

MARC SILBER'S 50-YEAR JOURNEY WITH  
AMERICAN VINTAGE INSTRUMENTS By Teja Gerken

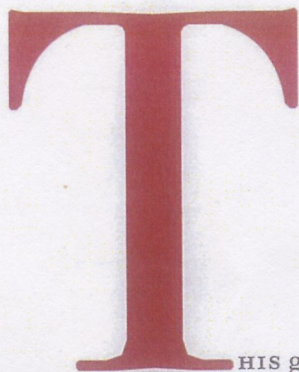


VAGGA

# GUITAR



# BONDED



THIS guy has forgotten more about guitars than most people will ever know, and he can actually play." That's how Steve Earle introduced Marc Silber at a show at San Francisco's Great American Music Hall in 2010 (documented in a YouTube clip), basically finding the words to boil down more than five decades of immersion in the stringed instrument universe. Indeed, one could pick any one of those decades and find plenty to say, as Silber's amalgam of Greenwich Village beatnik, vintage instrument historian, blues singer and globe-trotting hobo has led to a life rich in experiences.

Silber's interest in guitars started as a teenager in 1950s Michigan. Meeting guitar repair pioneer Jon Lundberg during a summer trip to Berkeley, California, sealed the deal (as did meeting luthier Eugene Clark, whom Silber considers to be his mentor), and in 1963, he opened his own store, Fretted Instruments, in the heart of New York's Greenwich Village with the help of folk-music exponent Izzy Young, who ran the Village's famed Folklore Center. Being in the right place at the right time, Fretted Instruments became a hub for the rapidly escalating folk scene, with patrons including everyone from open-mic heroes to legendary bluesmen, soon-to-be-famous folk singers and budding instrument lovers.

"Marc gave me the inspiration to do what I have

been doing for the last 45 years," says New York guitar shop owner Matt Umanov. "Marc not only had a real store dedicated to older American instruments, but a wonderfully relaxed passion for understanding them, both technically and historically. Everyone who has ever benefited from what I've done with these instruments owes Marc an enormous vote of thanks." But Silber's peripatetic nature had him move on before the '60s ran their course, first traveling in Europe and North Africa, then eventually settling in Berkeley in the early 1970s. Returning to buying and selling instruments led to a succession of shops; for many years he hosted a stringed instrument museum; and for most of the 1990s, he imported guitars from Paracho, Mexico, under the Montalvo and Marc Silber brand names.

As his gig opening for Earle demonstrated, Silber is also a capable guitarist and singer in his own right. During his Greenwich Village days, he performed with the Children of Paradise (which also included Artie and Happy Traum and Eric Kaz). Although Silber's recorded output is limited to several self-produced CDs that are available via his website, he's been a fixture on the Bay Area scene for decades, performing solo or with local luminaries such as Will Scarlet, Jody Stecher, Eric and Suzie Thompson and others. His sound is raw and honest, and in the context of today's refined fingerstyle finesse, he delivers an authenticity that harks back to players like Son House, Mississippi John Hurt and Blind Lemon Jefferson without sounding forced.

Silber's collection of more than 200 instruments is legendary, and while it includes many fine examples of well-known brands, his primary interest is in obscure builders, essentially small-shop luthier-made instruments that predate the familiar makes that appeared over the last four or five decades. Among the fascinating examples in Silber's collection is a patent-applied-for A-style mandolin built by H.W. Titus that may predate Orville Gibson's similar design, and a lap-style guitar that looks not unlike a Weissenborn, though it is labeled to have been made by Guadalupe Acosta in San Antonio, Texas, in 1905—predating Weissenborn or Knutsen by several years.

Silber's De Luccia mandocellos is another example of a great instrument made by a little-known builder.

Previous Page: Marc Silber owns several instruments built by Philip Interdonati, a relatively mysterious figure in the world of early 1900s instrument building. Interdonati's guitars and mandolins are built exceptionally well and tend to have wild designs such as this one.



Silber's inventory of second-hand instruments runs the gamut from affordable to near priceless.



ANGELO  
MANNELLO  
ca 1900  
NEW YORK  
0410-03

Washington  
Parlor  
0206-11

1920s TIERI  
Restored!  
# 0812-07

1947-51  
GIBSON L&Z  
ind.  
SSCase  
# 0113-02



I first met Silber in the mid-'90s. I'd heard about his connection to Paracho, and having spent a few months there myself, I looked him up to swap stories. Since then, I've written about his guitars, run into him at peace marches and shared the occasional gig around the Bay Area. I follow every encounter with him thinking about what a kind, positive, complex and yes, musical character he is. This interview started out in his Berkeley warehouse/workshop and continued at the French Hotel Cafe, a little slice of Bohemian vibe at the edge of the Berkeley "Gourmet Ghetto."

**Fretboard Journal:** The city of Berkeley honored you with a ceremony at City Hall by making November 19, 2013, "Marc Silber Day." What was that like?

**Marc Silber:** It was great! I made the mayor sing

along with the most horrible song I've ever written: "There's been another murder on TV, I sure am glad it wasn't me." I'm like, "Sing, Mayor," and when you watch the video, he's got the lyrics up like a choir-boy; he's hiding behind the page!

**FJ:** Did you come to the Bay Area before going to New York?

**MS:** I hitchhiked to New York one time with some college buddies, and we went to Newport. So I'd been in the Village with one guy who was from there, Al Young (poet laureate of California from 2005-2008), who now also lives here in Berkeley. I came back to Michigan, and Al had decided that he was going to Mexico. He came here first, and then he wrote me this long letter; I still have it. He said that he's going to be a writer, not a musician anymore, and in the middle of it is, "Oh, and one other thing, they never have winter here." I thought, "What if that could be true?" So I got my last paycheck and



Silber holds up the certificate signed by Mayor Tom Bates declaring November 19, 2013, "Marc Silber Day" in Berkeley.

packed up; I was 20 years old. I had an address for Al, and I found him playing in a pizzeria on Telegraph Avenue. I walked in, and he just about fell off his chair! He said, "It's unbelievable, I just sent you a letter." I said, "I got your letter, I'm here!"

**FJ:** Did you hook up with Jon Lundberg during that trip?

**MS:** Yeah. I was walking home one night, and I was looking into this storefront. I'd been looking for old instruments, and I'd only seen about 10 in my life, and there in the window were about 40! I was there the next morning, waiting for them to open. They were really nice to me right from the start. I just started soaking it up. Jim Kweskin was in there, and Mark Spoelstra, it was quite a good group of people.

**FJ:** When did you start working on instruments?

**MS:** I stayed in Berkeley for the summer and then went back to Michigan to go back to school, but when I got instruments that needed work, I'd send them to Lundberg. Then, when I had my shop in New York, I decided that I better learn how to do some of it myself. I can remember that to remove a bridge, clean it and reglue it, I used to charge three dollars!

**FJ:** I've heard a lot of things about your New York shop. How did that come about?

**MS:** My girlfriend got a job teaching in England for a year. She was from New Jersey, so she went there to prepare, and I decided to go with her, hang out, go to New York. We said goodbye and I thought, "Now I've got to get some money, so I can at least get back to Michigan." I had a car with a trunk full of instruments, so I tried to sell some, and I was surprised that nobody over there seemed to know any-





thing. I was complaining about it to Izzy [Young], and he said, "I don't know anything. If you tell me to sell it for \$100, I'll sell it on commission. What we could really use is a shop in the village that focuses on the banjo and the guitar." Then he looks up and says, "You know, I saw a guy putting a For Rent sign up in a window this morning; let's go!" He calls the guy from a phone booth, it's \$100 a month, and right above the subway stop, so he says, "Let's just open a shop."

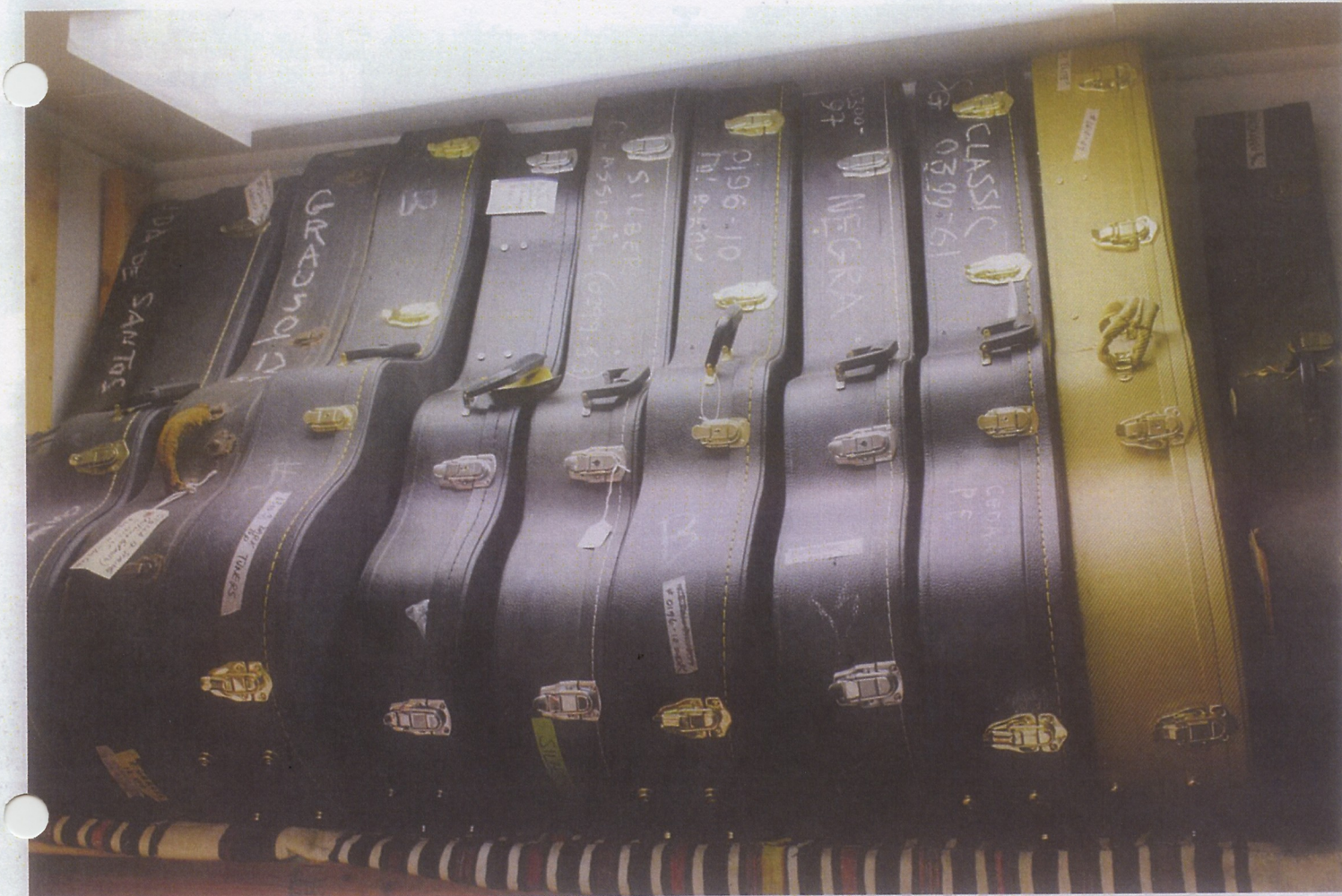
The next morning, I go over there, and I'm looking at the building, and the place is on the second floor, and I'm going, "What am I doing?" And here comes one of the few people I knew in New York, a guy named Walter, and he was with two beautiful girls, and they come walking down 6th Avenue, and he goes, "What are you doing?" I say, "I'm looking at that building. Me and Izzy sort of rented it, and I'm thinking of opening an instrument shop." And one of

these girls says, "It's about time we had our own god-damned shop, we have to go all the way uptown. We really need that here!" It was Maria D'Amato, now we call her Muldaur. I said OK, and we fixed the place up.

**FJ:** And you immediately got hooked in to the Greenwich Village music scene?

**MS:** It sounds like a fairy tale, but it was just a success from the start. All those people in the Village—Dylan had one record and Dave Van Ronk had a few. But soon enough, I was friends with everyone. I'm still friends with many of them, and some of them are the best people I've met.

We opened at the end of November '63. We got it all fixed up, except the floor needed painting. One day, this Cadillac hearse or ambulance showed up, with a plastic bubble on top that people could look out of, and a bunch of kids piled out, saying, "Izzy told us that you're going to start an instrument shop. If we paint your floor, can we stay for the night?"



It was Arlo [Guthrie] and all those kids from Alice's Restaurant! When I came back the next morning, the whole floor was painted, except for the area where they'd slept! That was November 22, 1963. I went to the hardware store for more paint, and everyone was acting really weird, there were limos at the Catholic church, people crying and whatever, and then I found out that the president had been assassinated. I went, "I can't really open the shop now!" So I finished painting it, and a day or two later, I was in there at night, putting the instruments away. It was on the second floor, so you had to ring to get inside the building, and suddenly there's someone knocking. I opened the door and it was David Grisman, age 18, and a buddy. I might have had 15 instruments, and then Izzy had instruments that he'd had on consignment. I knew all those people right from the start. I opened my store at noon the next day. The bell rang, and it was Bob Dylan and Joan Baez,

asking for thumbpicks. I made my first quarter and I said, "I guess I'm in the right place at the right time!"

**FJ:** You sold Dylan the Gibson Nick Lucas that he played in the early '60s, right?

**MS:** Yeah, it was my sister Julie's; he just had to have it. It was the best-playing guitar; we redid it at Lundberg's. It had had a tailpiece bridge setup, but we reset the neck and put a glued bridge on it. And very uncharacteristically, it had that Lloyd Loar sunburst, that greenish-brown, funny look, and at Lundberg's shop, somebody spilled something on the finish and ruined it, so it got refinished natural. It was just the best-playing guitar in the world... and good sounding.

**FJ:** You had it in your shop?

**MS:** Julie worked with me and it would be in there.

**FJ:** Dylan would come to hang out?

**MS:** Yeah, he'd come by on Saturday mornings. We'd open at noon, but Artie Traum would come in

“It’s like we now say about the Reverend Davis and these people, we knew they were special, but we didn’t realize how unique they really were.”

there at nine in the morning and the three of us would swap songs. It didn’t last long, because Dylan was getting so famous that the kids would start milling about; it was meteoric, the whole thing. He would play the different guitars, and there wouldn’t be anybody in there. I told Julie, “We’ve got to sell your guitar to this guy, because he’s going to be a star, and he’ll tell all the other people. We’ll just buy you the best guitar possible with the money.” I was out here the year after, and a guy had a Martin New Yorker, 1-34, and I paid by far the most I’d ever paid for it. It is a perfect guitar; we still have it.

**FJ: How about the Guild you sold to Mississippi John Hurt?**

**MS:** He was one of the sweetest people ever. It was immediately good vibes with that guy! He’d been at the Newport Folk Festival, and as part of his payment, he got carte blanche to buy a guitar. He would hang out in New York, and so he came in. I remember I had a converted Martin 00-40, we were wild about it, a bunch of old stuff, and we said, “Play them all, they said you can have anything in here and they’ll pay for it.” So he pulled out a Guild F-30 sunburst, it was like a Martin 000 attempt, nice, OK, pretty good, but you know... He decided on that one, and I said, “Why do you like it?” He said, “Because it’s two colors at once!” Of course it was also way easier to play than what he’d showed up with. We just thought, “Why not get a Martin 000-18?”

**FJ: How long did the shop last?**

**MS:** I stayed there until the spring of ’68. It was getting so big, and companies like Fender and Shure wanted to buy the building and use the other floors of the building and make it a kind of a music center. I went, “Uh, Fender electric guitars wants to be here in the Village? This is getting too weird. I want to go and travel.” So I gave my stuff to Izzy and Matt Umanov—he’d opened his shop—and I quit.

**FJ: What did you do in the period between your New York store and starting your museum and shop in Berkeley?**

**MS:** I suddenly had a new French-Canadian girlfriend and I figured I’d leave New York and go traveling; we took her brother along as well. We wound up in Tangiers, and I said, “We don’t have enough money to keep doing this; I’ve got to get them back to Quebec somehow.” Tangiers has a big port, but there aren’t too many passenger ships. Suddenly there was a freighter landing there that was going to Montreal, so I spent all the money we had to get them both on the boat. I called their parents and said, “We’re not breaking up, but they’re coming home.”

**FJ: How did you get back?**

**MS:** I didn’t exactly get back... A guy told me about Marrakech, so I went down there. One day I went to the American Express office to get my mail, and there was a postcard from my sister. It said, “You’ve got to come back, Talbot [Steve Richmond Talbot] landed a big contract, you’re the bass player. Eighty-thousand-dollar budget; you must get back!” So I backtracked, and it took me a long time to get out here again. I left New York the weekend of Woodstock, a guy offered me a free ride to Denver and I took it. I wound up back here, and I was getting paid a lot of money on this record thing, and I got to play bass, which I’d always wanted to do. We had a great time, but nothing happened with his record.

**FJ: So you eventually opened a shop in Berkeley?**

**MS:** Yeah, my second shop was called Museum Music, and then I moved up to the Berkeley Musical Instrument Exchange, and now here to the warehouse. I used to always sell, by bulletin board, word-of-mouth, flea markets...

**FJ: How did you end up having guitars built in Paracho?**

**MS:** I always wanted to go there, and eventually I went there with my friend George Katechis [of the Berkeley Musical Instrument Exchange] in the late '80s. We looked at hundreds of crappy, bad frets, bad everything guitars, but eventually we found a really good maker, Victor Hernandez, and his sons. We started buying stuff from him, and then we somehow got connected to the Huipe family, and they were making higher-grade guitars. I said, "What if we designed a guitar and brought you the wood?" I did all that part of it, and George was fluent in Spanish, and probably better at business than me; we worked with three different families.

**FJ:** You've obviously been around a lot of great vintage guitars, but the last few times that I've seen you play, you had either a recent Epiphone Masterbilt or a Seagull. How come you're using those modest instruments?

**MS:** I keep the Seagull at my place in Mexico now. I play the Epiphone (an AJ 500RC 12-fret) if I'm just taking one guitar to the gig; I can play all my stuff on it. I have my 000-45, which I've had since '61, and I never play it, even though it's an astoundingly good guitar. But where am I going to play it, other than in a recording situation? It's too valuable, and I also think that the pure acoustic thing is unappreciated. Really, I've come so far that I think singing is the whole thing, and accompaniment is really my main interest.

When I'm playing the guitars that I think sound really good, they're restored Oscar Schmidts. Those things, with the bridge in the right place, you're not getting that sound from an X-braced guitar! I made two wrecked ones into one—the neck of one on the body of the other. The most recent one I've got is the most surprising one ever. I'm at a yard sale and I open this gig-bag, and there's a slotted-peghead with a truss rod. And I pull it out, and it's a parlor guitar with a '60s Stella neck on it. Size 1 body, painted rosewood with spruce. Fabulous sounding; super loud! And what is it but a catalog parlor guitar. Of all the things I have, the second string on there is the best steel-string sound I've ever heard. You do not hear any string, you hit it, and it's like you're playing a marimba or something. The bridge was in the wrong spot, so I put a tailpiece on it and just slid the bridge in the right spot. And I don't like tailpieces on flattops, but guess what? It just works.

**FJ:** Can you encapsulate some of your thoughts about vintage guitars?

**MS:** I'm a big student of history; I love to read about old stuff. I realized that these histories are sponsored by the universities, the government, the military...so there is a dominant position in them.

And in our field, steel-string guitar, it's been dominated by a worthy character named C.F. Martin. But it's really not the whole story. And the minute you find another guitar that satisfies you in that field, it's not the whole story, either. I remember as far back as my New York days, getting an Oscar Schmidt 12-fret 000 with some weird name on it, playing it and thinking, "You know, this thing sounds good. It's just a piece of funny junk, but it sounds good; how could that be?"

**FJ:** Accordingly, you're into collecting American non-factory made vintage instruments.

**MS:** They've been overlooked! I call them "store-front immigrants." Most people aren't as interested in it as I am. I got a Mario Martello 12-string from '65 that is so well done. It's a cutaway, Brazilian rosewood, abalone inlay and it doesn't need anything! It's from '65 and it has perfect action! Who was he making this for? Who could have paid for this? This is not a cheap guitar! I have several of Philip Interdonati's guitars, and every time I look at his stuff, I think to myself, "This guy is nuts!" He was way ahead of the game, and ironically, he was living on Bleeker Street, like three blocks from Matt Umanov's shop!

I also have a few De Luccia instruments from the 1920s, of which my mandocello might be the best. They were a violin-making family in Philadelphia—the Larson Brothers. For a long time, it was like, "Who were they?" and now people know. There was a pretty interesting guy who I actually met, I think his name was Mango, and he was on the east side of Manhattan, and I used to walk by his shop. He also fixed shoes or purses or something. I was interested, but I didn't really stop in.

It's like we now say about the Reverend Davis and these people, we knew they were special, but we didn't realize how unique they really were. **FJ**