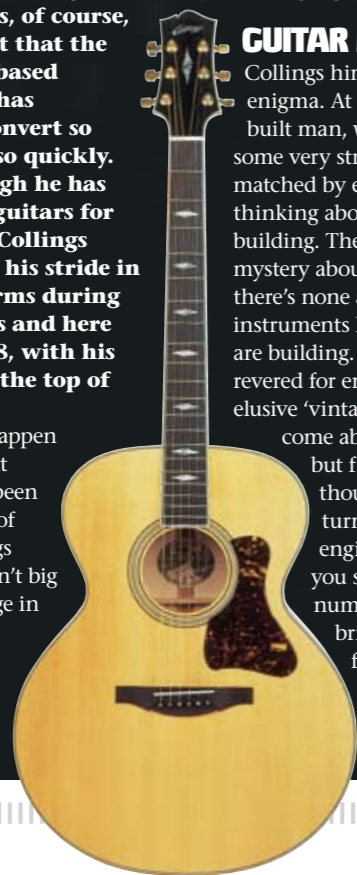


AS GOOD AS IT GETS?

Does Texas-based Bill Collings make the world's finest production acoustic guitars? It's a controversial view, but one held by a number of aficionados. But who is Bill Collings? And how have his guitars come to take on the world's greatest acoustic guitar brands? Gary Cooper asks the questions

Opinions differ, naturally, but if you ask acoustic guitar cognoscenti which manufacturer currently produces their favourite steel-strung acoustic guitars, an impressive number will come back with the answer 'Collings'. Bill Collings has plenty of rivals, of course, but it says a lot that the Austin, Texas-based guitar maker has managed to convert so many people, so quickly. After all, though he has been making guitars for over 30 years, Collings really only hit his stride in production terms during the early 1990s and here we are, in 2008, with his name right at the top of the tree.

That doesn't happen by accident and it certainly hasn't been due to a barrage of publicity. Collings Guitars simply isn't big enough to indulge in the endorsement politics of some bigger rivals, nor does it paper the



town with advertising. If Collings guitars have become a big deal – and they have – it's been due to players having spread the word. And it's not just acoustic guitars – in the USA, Collings mandolins more or less rule in the bluegrass market and, more recently, the company's new electric guitars have been making big waves.

GUITAR MAN

Collings himself is a bit of an enigma. At 60, he's a powerfully built man, with a reputation for some very straight talking that is matched by equally straight thinking about guitar design and building. There's little magic and mystery about Bill Collings and there's none at all about the instruments he and his team of 80 are building. For all that they are revered for encapsulating that elusive 'vintage' quality, this doesn't come about through alchemy, but from analysis and thought. Bill Collings, it turns out, has an engineer's mind – and if you set out to build numbers of consistently brilliant guitars, there are a few better things you could be than a gifted engineer.

It's consistency that is so important to acoustic guitar buyers, too. It's no good being told that someone else's Brand X guitar sounds like a pre-war Martin Dreadnought, if the ones you try in a shop are all different and none of them quite right. Besides, if they are that variable, what might they be like in a year or two's time? Achieving that level of reliable excellence has been one of Collings' goals. But we're jumping ahead of ourselves. How did the Collings Guitars story start?

"I was born in Midland, Michigan, moved to Ohio when I was 11 and started playing guitar when I was about 14, and I just became curious about guitars," he says. "I started making guitars in the early '70s, so that's 37 years now I've been making them."

As anyone who was around back then will tell you, becoming a guitar builder wasn't easy in the early 1970s. There were few books around and no teachers. So how did Collings learn?

"I'm a curious person, so I kinda figured it out. You know, I'd look at a guitar and see the binding and wonder what that was, and that's about getting used to what a good guitar is. People don't learn for themselves what a good guitar is,



they learn from other people. But I was more curious than that, I wanted to know what made a good-sounding guitar and it was kind of a quest that went on probably until I was 20.

"After college, I worked in a machine shop with this old guy and that's where I learned machining and a lot of other skills that added to my love of making things. After a while, I knew how to measure and I knew how to make things, and the precision – I loved the precision. I got used to working to close tolerances for people who really needed work done to that level. So I learned craftsmanship from a 70-year-old guy who did it all by hand and knew how to make good stuff. I hadn't known about any of that stuff. I could work with wood, but I didn't know any of that. I was a very driven man back in that machine shop, sucking in all of that knowledge."

THE ENGINEER

What sets Collings apart and, we suspect, may be one of the secrets of his success is that he married that precision and predictability of fine engineering with an understanding and love of wood. "That's what I wanted. I loved everything to do with the metal but it didn't have a meaning, so I wanted to put the two together and it actually drove me to make good guitars."

Deciding he would move to Texas, Collings hatched the plan of getting a day job and making guitars in the evenings. At the time, he was playing a Gibson Dove, "But I soon traded that for a Guild D-25 because I could just tell that Gibson wasn't a good guitar and I did like the sound of the Guild, though I couldn't tell why. There was no back bracing and it had a plywood back – it was just a cheap, well-made manufactured guitar, but I liked it better, so I thought a lot about that.

"I also studied a lot of old Martins and eventually decided to put it all together and make the world's best guitar," Collings continues. "There were things about Gibsons that I liked and things about Martins, and I had the long scale of that Guild D-25 and I put all that together." And the result? "Well, it wasn't that good," he laughs. "It was OK, but I could tell it didn't have what I wanted. But I didn't know if anybody else could tell and the neat thing was they could and they could tell me what they liked and didn't like and that helped me a lot.

"So I made a second guitar, a dreadnought this time. I thought I'd make just one style this time and that guitar was better. I'd started.



I went to a club in Houston, where there were some really good guitar players and I told this guy I was a guitar maker and that I wanted to make him a guitar. I said if he bought the wood, I'd make it for him and he went for it. So he bought the wood and 10 days later I gave him his guitar – and that wasn't a good guitar, that was a great guitar and the following day I had 10 orders. That guy is playing in Nashville now and still uses that guitar today."

MEASURING UP

One of the things Collings had done, and which he says enabled him to get it so right, so quickly, was use his skills as an engineer. He had measured many old guitars and studied them in detail so that when it came to making his own, he knew what needed to be done. It sounds incredibly simple, but how many others have managed to do it? This leads to the question, if these old guitars – particularly Martins – sounded so great, why was that? Is it because they had just aged well, as good acoustics do, or was there some secret in the way vintage instruments were made?

"Well, they were built a little differently. A lot of it is age but a lot of it is they were built well. They might have been a little tight when they were new, but in a year or so they would have come into their own. Now the thing is, did people know then that they were good guitars? Did they design them that way? Well, actually they were in a quest to make them louder, so from about 1928, when steel strings hit, they were constantly working and changing – you can watch it happening. They get thicker, they get thinner, you can see there was somebody there saying, 'Let's try this,' and for the next 9,000 guitars, that's what they did."

One thing that Collings says drove him hard in the early days was that vintage Martins were still quite affordable, so his new instruments were having to compete with the best to sell. "Were they great, the guitars I was making? Well, some of them were. I get them back today and I think, 'Wow! What is this?!'"

Does he think that using traditional nitro-cellulose lacquer is an important factor in those old



guitars? "I don't think it's just the finishing. The finish won't change if it's poly [polyurethane], and nitro hardens over time as it looses solvent and gets maybe more loose, but it's not just that."

Here Collings reveals the almost fanatical depth in which he has studied old guitars. We start talking about the thickness of lacquers and he explains how you can never be sure when you see an old guitar, whether it has been refinished at some stage. "But then you occasionally find one that hasn't been touched – left in a case for 60, 70 or 80 years. Those guitars that I've measured, on some I've seen as little as 2 thousandths of an inch on the backs and three to four on top."

So what thickness of finish does he work to? "I had to go up a little, to normally five and a maximum of seven [thousandths of an inch], but if we get heavy I want to go light and if we go light I want to go heavy – but it's always in that space, because I love the thinness but I want the protection. You'll tend to get pick scratches on a nitro finish, which you won't on a poly, and it will age. A poly finish generally doesn't get yellow, but lacquer will darken with age and get this lovely golden glow – which people in England really like," he laughs.

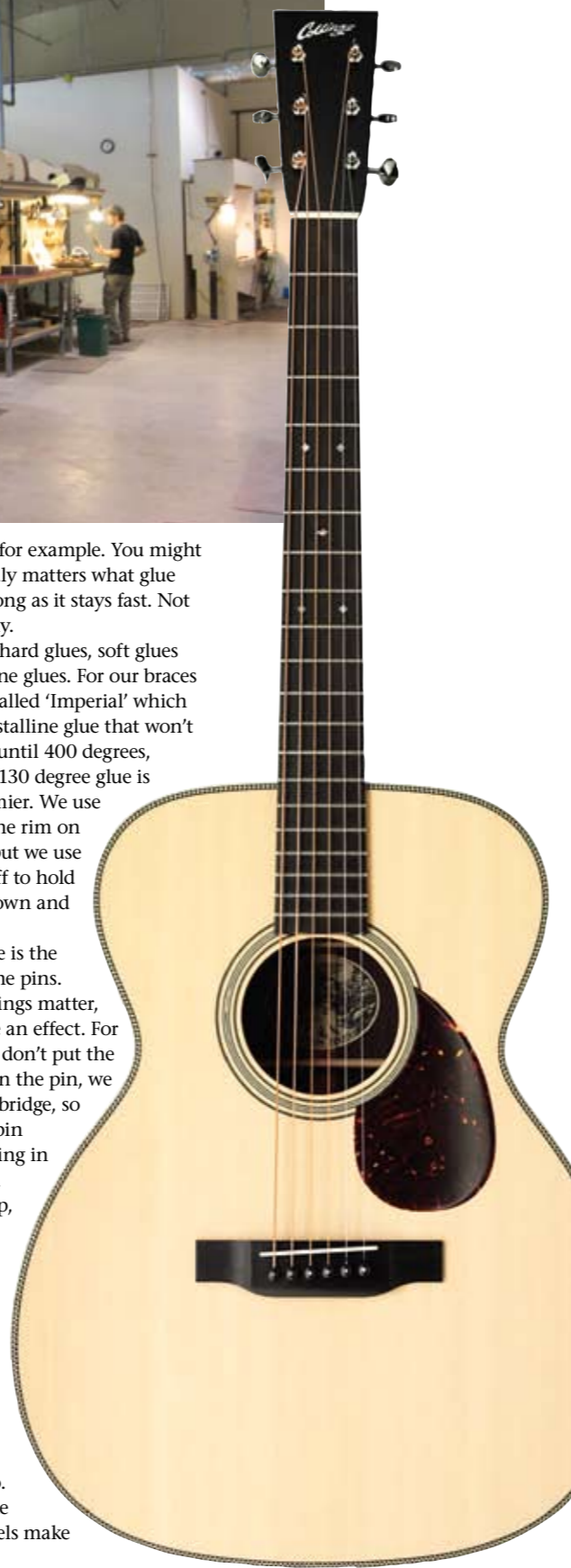
STICKING POINTS

To produce a guitar in this class calls for that sort of attention to detail. And it doesn't stop at just lacquering

– take glues, for example. You might think it hardly matters what glue you use, as long as it stays fast. Not so, apparently.

"We have hard glues, soft glues and crystalline glues. For our braces we use one called 'Imperial' which is a hard crystalline glue that won't break down until 400 degrees, whereas the 130 degree glue is a little gummier. We use that to put the rim on the outside but we use the hard stuff to hold the bridge down and the braces."

Then there is the bridge and the pins. "All these things matter, they all have an effect. For example, we don't put the [string] slot in the pin, we put it in the bridge, so the wedged pin holds the string in that position under the top, so it's forced to the top not into a spongy old pin. That alone cleans the sound up, but it's just one of a thousand things we do. Pennies make nickels, nickels make dimes..."



ACOUSTIC



Bill Collings

While he's worrying about which glue to use, what about the all-important wood? How hard is it in these days of dwindling supplies and restrictions on endangered species to get the quality of wood that Bill Collings needs? "You're always looking down the road. It's never as good as you had. Once you make a guitar with a piece of wood, you know what it does, but when you go to make another one, it's a different piece of wood, so you're more judging in what you got – you're trying to make it the best it is and that's the balance. Making a guitar is easy, but to make it a musical instrument, enhancing whatever wood we can get, is what we do. It's hard to get the quality of wood but there are some adjustments we can make. You make it thinner, thicker, you brace it differently – you voice that wood.

"There was probably only one block of wood I've ever had that I could have done anything with. I could have made it a foot thick and it would still have sounded good, and I'm not lying. It was a piece of Adirondack spruce and I cut that from the Stanley Tool farm in New Hampshire. A friend of mine got the tree, we paid \$100 dollars for it and he sent it down to me in sections at 20 bucks a section. You know how many tops I got out of that tree? Twenty! And you know how much work that was? Well, I'll never do it again!"

GOOD WOOD

Talking wood with a world class luthier like Bill Collings is always a joy. Their eyes light up and the tales start to flow – this piece of wood that made that guitar, this kind of spruce against that kind. It may even be the litmus test for guitar builders – you can tell the real thing by seeing how hot they glow when you start talking wood. In Collings' case, we're soon off the scale, with Bill explaining how the drive to find

wood for WWII opened up Alaska, which in turn led to the availability of Sitka spruce today.

But what about other tonewoods? Is he able to get the rosewood, mahogany and whatever else he needs in sufficient quantities? "What's happening is that people are being more careful. In Honduras, for example, that's becoming an endangered species, which means they allocate so much that can come out of these areas and there's no clear-cutting. So, they go in, locate a tree over a

certain size and they mark them and people go get them and it takes the rainy season to drag them out.

That's some of the mahogany I'm getting now and it's like some of the wood they used back in the '50s on electric guitars. Then the other source is Peru and soon they're going to open up Brazil. Is it endangered? No, it just hasn't been cut right before and we're cutting it better

today and looking at sustainable use. That's how it is in Honduras, where you can't clear-cut, you can only pluck."

This, Collings reveals, is a more enlightened approach than is being applied back home, where Sitka spruce is being cut at such a rate that some believe there is just eight years' supply remaining. "You know, if we used a hundred Sitka spruce a year in guitar making, that would be all of us – every one, maybe a little more. Very little wood goes to guitar making and it could go on forever if we'd only do it right. You know, India did that 100 years ago when they planted plantations of Indian rosewood. You can have that all day long and it's fine."

ACOUSTIC ANALYSIS

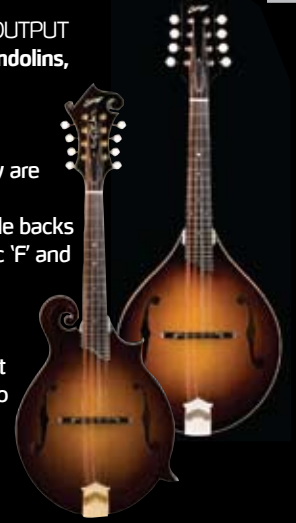
Using his analytical mind, Bill Collings has worked out just what it is that makes a really great acoustic guitar – whether it's the thickness of the lacquer, the way the string slots are cut, the glue used to fix the bracing and a thousand other tiny

MANDOLIN MAN

ANOTHER SIDE OF COLLINGS' OUTPUT

So what about the Collings mandolins, which have taken the folk and bluegrass world by storm?

Collings currently offers eight different mandolin models. They are built along traditional lines, with seasoned spruce tops and maple backs and sides, and follow the classic 'F' and 'A' shapes. But how difficult are these diminutive eight-stringed wonders to make? "Oh, they're awful!" Bill Collings laughs. "That was an engineering challenge to make that work and produce a quality instrument. They're little and the funny thing is that anything little takes more time than something big. Take a ukulele – I swear to God you'll spend as much or more time on it as a guitar. All the little things show up more."



“ I'M A CURIOUS PERSON. I WANTED TO KNOW WHAT MADE A GOOD GUITAR ”

processes. That meticulous attention to detail, every step of the way, goes to make an instrument where the whole is, as the saying goes, actually greater than the sum of its parts.

We asked Bill Collings a final question. How would he advise a player looking to buy an acoustic guitar to go about it? "Just like when I started making guitars and wondering about them. You can say, 'Oh, Martin guitars are the best' or 'Collings guitars are the best', but trust yourself and educate yourself. You can go buy one because you just heard it's good and it'll probably be fine, but if you start going on this quest, you'll never stop because it's too fascinating. It's a very good, safe, bad habit!"

There was lots more, of course. Get Bill Collings talking about neck tensions and you could take a whole day out of your diary as this genuinely funny, intense man lights up and starts to deliver a masterclass. If there's a secret to Collings guitars, I suspect it lies in the name on the headstock: the guitars reflect the maker's personality. And that's how it should be. **ACOUSTIC**