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The Lowdown on
Baritone Guitars

11 Pages of
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Flatpicking Fave
Patty Larkin's
"The Cranes"
Tommy Emmanuel's
"Mombasa"

Acoustic Longnecks

The lowdown on baritone guitars

By Teja Gerken



A bevy of baritones (from left): MusicYo's Avante AV-2, David Berkowitz baritone, Ovation LongNeck DS778, Joe Veillette MK-IV nylon-string, and Alvarez-Yairi YB1.

Dropping a guitar's tuning below standard is becoming increasingly common in many musical styles. Scores of electric players lower their pitch by a half step to facilitate string bending or playing in the flat keys favored by horn players, and many singer-songwriters and solo fingerstyle guitarists use alternate tunings that drop strings by a step or more. However, lowering a string more than a step or two often results in poor intonation, buzzing, and a floppy feel. The scale length on most guitars (usually between 24¾ and 25½ inches) is designed for standard tuning, and according to luthier Rick Turner, once a string is tuned below its intended pitch, it becomes inharmonic, resulting in the effects described above by compromising the flexibility of the string in relation to pitch.

The logical solution is to increase the instrument's scale length. European classical guitar makers have long offered long-necked versions of their nylon-string instruments. With scale lengths of 70–75 cm. (27½–29½ inches), these guitars are designed to hold down the low end in classical ensembles. Aria (www.ariausa.com), Spain's Esteve Guitars (www.fernandezmusic.com), and Germany's Hopf Guitars (www.hopf guitars.com) are among the makers who offer this type of instrument.

In the steel-string world, certain Stella 12-strings built in the 1920s (such as the one played by Leadbelly) featured a longer-than-standard scale length of 26.4-inches, but no one seems to have made any early six-string counterparts.

The first modern six-string basses were offered by Danelectro and Fender in the late '50s and early '60s. With a scale length of 30 inches, these instruments were intended to be tuned E to E, an octave below standard guitar tuning. Designed so that guitarists could play bass without relearning the fingerboard, the instruments' twangy bass sound eventually became known as "tic-tac" bass, and it is found on many recordings of the time.

It is unclear when guitarists began to restring six-string basses with lighter

strings to bring them closer to the guitar's range. But this was the reason luthier Joe Veillette built his first long-scale six-string during the period of his partnership with Harvey Citron in the late '70s. "The first piece was a custom instrument for John Sebastian," Veillette says. "He was touring and doing solo gigs, but he didn't want to play an acoustic. He was using a Fender Bass VI. He and a few other people at the time were using them as baritone guitars by stringing them with lighter strings." Veillette's initial baritones were solid-body electrics. Rick Turner experimented with baritone acoustics during the mid-'80s by converting Martin and Gibson dreadnoughts and jumbos to baritones. Using a new rebraced top with the bridge moved back and a fingerboard with a longer scale, Turner's instruments quickly became popular with Los Angeles session players.

Many acoustic players were introduced to this kind of instrument during the '90s when Martin Simpson began playing a Ralph Bown baritone. Preston Reed and Ani DiFranco also began using acoustics with longer necks, awakening an increased interest in the low-toned breed.

Baritone Builders

Although they're not hanging in every guitar shop, a surprising number of baritone guitars are available. The most widely distributed baritones are made by Alvarez-Yairi (www.alvarezgr.com) and Ovation (www.ovationguitars.com). The

Alvarez YB1 (\$1,999) is based on a jumbo body but features a 27½-inch scale. Ovation began making its LongNeck model with a 28⅓-inch scale in 1994. Featuring Ovation's usual synthetic bowl back, the LongNeck is currently available as the DS778 (\$1,899) in the company's U.S.-made Elite line, and for a while, the company also made a less expensive imported version, the DCS247S. The company found that it didn't need to alter its multisoundhole bracing pattern for the longer scale, and Ovation's Rick Hall points out that "the bridge ends up where it would be on a [regular] 12-fret guitar, in the middle of the lower bout," which is often called the "sweet spot" of a guitar's top.

Gibson's MusicYo! online division (www.musicyo.com) offers an affordable Korean-made instrument, the Avante Baritone, which was originally designed by Joe Veillette and Michael Tobias and imported by Alvarez during the '90s. In its latest incarnation, the Avante features a solid spruce top and a 27¼-inch scale and is available in acoustic (AV-2, \$449.99) and acoustic-electric (AV-2E, \$519.99) versions.

Froggy Bottom (www.froggybottomguitars.com), Goodall (www.goodallguitars.com), and Santa Cruz (www.santacruzguitar.com) are among the small to medium-sized manufacturers offering baritone guitars as part of their standard lines. Froggy Bottom's Model B Baritone (\$4,300) and Santa Cruz' Bob Brozman signature model (\$4,310) both feature 27-inch scales and are based on 12-fret body designs. Goodall's Baritone (starting at \$4,195) has a 28-inch scale and comes in either a slope-shouldered dreadnought or jumbo body size. If you'd like to try a baritone guitar made from space-age materials, Composite Acoustic's AT-6 (\$1,699, www.caguitars.com) is worth checking out. The carbon-fiber guitar features a 28-inch scale as well as a radical design with two soundholes in the upper bout and a trapeze tailpiece.

Baritone pioneers Rick Turner (www.renaissanceguitars.com) and Joe Veillette (www.veilletteguitars.com) are both focusing their attention on acoustic-electric baritones. Featuring a semi-hollow design and a proprietary pickup system, Turner's Renaissance line includes six- (starting at \$1,880) and 12-string (starting at \$2,235) baritone versions (see *Gearbox*, April 2002, for a review of the 12-string). Turner feels that players who are switching from a standard guitar will feel right at home with his baritones' 27-inch scale.

Veillette also uses a semi-hollow body for his acoustic-electric baritones, which include Alvarez' System 500 preamps and saddle pickups and are available in six-, 12-,

and nylon-string versions. Veillette's models (starting at \$2,000) are designed for players in a loud rock band, and the baritone's 27⅔-inch scale keeps the strings from becoming floppy.

Many individual luthiers are able to build custom baritones for those who aren't satisfied with off-the-shelf offerings. Californians Roy McAlister (www.mcalisterglass.com) and Lance McCollum (www.mccollumguitars.com); Canadians Linda Manzer (www.manzer.com), William "Grit" Laskin (www.williamlaskin.com), and Marc Beneteau (members.rogers.com/beneteauguitars); and Washington D.C.-based luthier David Berkowitz (www.berkowitzguitars.com) are among those who often venture into the lower register. Manzer has built both steel- and nylon-string baritones, and jazz guitarist Pat Metheny uses one of her creations onstage and in the studio.

Berkowitz has done more research on the acoustic baritone than most other luthiers. "I decided early on in the design process that a baritone is a different animal," he says. "It's not a bass, and it's not a guitar." Accordingly, Berkowitz has invested considerable efforts in the R&D of his instruments. Impressed with the bass response of Breedlove guitars, he decided to use the JLD bridge truss system, which transfers tension from the top to the instrument's sides. "What's nice about the bridge truss is that it takes away some of the attack transient, making it more bass-like," he explains. His first baritone was commissioned by John Jennings, and because Jennings was used to an electric Jerry Jones baritone (which is based on the Danelectro design), Berkowitz chose a long 30-inch scale. He has also built baritones with a 28.59-inch scale.

Berkowitz has used both spruce and cedar for the tops, and he has strong opinions about the wood used for the baritone's back and sides. "A lot of people use rosewood, but what a good bass needs is good treble for separation," he says. "Rosewood has a tendency to reinforce the low end, and I already get plenty of low end from the strings." His first baritone was made with koa back and sides, and he has also used walnut, both of which he feels offer the clarity necessary for the instruments' extended range. Manzer feels that a combination of koa and spruce work well. "This is a great combo to bring out the warmth of the bass notes and the clarity of the top end of each note," she says.

For a truly different experience, National Reso-Phonic's baritone version of the metal-bodied tricone (\$3,360, www.nationalguitars.com) is certain to make an

impact. In a similarly outlandish vein, French luthier Maurice DuPont (www.acoustic-guitars.com) has made baritone versions of his Selmer-style instruments.

Bari Pickers

Although many players are drawn to the baritone's sound once they get a chance to try one, few have made it their primary instrument. Fingerstylist Preston Reed is a rare exception; he has been touring and recording with his custom Ovation LongNeck for years. "The tonal richness and added sustain encourage the creation of compositions that would not happen on a normal guitar," he explains. "For example, when I play 'First Summer without You,' everyone swears they hear a stand-up bass behind it. I would not have written a tune like that without the lush, long-resonating bass strings."

Celtic guitarist Tony McManus has used a baritone made by British luthier Bill Kelday (pages.zoom.co.uk/kelday) on his own recordings and for occasional session work, such as on Kate Rusby's *Hourglass*.

Fingerstyle pioneer Alex de Grassi plays a baritone made by Lance McCollum. Although he hasn't used the guitar a lot in public (so far, it's been reserved for shows close to his northern California home and a few overdubs on his 2000 release *Tatamonk*), he says that he enjoys playing the instrument immensely. "I like to play slower stuff on it," he says, which he demonstrated with a version of the jazz classic "Goodbye, Pork Pie Hat" at a recent concert. De Grassi says the guitar's incredible sustain sometimes requires changes to his arrangements. "Pieces that I'd play on a standard guitar can be trimmed to use smaller chords," he explains.

Baritone fever goes beyond the fingerstyle crowd. Singer-songwriter Ani DiFranco is perhaps the strongest proponent of acoustic baritones. She owns instruments by Alvarez, Berkowitz, and Veillette. Turner's baritones have shown up in the capable hands of Lindsey Buckingham and Colin Hay (*Men at Work*), and Veillette counts Steve Miller and Eddie Van Halen among his clients.

As McManus and de Grassi have hinted, the studio is an ideal place to use a baritone acoustic. Alvarez' Paul Meisenzahl says that Alvarez "sells a consistent number of YB1s each year in recording centers such as Nashville, Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago. The baritone is very useful for creating multiple layers of guitars on recordings." Rick Hall concurs and says that he's heard of players who have been hired specifically because they provide an

acoustic baritone sound. Nashville session ace Michael Spriggs is cited by both Meisenzahl and Hall as a player who has benefited from his use of long-scaled acoustics in that city's competitive recording market.

According to Esteve's Ron Fernandez, classical bass guitars are gaining in popularity. "These instruments are used in guitar orchestras, as part of classical guitar quartets, jazz groups, American folk groups, and church music groups," he says. "They have also become popular among *fado* musicians in Portugal. Essentially, they are used where a string bass or electric bass would be used."

Low Tunings

As with any new and obscure instrument, there is little consensus as to how a baritone guitar should be tuned or what gauge strings should be used. Ovation and Goodall recommend standard medium-gauge sets (.013-.056) tuned down a whole step from standard guitar tuning to D G C F A D. The benefit of this tuning is that by placing a capo at the second fret you can quickly revert to standard tuning. But many players use heavier strings and lower tunings. Berkowitz tunes his 30-inch scale instrument from A to A, using a custom set of strings gauged .018-.080. If there is any standard, it is probably found between these extremes, with many players who use standard-tuning intervals preferring B to B.

Traditional Spanish-style, nylon-string bass guitars tend to use B to B on shorter-scale instruments and E to E, an octave below standard tuning, for longer-scale models. De Grassi usually keeps his McCollum tuned to B^b, but he is also experimenting with a variety of alternate tunings. For strings, he discards the first string from a standard medium set and adds a low .062. McManus and Reed have used extensive and often ultralow tunings on their instruments. McManus has gone as low as F C F C F G but generally stays with G D G C E A and G D G C D G, which uses the same intervals as D A D G A D. Reed doesn't usually tune quite as low; his favorites include C G D G G D and B^b G D G A D. John Pearse and La Bella are among the string manufacturers now offering acoustic baritone sets.

It's been said that getting a new guitar is the ultimate way to inspire new ideas or get out of a rut in your playing. The unique voice of a baritone can only increase these possibilities. And if low tunings or session work are a part of your life, then you really should check out a baritone guitar. ■