

# Introduction

After three years of looking, I found the guitar in a small vintage instrument shop on Hertle Avenue in Buffalo, New York—the city where it had been made over sixty years before. It was listed on the Internet and, after a call, I drove from Chicago to get it.

Even for Buffalo, the day was unseasonably cold for early June, more like the western New York Octobers I remembered growing up: windy, with rows of crenulated clouds, slate gray and bruised purple in their deeper recesses, rolling east from Lake Erie.

If the past lingers anywhere it is in places like the old frame house on a worn commercial avenue—with a rectangular storefront probably added in the late forties—where Scott Freilich keeps his vintage instrument business. A sign in the window led me to a side door, where Freilich appeared; the visit was by appointment and I was his only customer. He led the way up two flights of creaking backstairs to the attic.

A fraction of daylight slanted through small windows in the eaves and an overhead bulb glowed enough to push the larger shadows under the eaves of a ceiling which sloped steeply along the roof line. At least a dozen old guitar cases lay handles up, like luggage in a forgotten lost and found, with a few others in stacks of two or three. Freilich, a husky man in his late fifties, in jeans and plaid shirt, sorted among several, looking at their tags, and drew out a battered black case with corroded brass locks and a handle made from several loops of strong white cord. A light smell of mildew drifted into the air.

The guitar, Freilich explained, was part of a consignment from the estate of a local collector—sadly, a personal friend—

who'd recently died. He raised up a big, warm-toned sunburst archtop, with an elegantly inlaid mother-of-pearl headstock and an elaborate, elongated hourglass figure under the manufacturer's name, GUGINO, rendered in bold pearl letters with a flourished underline.

Its neck, back, and sides were densely grained maple, which had an onyx glow; the spruce top, balanced with two *f*-shaped sound holes, bulged slightly, a straw-toned center—the so-called sunburst—merging to brown edges. Its neck, fashioned from three lengths of wood fit seamlessly together, felt solid as an ax handle. The cream-colored plastoid binding sealing the fret board to the neck had shrunk slightly over decades, raising slight bumps at each metal fret and giving it, as I ran my left hand down its length, the feeling of vertebra.

Its strings were shiny, but dead, old without ever being played. They were heavy, too, thicker than what my fingertips were used to, and didn't sound like much when I plucked them. Freilich handed me a hard pick. When it hit the strings, the guitar sounded like it had been switched on.

The truth of the matter is that I had no real business wanting such an elegant, vintage instrument. By then I'd been playing guitar only about four years, and owned two very nice flat-top guitars, a jumbo Gibson and a dreadnought Guild, both of which rang like bells and were rather better than my skills justified. No, I wanted the Gugino since the night I found out, over dinner with my late father's older brother, that it had been made by their maternal uncle, my great-uncle, Carmelo Gugino—who died a decade before I was born—who once built stringed instruments, mainly mandolins and guitars, in his very active factory/workshop.

This was news to me, delivered only after I'd mentioned to my uncle that I was learning how to play guitar. It turned out that music ran a bit in the family.

I knew little of Uncle Carmelo; Dad occasionally mentioned him with something like an embarrassed pride. "He swore he'd make a million dollars, and he did!" he told me once. "And he spent every dime." Carmelo was seventeen years older than my

grandmother, so as to be of nearly a different generation, and I came to fill in his outline—who he was and how he came to manufacture high-end guitars—by looking in old newspaper files and talking to distant cousins, several in their nineties.

The guitar in Freilich's shop dated from 1945, the year before Carmelo died, at seventy-seven. With one significant difference, it was a twin to the Gibson model L5, one of the most advanced and desirable acoustic guitars ever made. The L5 was the largest and, for its size, lightest model available in its time, broader and thinner than the standard flat-top—designed before there were amplifiers to be loud enough to play in dance bands. From the 1930s through the '50s, luthiers like Carmelo, and the New York City master John D'Angelico, produced archtops exquisitely refined from the Gibson model.

Born in 1868 into a stubbornly feudal Sicilian society, Carmelo came to America at twenty with his younger brother Natale. He thrived in several businesses—construction, real estate, banking—before losing nearly everything in the Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed. It was then, at sixty-five, that Carmelo started his guitar company, driven by a vision (he patented a unique design in 1935) and probably something like love.

Though Carmelo might have seen it differently, I think he invested everything he felt about America in his guitars. The archtop was the most modern stringed instrument imaginable at the time, embraced by jazz musicians and recording artists. It was beautiful, loud, and it did not look back.

Sturdy as they may feel, acoustic guitars are essentially fragile things: thin shells of stressed wood held together by snug joints and a little glue, braced only enough to endure the colossal implosive tug of their strings, to vibrate harmonically under the implicit promise of coming apart. Eventually they do. Guitars tend to have a human lifespan. Though they gain riches with age, very few survive to reach ninety.

Which is why, I think, they tend to capture our imaginations more than, say, trumpets and clarinets, why they are better companions than pianos. A certain sympathetic magic exists

in even the cheapest guitar. A lot of diverse ideas and fugitive emotions can rest in their long necks and hourglass shapes.

Carmelo, apparently with the help of a couple assistants, turned out an estimated three hundred archtops in a little over ten years, along with an unknown number of flat-back mandolins—another Gibson company innovation—and ornate mandocellos, as well as a steady stream of stringed experiments. Freilich, after I mentioned the family connection, said he'd seen a lot of Carmelo's work over the years. "He tried a lot of different designs," he said, not all successful. "Some of them sound like they were made out of cardboard."

My archtop was not one. Back in Chicago, with a new set of strings, the sixty-year-old Gugino sounded as loud as a train, twangy, and bluesy as hell.

In searching out Uncle Carmelo's life and work, wider aspects quickly intruded: questions regarding Buffalo and western New York. If Sicilians were part of the third wave of immigrants there, what about the first two, and, then, the original inhabitants whom those people displaced? Soon enough I had to account for the transits of these associated cultures—what was lost, what was passed along in the process—nothing less than the forming of America: broadly speaking, those matters having to do with the guitar and the New World.

This was because it became pretty clear early on that though the modern acoustic guitar had its roots, like Uncle Carmelo—like me—in an ancient Mediterranean culture, it was as much an American invention as jazz or the ice cream cone. The small, flat-backed, hollow-shelled four-paired stringed instrument carried on the first Atlantic voyages by Spanish and Italian sailors—a polite, courtly thing meant to be plucked for love ballads—was shortly thereafter transmogrified into something big and loud, with five single strings, meant to be thrashed in rhythms to accompany the violent new dances which also came back with the ships from the New World.

Gradually the outlines of a kind of fugitive history presented itself, something outside the lines of a standard account, one in which songs and family memories could weigh as much as old newspaper stories and the conflicting reports of books. Something unique appeared among Americans some time ago; it has not gone away, and might still be found, I submit, anywhere you care to search. The following relates what I eventually discovered, in Buffalo and elsewhere, among my folk and many others.