then from there our relationship just grew.

RD: Got better and better. And then he hit me with the idea that he's been thinking about his whole life: making a guitar that encompasses the whole orchestra.

*EB: That's how the 8-string came into being?*

RD: Yes

Ramo: I was over here designing for him. I came in with all the sketches, and he's looking at me like I'm crazy.

*EB: You had it all worked out on paper before you came in ?*

Ramo: Well, not the total idea; I just had parts.

RD: He gave me the leeway to build it however I wanted, which is great. I knew he liked a thick guitar. Whereas a regular classical is approximately 4 inches at the tail, he wanted 5 inches.

*EB: Any special woods on his guitar?*

RD: Well, for the first-8 string, I said, "Look, I don't know if this is going to work, so let's not use the best wood. Well every wood is good, but I'm not going to use a piece of German spruce. I had loads of beautiful

curly maple, so I said let's use this; this will be the prototype." Our plan was, if it doesn't work, we'd go to Jones Beach, and then we'd just chuck it into the ocean, because what's the sense in having it if it's not functional? Like John D'Angelico used to do if he built an instrument that he didn't like. He used to take it right to the Park Row pawn shops, where they would sell them.

*EB: Well how did it come out?*

RD: Terrific! We were thrilled!

Ramo: He called me every day. I was here almost every week, 2-3 times a week.

RD: This wasn't just something that he gave me the idea for; we talked, he came here, we worked this out.

*EB: This is not a commercial instrument. There are maybe a handful of players in the world who play an 8-string.*

Ramo: You're right about that, Ed. We were on the internet looking for pre-1600 instruments. There was nothing like it. So it's from scratch.

RD: This 8-string is definitely out of the ordinary, because the 7th & 8th strings are fretless. And with Ramo's style of playing, it sounds like two different players: one on stand-up bass, and another on guitar. But it didn't just happen with one meeting. He would come with Heidi and spend hours and hours here, until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, discussing this and that.

*EB: How long did it take you to build that one?*

RD: Approximately 3 months.

Ramo: Well, the funny thing was, one day I came in with a fretboard on paper. I wrote a scale with the chord changes. I say, "See this chord? This chord is going to be like this, this chord is going to be like that," and he's just looking at me like I'm crazy.

*EB: The top 6 strings are tuned like a guitar, right?*

RD: Yes, a regular guitar.

*EB: It's tuned down to low E on the 6th. Now the last two strings are tuned how?*

Ramo: The 7th is a low A and the 8th is a low D.

RD: This low D is a full two octaves below the regular D on the 4th string. This is a 6-octave instrument, because it has 34 frets and goes up to the high D- which is how it got the name "Ramo Hei-D Mostro." I thought this thing was like a monster - mostro means monster in Italian.

Ramo: My wife's name is Heidi and sings to the high D and above, and because this instrument is a monster,

the name is perfect! The low D is one step lower than the fourth string of the double bass, and being a six-octave instrument, the range is only one octave less



*EB: I don't know how you could finger something like that. I mean the neck has got to be a baseball bat.*

RD: No, I tried to make the neck like the spacing on a regular classical. That's what's beautiful about the whole concept of the instrument and his style of playing.

*EB: As if it was the same all the way across.*

RD: Exactly. On a regular 8-string classical guitar, the neck is huge. There's no need for that.

*EB: Now you built him a second one. What's the difference in that compared to the first one?*

RD: Just different woods and visual design, with the same RMC pickup.

Ramo: Rich built such a terrific instrument! The single pickup on each string really brings out the huge range and every nuance of this guitar. I can't imagine how another type of pickup would be able to reproduce this true sound in both live recordings and performances. Also, I want to mention that this guitar with the RMC pickup, along with the AER amp, makes a beautiful true sound for nylon strings.

*EB: Don't tell me you're looking for a 9 or 10 string?!*

Ramo: No. The 8-string has the range and versatility all here.

*EB: Who's making the strings?*

Ramo: La Bella. The 7th string is .070 gauge, and the 8th is a .080 gauge.

RD: Custom-made. We went up there one day and they put the red carpet out for us. I couldn't believe how they treated us. They kept coming up to us, "Try this one and that one." Richard Cocco and Bob Archigian would go to their shop and have a craftsman make up a whole batch for us. It was just wonderful how they were trying to help us. The strings are perfect.

*EB: Do you do many 7-string instruments?*

RD: Some.

*EB: Most classicals?*



Rich filing a guitar at his shop.

*EB: Do you see any differences that you're doing now, or what people are asking for, compared to 5 years ago?*

RD: As far as classical?

*EB: No, jazz guitars. You didn't do jazz instruments*

*years ago, right, it was strictly classical.*

RD: Yes.

*EB: Any changes at all?*

RD: Not really. Everybody just wants a nice sounding instrument.

*EB: Seems like business is good, you're backed up for more than a year. But you always keep some in the shop here for sale if people come in.*

RD: Oh yeah.

*EB: But if a guy walked in today, he'd have to wait a year basically.*

RD: Yes, for an order. Only because I have this Japanese thing going here now.

*EB: Do you sell to music stores?*

RD: Yes, one in New York City--Luthier Music Corporation on 44th street. Tony Acosta deals only with classical and flamenco Instruments. It's the only place to be if you're in the City.

*EB: Thanks, Rich; enjoyed seeing the shop and talking*



Rich DiCarlo and JIG publisher Ed Benson at Rich's shop.

**R.J. DiCarlo Guitars**  
**141 Roosevelt Avenue**  
**Massapequa Park, NY 11762**  
**516-795-3941**  
**[www.dicarloguitars.com](http://www.dicarloguitars.com)**

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