



PHOTOGRAPHED BY PETER PHELAN





Godin 5th Avenue

Owning a desirable arch top guitar has often been just a dream for many. Are you more likely to buy one, as they have become more affordable? **By Huw Price**

Once upon a time, not so long ago, you could walk into just about any junk shop and see a whole bunch of derelict archtop acoustics hanging on the wall. For a sizeable chunk of the twentieth century 'F' hole guitars reigned supreme, and if you wanted to play rhythm in a dance band or jazz orchestra, or even a skiffle band, companies like Hofner, Framus and Grimshaw could get you up and running.

The emergence of the electric guitar and the flat top luted folk boom of the early 1960s conspired to end the era of the archtop. The percussive drive of an 'F' hole didn't really suit sensitive singer/songwriter types, and anyway their inherent loudness was rendered redundant by even the humblest Dallas Tuxedo and a Vox AC-4.

Nevertheless archtop guitars didn't entirely disappear, because jazz players have never fallen out of love with their looks and sound. As the market was so limited, some archtop builders stuck to making super-expensive models with carved solid spruce tops, and nobody moved in to fill the yawning gap at the 'affordable' end of the market – until recently.

Famous names like D'Addario and D'Aquisto were revived in Far Eastern factories, and more

affordable models, from the likes of Adam Black, Eastman and Peerless, soon followed with pressed ply tops and minimal decoration. Now Godin has joined the fun with a no-frills model called (in suitably Big Apple-evoking style), the 5th Avenue, which promises the 'soul of a 1950s archtop...with today's level of modern playability'.

It has also apparently been revoiced for the music of today with more projection and volume in the low mids than a traditional archtop.

Looking closely you'll see that the back and front are moulded from Canadian wild cherry. The edges of the 'F' holes reveal that the top is actually thin plywood with only three layers, and you can easily bend it with your fingers. The top moves very freely and the jointed back appears similarly slim because it rings like a drum skin with various deep and clear tap tones. The construction is straightforward, with parallel tone bars/braces for the top and no braces for the back. The neck, with its scarf-jointed headstock and stacked heel, is set fairly high above the body. This dictates that the compensated rosewood bridge has to be set fairly high too, and this leaves plenty of margin for adjustment. The sharper break angle between the bridge and the chrome trapeze tailpiece also ensures plenty of downward

pressure, which keeps the bridge in position and helps to transfer maximum string energy into the top.

You get cream body binding with a black pinstripe for the top and a three-ply pickguard with a tortoiseshell mother-of-toilet-seat top layer. The unbound rosewood board has 21 medium frets and pearl dot markers up to the 12th. The only gloss-finished area on the guitar is the black front of the

headstock, which has been neatly scraped back around the edges to create a faux binding effect.

The synthetic nut is a bit narrower than the fingerboard, but that just presents some bone upgrade potential, and the lightweight vintage Kluson-style tuners get a big thumbs up from me. These ones match the tailpiece. To my eyes the 'natural' finish of our example is infinitely less attractive than the optional black





**GODIN
5TH AVENUE**

Price: £385
Manufacturer: Godin
Made in: Canada
Woods Used: Canadian Wild Cherry, Silver Leaf Maple & Rosewood
Top: Canadian Wild Cherry
Back & Sides: Canadian Wild Cherry with Cream Binding
Neck: Silver Leaf Maple with contoured high-gloss black headstock, 25.84" scale
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Bridge: Adjustable Rosewood Bridge
Frets: 21 frets, normal
Nut Width & Scale Length: Tusq, 1.72" (4,6cm)
Electronics: None
Left Handers?: No
Gig Bag/Case Included: No

Contact Details

Active Music Distribution
Tel: 020 8693 5678
www.activemusic.co.uk

What we think

Pros: Tons of character, extremely versatile and a completely different sonic flavour to regular flat tops
Cons: Hard shell case is an optional extra
Overall: A great value-for-money instrument which, at this price point, fiercely defends its corner superbly well

Review results

Exceptional	★★★★★
Excellent	★★★★☆
Good	★★★☆☆
Average	★★☆☆☆
Poor	★☆☆☆☆
ACOUSTIC RATING	★★★★★



and 'cognac burst' finishes. You might justifiably disagree.

Sounds

Archtop guitars are as far removed from steel-string flat tops as Martin-derived 'X' brace designs are from Spanish-style classical guitars. The component parts, like the tops (obviously), bracing, neck joint and bridges are very different from, so naturally the operating principle is different too.

On a flat top guitar the strings pull the soundboard upwards and attempt to twist it towards the nut. This pull is resisted by the springiness of the soundboard wood and the internal 'X' braces, but you'll still often see a slight bulge or 'belly' behind the bridge. When a string is plucked, waves travel back and forth along the length of the string and these vibrations are transmitted through the saddle and the fixed bridge, setting the top into a rocking motion that pivots around the bridge itself.

With archtop guitars the string tension creates downward pressure on a floating bridge. The braced top resists this pressure (typically about 50lb) to achieve a state of balance or equilibrium. When a string is moved sideways its tension increases, which increases the pressure on the floating bridge and forces the arched top downwards. When the string is released the pressure drops and the top moves back to its equilibrium position – this process occurs thousands of times per second when you pluck a string.

The key difference is that

archtops vibrate with a piston-like motion, moving forwards and backwards rather than twisting like a flat top around a fixed bridge. This also means that archtops respond to side-to-side string movement whereas flat tops respond to energy travelling up and down the string length.

Moving from the theoretical to the practical, how does this affect the tonal quality and does Godin's 5th Avenue conform to the breed standard? Archtops usurped flat tops during the jazz era because they were more percussive, direct and cutting. Before amplification, guitars were primarily rhythm instruments, so when you had to be heard over a drum kit, double bass, piano and horn section the feathery tonal niceties of a Martin weren't of much interest. Fortunately archtop guitars were just the ticket.

I gave my right arm a quick stretch, grabbed my best thick (recycled) tortoiseshell plectrum and started comping through my limited repertoire of 'jazz' progressions. Instant gratification ensued as the 5th Avenue started to speak with a clear, direct and surprisingly deep voice.

To my surprise I even found that it started to 'warm up', just like a solid-timbered flat top. Within a short space of time I felt the 5th Avenue loosening and responding willingly to a gentler and more nuanced touch. Despite a slightly raw and clanky edge I was really starting to enjoy this guitar. Obviously I wasn't expecting heaps of harmonic complexity or dynamics, but the 5th Avenue still

sounded intriguing. Dynamically it's very fast to respond, so there is a real percussive quality, especially when you combine a strong attack with left or right-hand damping. This provides a hint of Maccaferri Bavour for single-note leads combined with impressive sustain and a thick meaty quality.

The absence of harmonic clutter also allows complex chords and tight little note clusters to remain clear and very well defined. What's more, the 5th Avenue's impressive string-to-string balance and even response all along the fretboard ensure there are no nasty surprises that put certain areas on the fretboard off-limits. So as a straight-ahead traditional archtop the 5th Avenue is more than competent.

But Godin has made the bold assertion that the 5th Avenue would not look out of place 'in the hands of artists the likes of Jeff Tweedy (Wilco), Ryan Adams or even Jack White (White Stripes). From alt-country, Delta blues, slide, jazz to rock, the 5th Avenue can really deliver'. The fact of the matter is that they're right.

Although archtops are primarily associated with jazzers, many artists have used them successfully in other musical genres. Maybelle Carter pioneered country rhythm playing on her Gibson L5 and Neil Young has frequently been photographed with a 1930s D'Angelico. More recently David Rawlings has added texture and colour to Gillian Welch's songs with a cheap 1935 Epiphone Olympic.

