

# BAM

THE CALIFORNIA MUSIC MAGAZINE

**GUITAR  
SPECIAL**

**Waddy  
Wachtel  
Tommy  
Dunbar**

**NEW  
WAVE  
SINGLES**

**WARREN  
ZEVON'S**

**Mystery Dance  
By Michael Branton**



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**T**his issue finds an unusual occurrence in that every one of the articles in our Guitar Special in the "Axe" section is written by the same person, David Gans. David is not only a journalist who has written for **BAM** since early in our first year, but is also a professional musician and a bit of an expert in audio electronics and guitars. David's occasional absence from our pages over the last couple of years was due to his busy traveling schedule while he worked as a consultant for the BASS ticket agency, setting up computerized systems all over the U.S. and abroad.

A native Californian, David grew up in Los Angeles and San Mateo, and attended San Jose State College. He has been a songwriter and performer for ten years.

—RM

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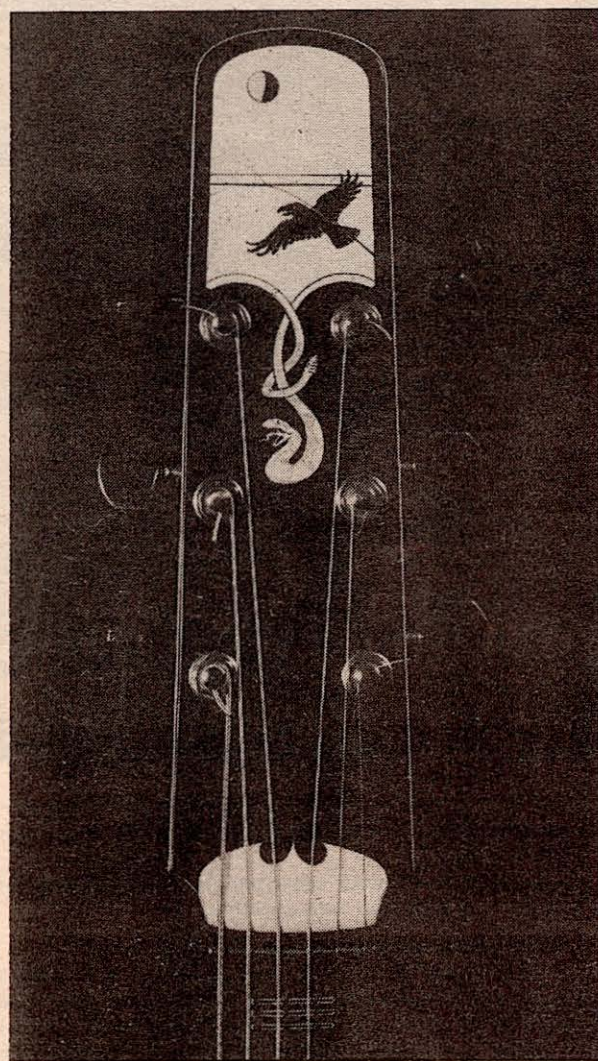
## Steve Klein: Radical Luthier?

His business card says, "Designer & Builder in Wood." The drawing shows front, side and detail views of a rather strange-looking acoustic guitar. Is he a sculptor? Parodist? Radical Luthier?

There isn't an angle from which to view Steve Klein's guitar that doesn't yield an unusual line or shape. It seems to stretch some bounds: the body is round, high-waisted and shallow; the bridge resembles a lopsided bow-tie; there is no heel to speak of; and the peghead angles back drastically from an unlikely-looking carved-ivory nut. But when those lines on paper are realized in wood and wire, it makes an extraordinarily graceful visual impression.

I've seen many a musical instrument whose eye appeal, rather than sound or playability, was its *raison d'être*. To this very serious acoustic guitarist, the Steve Klein design sounds as good and plays as well as it looks. I rarely get to hear quite how lovely my Martin D-35 sounds because I'm usually behind it when it's being played, so I'm pleasantly surprised at its rich bass tone each time I hear someone else playing it. When I first strummed the Klein guitar, I heard a surprisingly deep tone and felt a very responsive, accurate action.

It is Klein's contention that the acoustic guitar was never properly brought up to date after technology made the mass-production of metal strings possible a hundred years ago. "The craftsmen closed ranks around tradition and classical musicians never wanted to see radical design changes." Structural changes were made to deal with increased string tension, but



Peghead and rosette designed by Klein and Joni Mitchell. The eight basic symbols of the I Ching are used for fret markers and slots cut in an ebony ring around the sound hole. Rosette is ivory, etched and inlaid with gold. Peghead inlay incorporates "the road" and symbols from the teachings of Don Juan.



Steve Klein shows off a nylon six-string commissioned by Jon Mark. The sixteen-fret neck is unusually long for classical guitars. Klein also built a matching twelve-string version for Mark.

the classical form of the acoustic guitar has for the most part been retained. Steve Klein's departures from tradition are not gratuitous distortions—they represent fourteen years of research and experimentation with structures and materials. "With modern musicians," he adds, "the unique design is an attractive point, and I do take advantage of the curiosity it generates."

☆ ☆ ☆

When Michelangelo stared into his chunk of marble, paced around it and waited for a statue to make its identity known to him, he had only the rock and the muse to wrestle with. Steve Klein sees in the luthier's craft a double challenge—both esthetic and practical—because his sculpture must obey rigid rules

of acoustics. The 30-year-old Californian was neither a woodworker nor a particularly dedicated guitar player when he built his first guitar in 1966. He was taking in the eclectic plentitude of music in the Bay Area while living in Kensington and playing a store-bought steel-string. "It was drastically overbuilt," he says in retrospect. "You could hammer nails with it." When his next-door neighbor brought home a set of drums, Steve decided he had to play electric, "so I bought an amp and a pair of deArmond pickups, a piece of a Harmony neck, a fretboard and a walnut butcher block, and I built myself a guitar. It did the job okay—he beat on his drum set, I played my home-made guitar." He later sold that guitar and built another electric for himself.

Klein began to develop an interest in the wood-



# AXE

working aspects of guitarmaking and decided to build an acoustic guitar. Around the same time he met Professor Michael Kasha, a scientist from the University of Florida who had done research in acoustics and showed Steve how the guitar could be made more efficient by redesigning the bridge and bracing. With information and inspiration from Kasha, Klein read what little he could find on guitar construction and went to work experimenting with different kinds of bracing, necks and body sizes and shapes, taking into account the concepts utilized in guitars, violins and other stringed instruments. "As I worked," he says, "I found very often that the solution to one problem created a new problem."

"For example, the steel-stringed guitar puts a great amount of strain on the lamination of bridge and top. Drilling holes big enough to pass a string's ball end through cut down intolerably on the gluing surfaces available. So I use small pins instead. The 'donut' at the end of the string slips over the pin. This design eliminates the chance of a split developing between the large holes in a conventional bridge, as well as reducing the danger of string breakage at the saddle due to the sharp angle at which the string bends into the hole."

By 1973, Steve had four salable prototypes which embodied the principles he had been developing. He was doing repair work to keep the doors open. "But you can't just hide in the basement building guitars and hope people will come and find you," says Klein, so he augmented his woodshedding by showing the

instruments to as many musicians he could reach and learning from their reactions. "I made friends with doormen and crew members, showed them my hand-made guitars and just talked my way backstage any way I could. People were very helpful to me."

"With electric instruments, it's hard to get a big star's attention long enough to find an amp and an electric socket, but with an acoustic guitar, everybody will at least strum it once."

And one strum invariably leads to another. "Doc Watson [who is blind] ran his hands all over my guitar and said, 'this is the strangest thing I've ever seen.' Then he played it awhile and said, 'The intonation is right on.'"

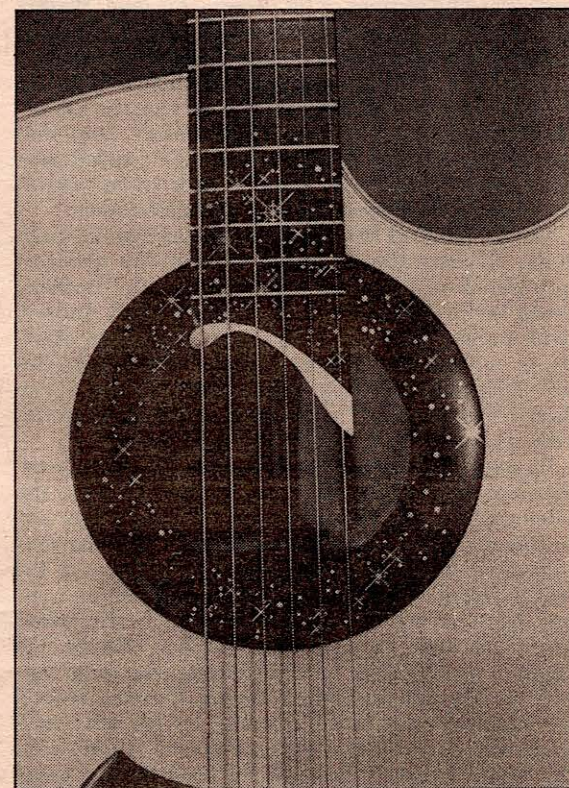
Steve collected a lot of valuable feedback from the artists who played his guitars. "People like David Lindley, J.D. Souther, Jimmy Page and Joe Walsh made comments and suggestions that helped me to know what I was doing right," he says. "I almost needed the feedback more than I needed a sale. But I would have sold one in an instant," he concedes, "though the longer I held on to each guitar, the more people played it and reacted to it."

Stephen Stills picked up a Klein 12-string one day just before his acoustic set at Berkeley, strummed it a little and, to Steve's amazement, walked out onstage and played his first two songs with it. Steve rushed out into the audience to hear his guitar for the first time through a PA in the grand scale of a theater.

While living for a time in Colorado, Klein met Joe Walsh, who was impressed but outpriced. A few years

later, Steve encountered Walsh again. Walsh, by this time an Eagle, handed Steve his Martin D12-28 as a deposit on a Klein twelve-string. When Steve delivered the twelve, Walsh ordered two more custom Klein guitars.

"I was showing my guitars to John David Souther [who played a Klein on "Sliver Blue" on his second album] at his management office," Steve recalls, "and he suddenly said, 'Has Joni [Mitchell] seen these yet?' I said, 'No, but I'd sure like an opportunity to show them to her.' J.D. said she was just down the street and called her up. Joni came in, tried the guitars, and invited me to a recording session."



This cutaway guitar was built for Dan Peek, former member of America. Constellations of Scorpio, Sagittarius, Libra, Virgo, etc. are silver inlaid in a dished ebony ring. Comet is an opal with an ivory tail.

## Structural Features of the Steve Klein Guitars

**Body**—"The roundness of the top makes the instrument a more efficient plate resonator," Klein says. Coupled with the split, asymmetrical bridge and an advanced bracing system, this makes for a more even frequency response. The result is a louder tone with a richer harmonic content.

**Bridge**—The bridge is the result of research by Professor Michael Kasha of the University of Florida. "It is designed in accordance with some of Professor Kasha's observations on the mechanical coupling of motion in stringed instruments," says Klein's catalog. "It is what he calls an 'impedance-matching' bridge," which transmits string motion to the soundboard more efficiently than a conventionally-shaped bridge.

The Kasha bridge is split between the third and fourth strings. The bass-string half is large, flat and fan-shaped, while the treble half is elongated and tapered. The entire assembly resembles a megaphone in silhouette. This design allows each half of the bridge to serve better the specific needs of the strings they support in transmitting energy to the guitar top.

**Saddle**—Klein uses a separate ivory piece to support each string, which means that intonation and string height can be set on each string while the other strings are at full tension.

**Zero fret**—This is not unique to Klein's guitars, but he says it makes open strings sound more exactly like fretted strings and facilitates bending strings on the lower frets.

**Ease of maintenance**—"The neck block holds the neck with a minimum of mass, to distribute tension to the back, leaving the face more relaxed," says Klein. "Equal neck mass behind the entire length of the fretboard helps assure a flat, easy-playing neck all the way to the highest frets. Overlapping laminations from the head-to-neck-joint create a much stronger neck than the traditional one-piece." The neck is also removable, which makes repairs and adjustments more convenient. Neck resets take half the time,

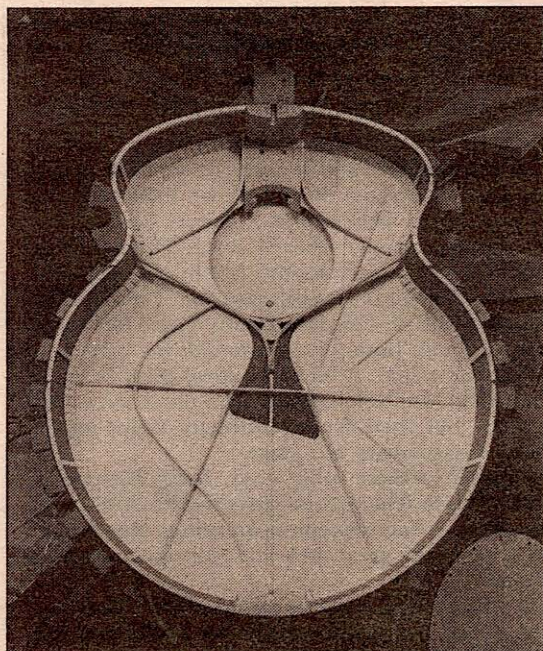


Photo of guitar built for Joni Mitchell shows unusual asymmetrical bracing pattern. Note channel where neck will be inserted. Flying braces link bridge support (dark piece) to sides of guitar.

and the metal truss rod can be adjusted with the strings in place.

**Bracing**—"The flying brace was developed for the steel-stringed guitar to transfer high string tensions in the face between the bridge and soundhole to the sides of the instrument at its waist," says Klein, "in such a way as to allow the bridge to drive the face and resonance bars with as little restriction as possible." A transverse bar directly beneath the bridge makes face warpage less likely and frees the resonance bars from support functions, making them acoustically more efficient. □

Mitchell recorded a track with the Klein guitar that she'd already cut using her Martin. They played the song back and faded between the two acoustic guitar tracks. "Her Martin sounded deep and rich," says Klein admiringly, "but my guitar was just a little more piano-like." Mitchell gave Klein a deposit that night and used the Klein track instead of the Martin one in the final mix of "Don't Interrupt the Sorrow" on *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*.

The basic guitar (prices start at \$1750) is made with a rosewood neck and walnut back and sides. Steve has also done some fine custom work, and decorations such as an ebony rosette and fretboard inlaid in silver with a partial map of the northern constellations and an ivory-and-opal comet (on a guitar commissioned by Dan Peek). Joni Mitchell designed a deliciously complex combination of carvings and inlays for her guitar. Steve built matching nylons six- and twelve-strings of Brazilian rosewood for Jon Mark and has built guitars with spruce, mahogany and even redwood tops, but the lion's share of his time and energy is spent building and improving on his basic designs.

Steve moved his shop and residence from Oakland to Sonoma a couple of years back. The region is home to a large number of independent guitar makers and small factories, with a particular emphasis on electric guitars—a field which is catching Klein's interest anew. "There is a growing number of people getting interested in making stringed instruments," he says, "and they're not tied to tradition. It's no longer frowned upon to try something radical."

Klein is in the process of increasing his production. He has an apprentice working with him and, after having standardized his designs and methods, he won't be needing to spend as much time at the drawing board as he used to. He continues designing and refining, accepting the more challenging of the commissions offered him. He doesn't expect to be doing much repair work, because he is confident that the Steve Klein guitar is made to last a good long while. □