

# Striking a Chord

Albuquerque's Pimentel family has made a name for themselves by crafting world-renowned guitars. Now, go with writer **MICHELLE OTERO** to meet these generations of luthiers, musicians, and teachers who are shaping the music scene in New Mexico and around the world.

**"IT WAS DESTINY THAT BROUGHT US TOGETHER,"** says Josefina Pimentel as she sits in the office of Pimentel & Sons Guitarmakers, Inc., in Albuquerque, looking at a framed, late-1940s portrait of a young, recently married couple: herself and husband, Lorenzo Pimentel. From their place high on the wall, the couple seem to look out over four of their 12 children, sons Agustín, Ricardo, Roberto, and Victor, who today, as master guitar makers, continue the work their late father began when he was 15: building fine, handcrafted instruments that are sought by musicians and collectors around the world.

Visiting the Pimentel & Sons workshop, one understands that the business was founded on hard work, patience, commitment, excellence, humor, romance, passion, and sacrifice. Lorenzo Pimentel, who died of prostate cancer in December 2010 at age 82, did not take the easy road to mastery and world renown. Born in Durango, Mexico, in 1928, Lorenzo learned to make guitars as a teenager, under the guidance of his half-brothers, in Ciudad Juárez. After marrying in 1948, Lorenzo and Josefina moved to El Paso, Texas, for three years, and then to Carlsbad.

Although Josefina says he wanted to devote himself to building fine guitars, Lorenzo first worked as a baker to support their growing family, and repaired and built instruments on the side. At his wife's urging, he took a vacation in 1963 and visited Albuquerque, where, Victor says, "He fell in love with the Sandía [Mountains]."

A few months later, Lorenzo and the family moved to Albuquerque, where he tried selling his handmade instruments to local music stores. "People didn't want Mexican guitars," says Roberto, who is now vice president of Pimentel & Sons.

Lorenzo's fortunes turned in 1965, when the music magazine *Frets* featured his work, and he received an order for 30 guitars.

Since then, the accolades have accumulated: In 2009, then-

**Above—Under the guidance of founder, Lorenzo Pimentel, Pimentel & Sons Guitarmakers, Inc., of Albuquerque, has earned an international reputation for fine craftsmanship. Left—In their Southwestern series, the luthiers incorporate Native American and regional designs.**



Governor Bill Richardson signed a bill making Pimentel's New Mexico Sunrise model the official state guitar. The company has earned the Hispanic Heritage Month Distinguished Honor Award, and an invitation from the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife. And yet the Pimentel workshop has the feel of a dear cousin's house, the aromas of homemade tortillas and beans replaced by the sweet smell of rosewood.

Indeed, for the Pimentels, crafting a guitar begins with quality woods, among them Brazilian rosewood, maple, European spruce, jacaranda, Spanish cedar, and ebony for fingerboards—all aged for years or, in some cases, decades.

"Wood selection is an art in itself," says Agustín.

"You never stop learning, because each wood is different," says Victor, who carves the signature Pimentel crown on the head of a guitar with tools he and his father made by hand—"even from the same tree, because the grain is always changing."

Ricardo, or Rick, the company's president, taps the top and bottom pieces, which are book-matched—that is, cut so that their grains are mirror images of each other. One side is brighter, the other deeper, to create a balance between bass and treble. With his chin, Rick gestures toward an electric band saw. "Father used to take a handsaw and just slice the wood as precise as a machine." Lorenzo's craftsmanship inspired and intrigued Rick as a boy. "He used to do it by hand, from nothing."

As junior-high students at Garfield, and later at Albuquerque High, the Pimentels took shop classes, where they displayed a natural talent. "The teacher was fascinated by how we handled tools," Rick says. "There was a competition the class entered to build a house. I told my team we'd only use hand tools. We came in first. I knew from that point I'd be a woodworker, but didn't know I'd be a guitar maker."

Just as ties to the guitar run deep for the four luthiers in the family, so they do for two of their other brothers, Hector

and Gustavo, each an accomplished, internationally known guitarist who credits his father with instilling in him a deep love of music. Hector found his path at age 12, when Lorenzo took him to a performance by Andrés Segovia, the Spanish classical guitarist credited with elevating the guitar from the parlor to the concert hall. Hector began taking lessons, and went on to study with Cuban-born Hector García, who, at the University of Albuquerque in the 1960s, established the first guitar department in the United States. (The university closed in 1986.) Later, Hector studied with

**Right—In 2009, the Pimentel's Sunrise guitar became the state guitar of New Mexico. Note the zia symbols on the face, head, and fingerboard, and the green and red chile motifs on the bridge. Below—Four of Lorenzo Pimentel's 12 children have carried on the family business as luthiers: (clockwise from right) Ricardo, Agustín, Victor, and Roberto.**



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**Clockwise from top, left—Ricardo Pimentel, who apprenticed under his father for more than 20 years, scallops the bracing of the interior of a guitar. Victor routes a guitar face prior to binding. Josefina, matriarch of the family, and Lorenzo, seen here in their Albuquerque workshop, built the family business from scratch.**

Erol Gallegos, who had studied with Segovia.

Lorenzo himself inspired Gustavo's musical future: "He used to play guitar and sing . . . real romantic music, boleros. I used to play along to the Beatles with a broom." Gustavo first realized that he wanted to play guitar professionally when he was 11, and his father took him to see The Romeros in concert. Hailing from San Diego and known as "the Royal Family of the Guitar," the quartet was founded by patriarch Celedonio Romero, a dear friend of Lorenzo Pimentel, and included Celedonio's sons Celin, Pepe, and Angel. In his late teens, Gustavo took his first master class with the Romeros.

"My father didn't have a big influence in terms of getting me into The Romeros," Gustavo relates. "It was either 'You're good or you're not good.' I was nervous. When I finished [auditioning], I remember Pepe saying, 'Magnífico,' and I was thinking, 'Oh, thank the Lord.'"

When Gustavo then asked Pepe Romero to take him on as a student, the answer was yes. "My father offered to trade him a Grand Concert Pimentel guitar in exchange for the lessons," Gustavo says. "Angel Romero overheard that conversation and volunteered, so that *he* could have the guitar instead." For the next four years, Gustavo spent every summer studying with Pepe Romero in San Diego.

Both brothers have performed throughout the United States, parts of Mexico, and Europe. Hector plays regularly at Casa de Benavidez, in Albuquerque's North Valley, and Gustavo at Hotel Albuquerque, in Old Town. And they are passing along their gifts to their own students: Hector in a studio at Pimentel & Sons, and Gustavo in a private studio.

The brothers and Josefina say that, in addition to his craft and the music, Lorenzo taught his children the value of hard work. "He was always working or designing. It would be Sunday, and we'd have to wake up at 8 o'clock to work," Gustavo reminisces.

From a young age, each of the sons worked with his father. Early on, Lorenzo built guitars at home because he didn't have a shop: Roberto would hold the instruments while Lorenzo applied lacquer. Agustín would grind

shells for frets and dip them in hot water. A math whiz, Victor would help him determine cutting angles. And each took a turn sweeping the shop.

"[Dad] would say, 'Feel the wood,'" says Rick. "You start falling in love with it. He'd tell me, 'Take the wood and tap on it.' It's alive. It makes you want to be able to produce something with it."

When it was time for one of Lorenzo's sons to choose a career path, Roberto says, his father gave him a choice. "He told us, 'You can go to college or you can work here.' I stayed here because it was what I wanted."

Victor chose college, where he studied architecture. "When I finished, I still wanted to make guitars." He smiles. "My father said, 'If you work here, you're not going to make a lot of money, but you'll work your butt off.'"

Agustín also worked outside the Pimentels' shop, doing classified work for the government. "Most of us have deviated [from the family business] a little bit," he says. "We came back. I always came back to guitar making. My innate part of me said, 'You have to return.'"

The long hours have kept the third generation of Pimentels away from the shop. "It's so much easier to do other kinds of work," says Agustín. Roberto's son Robert began working with his father, uncles, and grandfather when he was in his teens, but left the shop while in his early twenties. "I think it runs in my blood," Robert Jr. says. Now 35 and working at Intel, he says that, with his grandfather's death, he has begun to feel a greater sense of urgency to return to guitar making. "Something deep down inside is telling me, 'Hey, you should at least try again.'" Robert Jr.'s 12-year-old son is now taking lessons with his uncle Hector, and learning the trade from his grandfather and great-uncles. Robert Jr. reflects, "When I took my son, and my dad was showing him things, I thought, 'I remember that.' Now I'm a man, and not a kid who was only thinking of the money in it."

Musicians and collectors are grateful for the commitment this generation of the family has made to the craft. Pimentels are some of the last remaining handcrafted guitars. Ricardo says that when a guitar is made by hand, "you get the soul of the builder." It establishes a connection between the craftsman and the musician.



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**Members of the musically inclined Pimentel family are also performers and teachers. Here, Roberto Pimentel plays a Sunrise guitar at the New Mexico Museum of Art in Santa Fe.**

Juan Lucero, frontman for Los Primos, a Mexican folk group based in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, first played a Pimentel guitar that belonged to his grandfather. Now that he has his own Pimentel, he says, "I am emotionally attached to it in a strange way." But it's not just the love or emotional attachment that keeps him playing the instrument—it's the way the brothers do business. Lucero says he feels taken care of and supported as a musician. Ultimately, though, it's about the quality of the instrument itself. The combination of that quality and each instrument's physical beauty makes it the choice of musicians throughout the country. Lucero says, "It's like a piece of artwork that you carry around with you."


Ben Perea, of Albuquerque's Watermelon Mountain Jug Band, agrees. "Of all the guitars I've had—Taylors, Martins, Gibsons—there's nothing like the sound of a Pimentel. It's a piece of art, and a beautiful-sounding instrument. There are some nice guitars out there, but they are not completely handcrafted. I use the other guitars for my outdoor performances, because it doesn't really matter what happens to them, but for recordings and

important performances I use my Pimentel. I feel lucky to have one."

Lorenzo's journey of becoming a master craftsman and establishing his family's legacy was long and difficult, and his wife Josefina speaks of his sacrifices. There is no bitterness in her voice, but rather a recognition of fate, and an acceptance of her belief that life could have gone no other way. This is what she was meant to do. This is what her husband and children were meant to do and be.

As illness took hold of Lorenzo in the final months of his life, Josefina says, "He would call Ricky, 'Are you coming for me? *Quiero trabajar* [I want to work].'"

"Why do you want to go?" I would ask him.

"Because my sons are there, next to me." 

**Michelle Otero is featured in "Storytellers," on page 6.**

**For info:** 3316 N. Lafayette Dr., (505) 884-1669, [www.pimentelguitars.com](http://www.pimentelguitars.com)