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Robert Shaw. *Great Guitars.* [Southport, CT]: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1997. 119 pp.: 77 color and 24 black-and-white photographs. ISBN: 0-88363-397-3. \$35.00.

Paul William Schmidt. *Acquired of the Angels: The Lives and Works of Master Guitar Makers John D'Angelico and James L. D'Aquisto.* Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1991. vi, 103 pp.: 95 black-and-white photographs. ISBN: 0-8018-2346-2. \$29.50.

Within the last generation, guitars—especially those mass-produced in the United States during the guitar's so-called "golden age" from the 1920s through the 1960s—have become an important and attractive field of scholarly and collecting interest. This most ubiquitous of American instruments has gained the status of art object, with some particular instruments and models taking on an iconic, almost sacred, aura for working musicians, scholars, collectors, buffs, and even the casually interested. With the rise of rock and roll to international acceptance, the affluence of the baby-boom generation that really embraced the electric guitar, and the world-wide popularity of American popular musical styles—country, blues, gospel, bluegrass, folk, rhythm 'n' blues—all of which depended upon the guitar for mass appeal and acceptance, a sizable world of dealers, musicians, fans, investors, and connoisseurs has grown up to excavate the mostly hidden history of this instrument. One result has been a plethora of magazines and lavishly illustrated volumes recounting the histories of famous or significant guitars, their makers and users, and the guitar's impact on American music. Individual company histories, studies of important guitarists and their instruments, photo books of valuable and rare guitars comprise much of the book-length studies of guitars, with varied results. Now Robert Shaw offers an well-illustrated tour through guitar history. Featuring the biographies of about sixty influential and significant instruments, Shaw's volume provides a nice introduction to the field of "great guitars." While he never fully clarifies his opaque criteria for greatness, the author presents an informative survey of different models, musical styles, players, and forces behind the rise of the guitar to international prominence.

An introductory essay chronicles the evolution of the guitar's design and repertoire from Renaissance-era Europe to the present, and highlights the history of the American guitar through a survey of its makers and famous players. Shaw stresses that the guitar's significance came

from its mass appeal and its association with a series of folk-based musical styles that each became influential in American popular music. He also reveals that the guitar's roots and history are decidedly multicultural: many different European national traditions shaped the guitar's evolution; in America it drew from African-Americans, Latinos, Hawaiians, and rural and urban ethnic whites. The body of the book consists of photographs and descriptions of a succession of important instruments, mostly held in private hands. The descriptions offer histories of individual instruments, companies, artists, and performing styles. Well-known instruments such as the Gibson company's Super 400, L-5, and Les Paul Standard models, and the Fender company's Broadcaster (later called Telecaster) and Precision bass are featured. Alongside these instruments are less celebrated but nonetheless innovative models made by such companies as the Chicago-based Larson Brothers, and Californians Herman Weissenborn and Semie Moseley.

While Shaw includes some information about the types of wood used, manufacturing techniques, and features of most instruments, he does not consistently offer dimensions, materials, or other technical information to show exactly how these instruments were made. Minor flaws dog the book. Shaw misspells the name of Leon McAuliffe, the great steel guitarist with Bob Wills' Texas Playboys, and he refers to the Carter Family as "chart-topping," ignoring the fact that during the heyday of these pioneering country artists there were no charts for recordings or performers. His criteria for selecting guitars often have to be inferred. Artistry and workmanship seem the primary reasons for inclusion in Shaw's book, while he ignores some very popular instruments presumably because they are undistinguished either as art objects or examples of superior craft. With only one or two exceptions Shaw excludes inexpensive guitars; for those he does include he emphasizes the instruments' aesthetic achievements rather than their accessibility. Some obvious omissions are troubling: he does not include Les Paul's famous "Log," the guitar on which he experimented with solid-body design, or the Adolph Rickenbacker "Frying Pan," generally regarded as the first commercially successful electric guitar. Shaw does feature a number of guitars made by currently-active Canadian and U.S.-based luthiers and manufacturers, allowing him to project a sense that this field is still growing in interest and expertise, in that some of the greatest guitar makers ever are still working today.

Paul William Schmidt's study, *Acquired of the Angels*, covers John D'Angelico (1905–64) and his successor, James D'Aquisto (1935–95), who were by virtually all testimony two of the very greatest luthiers. Schmidt

presents an affectionate look at these men whose careers spanned the guitar's golden age. They both specialized in the carved archtop acoustic guitar, and they made their instruments almost entirely by hand, customized for individual buyers. They also made standardized models (which they often varied) and did repair work on other makes as well as their own. D'Angelico apprenticed as a violin maker; his career accompanied the transition of the jazz guitar from big band to bebop. Noted for their beauty, tonal balance, and precision, his instruments have always been regarded among musicians as the finest examples of the craft of handmade guitars. D'Aquisto was his apprentice and almost single-handedly kept alive the archaic craft of handmade jazz instruments in the rock-and-roll era. D'Aquisto lived to see a revival of archtop luthiery, along with the elevation of D'Angelico's and his guitars from a cult status among established musicians to objects of astounding values, as noteworthy now for the extreme sums they command as for their quality. Schmidt does a fine job uncovering what little there was to know about D'Angelico (much of it from D'Aquisto) and placing his work in the context of commercial guitar making. He provides a good study of D'Aquisto's overall career, including his struggles getting established and his many innovations and refinements of archtop design. Unfortunately, Schmidt refers to his two subjects as geniuses without providing much information as to exactly why their instruments are so impressive. He provides many photos of the men at work, but without a detailed understanding of what they were doing, their artistry remains in the realm of mystery—which evidently suits the author, whose veneration at times blinds him to larger questions. By including information from the two luthiers' ledgers, however, Schmidt gives us a sense of their work and their contribution to guitar-making.

Handmade guitars could never have an impact upon American music to match the sheer proliferation of mass-manufactured models, yet these two books remind us that American guitars, whether handmade or factory-built, have been at the heart of musical revolutions around the globe.

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[An updated and expanded second edition of Schmidt's Acquired of the Angels has been announced by Scarecrow Press (now located in Lanham, Maryland) for publication in November 1998; ISBN 1-57886-002-4, price \$45.00.

—Ed.]