

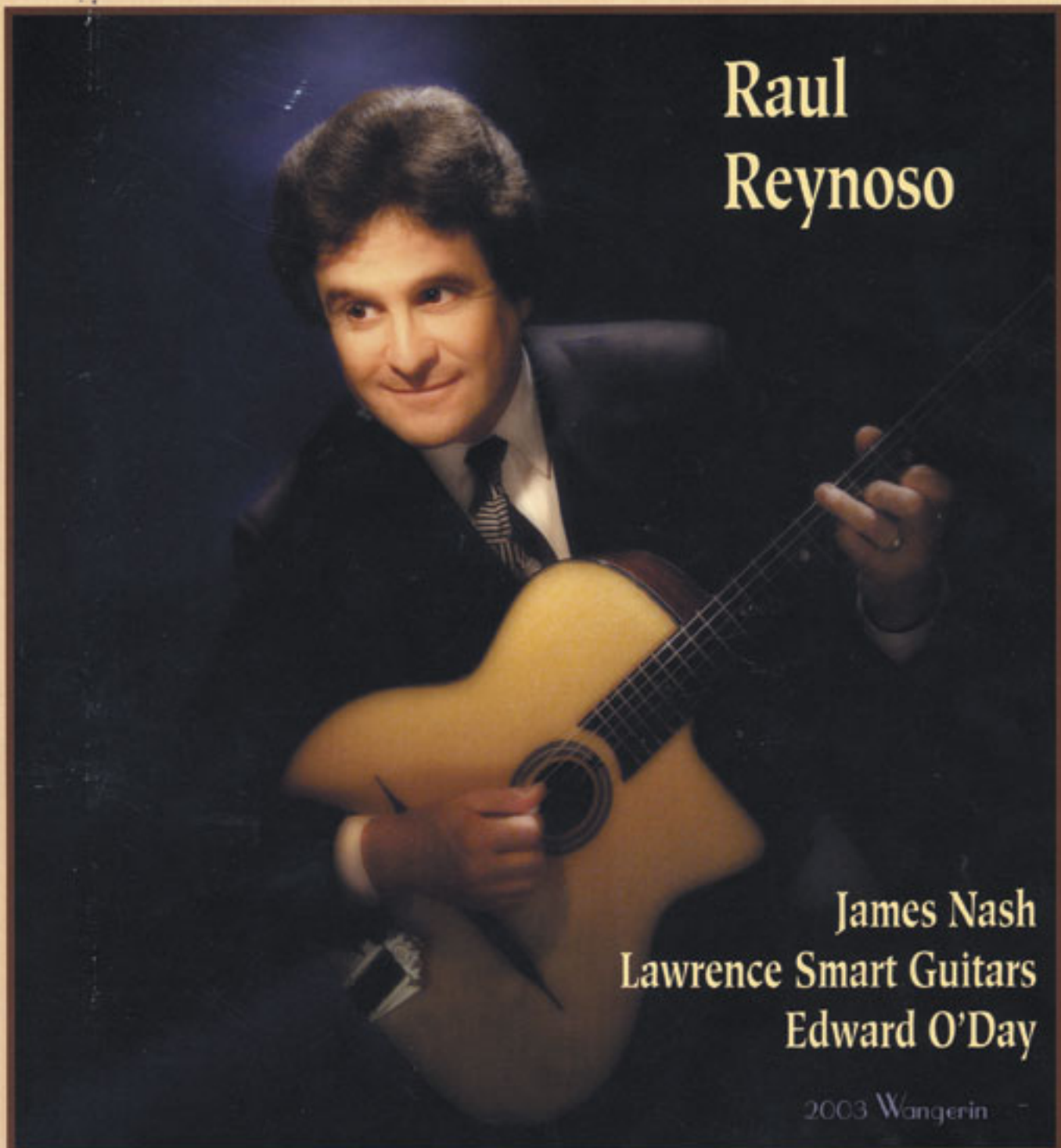
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Flatpicking Guitar

Magazine

Volume 7, Number 6 September/October 2003



**Raul
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Guitar Review: Saga D250M

by John Jorgenson

As a long time fan and player of the gypsy jazz music created by Django Reinhardt in the 30's, I have always been fascinated with the instruments used to create that unique tone. I was lucky enough to find an original Selmer for sale back in the early 80's when I started my obsession with this music. Like all guitarists, one guitar (even a Selmer!) is never enough and I have bought, sold and traded many gypsy style guitars over the years, including a custom Dupont from France, CSLs from Japan, Hodsons from the UK... and being ever the curious enthusiast I have tried wonderful guitars built by Dell'Arte, Shelley Park, Leo Eimers, John LeVoi, Rob Aylward, Favino, Micheal Dunn, John Monteleone, Killy Nonis, Anastasio, etc. I consider myself lucky to have been able to try many fine examples of gypsy guitars. The one thing that has been missing has been a high quality gypsy jazz guitar at an affordable price-until now.

The Saga D250M is just an all-around great guitar, not even considering the price which puts it in reach of players who are just starting to learn gypsy jazz and players who want to have this particular tone in their acoustic arsenal. This instrument's design and dimensions were taken from a vintage Selmer, down to the unusual solid headstock and 3 ply back and sides which feature a stunning bird's eye maple veneer, just like the original. Where normally ply is considered less than desirable in a conventional flat top guitar, in a gypsy style guitar it is the first choice for authenticity and function for the back and sides. The top of the guitar is solid spruce, not carved or pressed but rather glued to radiused braces to give the top a property of being slightly stressed, which creates the responsive snap characteristic of properly built gypsy guitars. The soundhole is a "petit bouche", a small oval shape surrounded by a yellow and brown multi-layer rosette.

The neck meets the body at the 14 fret and is not too boaty, not too slim, nice and comfortable. Adjustable with a truss rod, this is an improvement over the original Selmers which had non-adjust-



able reinforcement rods imbedded in the neck. The ebony fingerboard features mother of pearl dots at the 5th, 7th, 10th (French style) 12th and 15th frets, and has smoothly finished medium sized frets which provide just enough room to grab the strings for bending. The tailpiece is the classic stamped brass Selmer style, able to accept ball and loop end strings and has an attractive black insert. The tuners are Waverly-style open tuners, and they work well especially after loosening the screws slightly and adding a drop of 3-in-1 oil.

All of the above is relatively meaningless if the guitar does not sound good-but this is the best part-the guitar sounds great! It was shipped to me set up with bronze strings which always sound harsh on these types of guitars, so I immediately put on a set of Argentines (10-46, silver plated copper-the style of strings that to my ears sound best on these guitars) that Saga had kindly provided. With the lighter strings now the action was way too low, so I had to shim the bridge, inserting ebony squares under the 2 feet of the middle section of the 3 piece bridge (again like the original Selmers, with a movable middle section between 2 fixed "moustache" pieces).

With the action suitably up I could now hear the incredible voice of this guitar. The bottom end was full and punchy, the mids

clean and the treble not harsh but present. My true test of a guitar is if I want to keep playing it, and this guitar passed with flying colors. I even took it with me to Samois (the big Django festival in France) where I played it on a Ferris Wheel in Paris, in the campgrounds near the festival, in the airport in NYC, and it held it's own in many a jam session, with a lead tone audible over as many as 8 rhythm guitars all playing at once! I found myself half wishing I wasn't so close to being done with my new CD so I could use it on some cuts.

As you can tell, I do really like this guitar. I did make a few suggestions to Saga though. One was to ship the guitars out with the proper style strings (they don't have to be Argentines, other companies like John Pearse, Dell'Arte, Galli, and Lenzner make fine strings of this type) and to adjust the intonation on the bridges using these strings as well, as I had a little difficulty getting all 6 strings to be perfectly in tune up the neck with the current compensation. I also recommended that they ship the guitar out with 2 sets of shims, one already on the guitar for medium action, allowing the buyer to adjust the bridge up or down to his or her preference of string gauge and action (also allowing for the need to change from time to time due to climate). Aesthetically I would like to see the finish with a slight tint added, to bring out the bird's eye more, but that is a very minor thing and just personal taste. To Saga's credit they had already decided to adopt some of my suggestions, and the others they received willingly and plan to add on as soon as possible.

Players that are planning to use Stimer or De Armond magnetic pickups may run into a clearance problem depending on how the action is set, but there are companies that make very low-profile pickups, Miller from Switzerland for one.

The list price for the D250M is \$949.00, also available is the D250 which has all the same appointments but features rosewood back and sides and a slotted headstock and lists for \$895.00.

All in all this is a great value, and I am really glad that there is an affordable guitar of this type out there that is really a high quality instrument, well made with great tone. When I complimented my old friend and Saga designer Greg Rich on the guitar he replied "it doesn't cost that much more to do things right". The proof of that statement is found in the tone of the D250M.



**Raul Reynoso and John Jorgenson at the Winter 2003
NAMM show in Anaheim, CA**