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the ToneQuest Report™

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A Good Guitar is Hard to Find

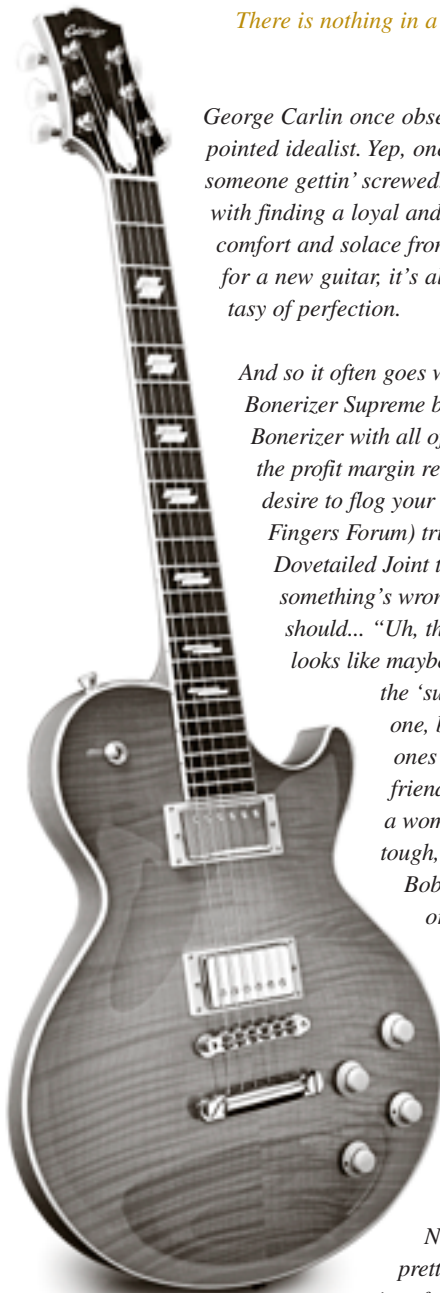
There is nothing in a caterpillar that tells you it's going to be a butterfly.

– R. Buckminster Fuller

George Carlin once observed that inside every cynical person, there is a disappointed idealist. Yep, one way or another, innocence lost always boils down to someone gettin' screwed. Now, finding an exceptional guitar may not quite rank with finding a loyal and loving mate, a rewarding career, or a home that gives comfort and solace from the din without, but once we commit to begin looking for a new guitar, it's all too easy to become consumed by an overwhelming fantasy of perfection.

And so it often goes with new guitars. The maker of the vaunted Magic Fingers Bonerizer Supreme buys pretty wood by the container load, assembles the Bonerizer with all of the care and affection that hourly labor costs allow given the profit margin required by the Carlyle Group, and you, obsessed by the desire to flog your very own (ranked Number One by members of the Magic Fingers Forum) trip on down to check out the new Bonerizer stash at the Dovetailed Joint to get your bone on, sweaty palms and all. But wait... something's wrong here. They don't all sound or look like a Bonerizer should... "Uh, this one sounds kinda sick... And the sunburst on that one looks like maybe the guy painting it had a stroke while he was shooting the 'sun' part. That's a sun spot, not a sunburst. I wanted a light one, but these ones sound tight and constipated, and the heavy ones sound dull, dumb and heavy like my sister Ramona's girlfriend, Roux Pearl. You know how a man's voice coming out of a woman just doesn't seem right? That kinda sound. Sorta tough, but not... like middle-aged white guys named 'Dangerous Bob,' 'Snookie' or 'Frosty' trying to sing "Goin' Down Slow," or fat Pearl in those stupid fatigues and an 'Armed and Hammered' t-shirt singing "Free Beer & Chicken" to her freaky Chihuahua... Do those things ever stop shaking, man? Shit, I'm not feeling any of these Bonerizers, but I really wanted one... Maybe I'll try eBay." And he will.

Well, pardner, the vagaries of wood, which comes from trees, which grow in all kinds of places according to God's plan, do not account for the fact that man would chop them down to make a taut and resonant Bonerizer. No, sir. Hence and to wit, the act of randomly assembling pretty yet disparate pieces of wood into a guitar with the promise of a constant outcome (magical, 'better than vintage' tone) is,



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to be kind, unrealistic, and to be brutally honest, complete and utter fantasy. And no one knows this better than

Bill Collings and his posse of guitar builders in Austin, Texas.

After carving out a heavy reputation for his acoustic guitars, Bill Collings answered the call to design and build electrics, which seemed at the time to be a straightforward proposition. After all, high-end acoustic players are a picky and discriminating bunch whose idea of the ultimate wooden box varies between big, booming dreadnoughts and smaller, more percussive 'orchestra' models. Collings had deftly re-set the bar with his acoustic guitars, so why not build electrics, too? Seventy prototypes and a year later, Collings finally felt confident in his ability to produce electric guitars worthy of his name on the headstock, but the experience had been profoundly humbling and revealing. We talked with Collings, who would much rather work on a guitar than talk about working on guitars, and he responded with one of the most candid and interesting interviews we have ever published with a guitar builder. Enjoy...

TQR: What first inspired you to build electric guitars?



There are really many reasons, and I thought of doing it for several years. We are great craftsmen here, and I thought it would be real easy... I almost felt as if some of these companies were printing free money. To me, it just wasn't that big a deal – you design a pretty guitar and you make it. I was proven wrong, by the way (laughing). *Big time.* I felt the same way back when we started building man-

dolins. I mean, we already had a wood shop and all, but it took us years to be able to make money on those. Just like the electrics, we had to figure out what tooling and fixtures we needed, then we had to design and build them. I've been carving maple and spruce for over thirty years for acoustic archtops, so the thought of carving mandolin plates didn't bother me. The jump to electric guitars just seemed like another extension of that, and it sounded like fun.

I had also heard that some other electric companies were going to make acoustic guitars, and I thought we could get to market faster than them, which we have. And so for many years I thought we could make a really nice thing, throw it together with the right wood and it would be easy, and we'd win, because we'd make the nicest looking one. It's not *that* easy.

TQR: What was involved in tooling up and making prototypes?



Tooling is something we're pretty good at – not fast, but good. You can't build good instruments without being

able to build good fixtures, and I've been doing it so long that I have a pretty good sense of what will work and what won't. It's basically beating your head against a wall long enough til you figure it out. Then, it's a matter of making prototypes and learning that it's not really what you think as far as taking a piece of wood and putting pickups on it and altering the tone solely with the pickups. It's bigger than that... You have to build this guitar that is actually acoustic, that people will like acoustically, and it had very little to do with the electronics at that point. Basically you're making a solid, acoustic guitar that feels good and is responsive without pickups. It went back to what we had been doing before, all those years building acoustic guitars. And during the initial R&D, we began to realize that every guitar we were making was not measuring up to what was already out there.

TQR: In what way?



Acoustically they might sound OK, but electrically they might have too much information or sound too bright... They just weren't up to par with other guitars on the market.

That R&D process took a good year to work out, building 70 or 80 prototypes of different weights and trying to determine what type of wood would go into these guitars before we could even begin ordering wood, and then, where would we find it? The problems were huge. Where would we get wood that would sound good? Even if we only made one guitar, we

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had to make it *right*. We're still on that quest of making every guitar better than the last one, and we're a lot closer now.

TQR: So you were experimenting with different types of wood as well as design specs to achieve a fairly consistent, optimal, audible result involving the mahogany you used, as well as the maple tops...



Yes, it was the same thing with the maple tops. How thick would the tops and back be? If we used a block inside (and we chose alder instead of mahogany), where would we get that?

TQR: Did you also experiment with the shape and mass of the neck design?

That's kind of a known. People have always understood that you don't want a spindle of a neck. Our necks on the electric guitars are probably a little more proud than on our acoustics... there is more mass, more roundness. You don't need something really heavy, but you do need a rigid neck that will respond.

TQR: But on a very lightweight guitar like the I35 semi-hollow body for example, you must manage the weight of the mahogany being used for the necks on that model, otherwise wouldn't you run the risk of the guitar being top heavy?



Or a wimp. That guitar is right under 7 pounds, so the wood we use for the neck will be right at 3 pounds per board feet. If it were 4 pounds per board feet, you might have a neck that is 7 or 8 ounces heavier. We don't use too hard a wood or too light. And we don't want wood ridden with silica. A lot of Peruvian mahogany can get up to 4 pounds a board foot. What we try to do is look to the areas in Belize, Honduras and Guatemala where a lot of the mahogany was originally sourced in the '40s, '50s and '60s. They can now pluck some of those trees out of there – they don't clear cut them anymore, but the Indians pull them out and process them into

the parts we want according to weight. Our necks are a little heavier than the body wood and we have very specific specs for both. Most of the mahogany is coming out of Peru, and many companies are so big that they are buying containers of mahogany, and in those you're getting all kinds of stuff that we wouldn't use because of the weight.

TQR: What are some of the key things you've learned and discovered in building the electrics?



The certain thing is, the more we do it the less we know (laughing). Well, it's hard to do right. You're going to get a range of sounds in the guitars...

There are certain fingerboards that will sound harder or softer... Everything you do to these guitars seems to affect them electrically. We would call our building process 'blueprinting.' We try to build a guitar to spec that will do a certain thing and end up within a specific range. We try to balance our tops with our backs and sides and balance that with the fingerboard so that we get what we're looking for. It's not like you're going to build this guitar, throw a set of pickups in it and they are all going to sound the same. They don't.

TQR: At NAMM you pointed to the Collings acoustics and said, "When I build one of those, I know exactly what I'm going to get."

Yes. We can alter the thickness of the top, alter the bracing, and vary the top and back and do all kinds of stuff to get really close – within a range of 5%-10% in those guitars. But with electrics we have to buy our wood and batch it and match it in bigger bundles and try to make it work acoustically. But if we use the wrong wood to start with, it's just the wrong guitar and it's not going to work. So we know what not to use, and we're not going to make those guitars.

Luckily, we don't have a lot of the wrong wood – we have a lot of the right wood on hand because we've been buying and culling it, averaging out the better stuff that we can make a



good electric guitar with. We want an electric that is acoustic enough to add some complexities to the sound rather than relying on the pickups to do it all.

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TQR: At the same time, you had to buy and use some of the wrong wood to find out that it was wrong, didn't you?

(Laughing) Well, yes, but it's not that much. Maybe we're buying 10,000 board feet, which isn't that much. A bigger company might buy 200,000 board feet and then you have a bigger problem.

TQR: What are some of the unique construction techniques that you've developed?



When we make the I35 style guitar, we hollow the mahogany all out for the back and sides, and we use alder for the center

block instead of mahogany because it was a little brighter and the alder was breathier and created a better tone. When we laminate the solid one-inch top on, it really makes a great acoustic instrument. All we're trying to do is put more good wood in those guitars. Since we can't alter it too much in the construction, we've got to be really good with picking our wood. We've stumbled on the right area, and it's not Peru, which is where so much of the mahogany comes from today.

TQR: Did this involve finding one source in Central America?



I have a couple of sources and they both do the same thing. They spend six months a year down there. They have to be there when the trees are cut or you'll just get sliced trees like you do in Peru. We're actually cutting them for a reason, in certain sizes so that you can get a good yield on it. We pay top dollar, but we buy nothing with knots or cracks. When it's cut specifically for us we can spec out what we

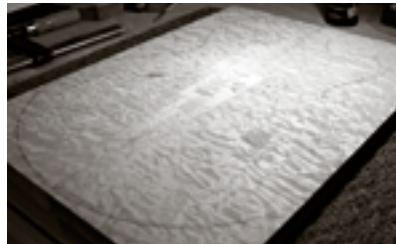
want in certain densities. We actually identify the lighter from the heavier trees before they cut them. That's pretty good.

TQR: Do you have to jump through the same hoops when sourcing figured maple?

Even more so, and we've finally settled on one really dependable source that's worth every penny.

TQR: Have you noticed how just different maple tops can dramatically affect the tone of a guitar?

Unbelievably so. In fact, I've made some guitars with hard maple thinking people would want some of that and I didn't get good feedback on it. It's a little harder, glarier, clearer and articulate, but it didn't have a good bottom end and it was very cold. We loved it as a good, hardcore rock & roll guitar, but you have to be careful there. If you use a soft piece of maple you need to use a little heavier piece of mahogany. You



have all these little variables to play with. It's a mind blower – we log every guitar body as far as the weight and density of it, how it sounds, and

then when we put the top on it we try to regulate how it sounds so that it isn't overly tight or dark sounding. Just like the fingerboard, that maple top is probably among the first things heard in terms of how the different parts affect tone. The I35 really helped us understand the role that the maple tops play in the sound of the guitars. Quilt and flame are entirely different and you really hear it. The flame has much more of an electric quality, while the quilt is much darker and woodier. I thought we might build nothing but quilt tops on



the I35, but it seems to go both ways. We get top players in all the time and we learn more from them than anything. You guys like those light aluminum tailpieces, and with our guitars being as acoustic as they are, our guitars sound awful with them. The aluminum just gives you too much information and

screws it all up. And it's the *wrong* information.

TQR: We actually use the heavier TonePros tailpieces on semi-hollow body guitars – always. So you just buy the heavier stop tailpiece from TonePros...

That's right.

TQR: What's the secret to your phenomenal fretwork and the fact that the strings don't bind in the nut slots?

A lot of hard work and Aaron yelling at everybody! Sure, we

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could have a Plek machine – those are great, but we also have people that can actually see a little better than the Plek. A few years into this process, there are still guitars last week that we yanked frets out of. If somebody has a funky five minutes doing fret work, we'll pull 'em. We really watch it.

TQR: Are you using straight-grained rosewood fingerboard material?

We're using several types... East Indian, Brazilian and Madagascar. We like the Madagascar a lot – it sounds good, but believe it or not, the smoothest would be the East Indian. It knocks a little of the highs off and it's a rounder tone. Again, everything is superficial on that guitar – wherever the strings are nearest, it's gonna pick up all that stuff. It's a matter of a harder or a softer board, and the East Indian is a little softer board.

TQR: Unlike some other builders, you're not installing the frets on the fingerboard and then gluing it to the neck...

That does not make a good fret job. You *need* a Plek for that.

TQR: How did you choose the pickups?



That was a really long process. Our friend, Ed Reynolds, a local guitar insulstant, made a quick-change set up for swapping them out and we acquired over 100 pickups from a variety of companies. Then we started talking to manu-

facturers to find out how easy they were to work with, what they could offer and how badly they wanted the job, and we wound up going with Jason Lollar. He's been very easy to work with, giving us exactly what we want and we may have only gotten a bad pickup once, literally.

TQR: He's known for his consistency and attention to detail. Did you play with the pickup specs much?

The P90s are basically his standard P90s and he just really nailed it. We have been experimenting with Lollar low-wind



pickups in the semi-hollow body guitars, while if you get the solid body guitar right, the standard Imperials work as is. As far as the neck in the semi-hollow body guitars, that was the easy one. The neck worked, but we needed more bite in the bridge,

so Jason came up with a low-wind humbucker called the Collings Special, and it's an Alnico II with a little more turns on the coils than the standard low-wind in the neck. Just recently, we went through another test scenario and reconfigured the bridge pickup again by just a hair in the direction we thought it should go.

TQR: Were there any players in particular that helped you in the R&D process?



There were a couple, but I don't know if I should mention their names because they've had other guitars named after them. But one player would certainly point out what wasn't right, and he did this from day one. Other people would just say, "Yeah, yeah, this is great." But he would say to me, "No... this needs this and this needs that." I appreciate everyone's

opinion, but the criticism is good stuff, and you could not have anything more important. We also relied on the "big ears" of our friend Ed Reynolds, who has done guitar work for lots of serious players.

TQR: Are you shooting nitro?

Yes, and you wouldn't want to use anything else, like poly, especially on an electric guitar, because that will put that hard glare on the tone, like an eggshell.

TQR: What type of tone caps are you using?



Polyester film caps with vintage-style shielded wire. We wanted to go with something that was really reliable but also have a cap that was non-inductive and prevent the guitars from becoming an antenna. We tried to stay away from fads, however, because it

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seems that everybody has a new cap coming out. Actually, we pick out our pots for every guitar, as well. Aaron notes the values for each pot, so if we have a harder fingerboard that is producing a brighter tone, for example, we can back that off a bit with a lower value pot.

Basically, we get a range of CTS pots from 430K to almost 600K, and some of them we won't use.

You could go on forever experimenting with all of this – like an X brace in our acoustics, but we have to find something that works and stay away from fads.

TQR: Big 'custom shop' operations can crank out around 60 guitars a day – what are you doing?

Three. We like that, and it could very easily get ahead of us. We have to have enough time to stop and say, "What did we just build?" We're not producers, and we really don't do that with acoustic guitars, either. We try to build single, great guitars, one at a time. It's not our goal to become a Taylor, or Gibson or Martin. Every guitar we make is an individual order – we don't come in on Monday and it's 'dreadnought day.' We work with the dealers every month to collect



their orders, and we run anywhere from a 2 to 18 month lag time, depending on the model, on filling orders. We basically sell high-end labor, and we really don't know anything about marketing. After 35 years of building stuff, I've never even had a brochure. If you come to the shop, what you get to see are a bunch of crazy people who are giving it their all because they truly love what they do. **TQ**

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A Player's Review

You'll recognize Jonn Richardson as our designated player at the Spanish Castle Burst Off chronicled in the March 08 issue of TQR. Jonn lives in Houston, splitting his time on the road playing with Otis Taylor, Diunna Greenleaf and Gary Moore, among others, and he was the winner of the Albert King Award at the International Blues Challenge in 2005. No surprise there – Jonn is one of those exceptional guitarists who plays with an emotional intensity that cannot be taught – you either bring it or you don't. If you'd like to check out his

work, just hit www.youtube.com and enter his name. As luck would have it, Jonn bought a Collings CL just as this issue began to take form. Listen...



I honestly didn't realize that Collings had started making electrics until my buddy Brad told me he was thinking of getting one. The next thing I knew, I'm in a car listening to ZZ Top's first album heading up I-10 to the Hill Country.

He wanted me to come along and help him pick 'the one' out of a batch of them, and in Texas, when you get an invite

to go to the Hill Country for barbecue and guitars, it's a no brainer. When we got to the store there were a few to choose from, so we started the process of checking them out.

I played four or five CL Deluxes in different colors, some more flamey than others, but all beautiful. After playing them all, we narrowed it down to two – one on pure aesthetics and the other that was 'it' on tone. I could not put it down, and as much as Brad wanted the 'prettier' one, I convinced him that this guitar had it all. So what if it wasn't the exact color he wanted? This guitar played and chimed like a piano!

The playability of the Collings electrics is great, and the neck width is surprisingly comfortable for a less clubby, 'contemporary' neck shape. The fingerboard feels like a big open highway just waiting to be explored. The fret work is also amazing – you can bend the hell out of the notes and they have that nice, smooth, effortless movement. Hearing the Lollar Imperial pickups made me remember why I wanted a Les Paul to begin with, and I even went out and bought a set of Lollars for one of my Pauls. True enough, nothing can compare to '58 and '59 Les Pauls and those old PAFs, but for these guitars, the Lollars do the trick. In the neck position the tone is very rich and full with clarity – not that woofy, muddy tone, but a defined sound that will stand up to a loud bass



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player. The bridge pickup kicks in with an over-the-top tone that cuts on stage – nice and clear with great note definition. Any of you who have been on stage and couldn't cut through the band know what it's like when you have to switch to the bridge pickup to get over the drummer... The Collings is an incredibly responsive instrument, but no two guitars made by anyone ever seem to be the same. This guitar is one of those that really wanted to be a guitar – not a coffee table.



I normally play nothing but Gibsons – a '54 mutt is my weapon of choice, with an old '58 P90 harness from a vintage Les Paul Special. I love the wrap-around tailpiece, and I also have another Les Paul '74 reissue of the '54 that had been routed for humbuckers. The ending to the Collings story is just the beginning for me. A few months ago Brad said he was 'over' the Collings we had picked out (the

truth was that he didn't like the color of the one I picked) and he really wanted to get the color he wanted. Since he bought the first Collings CL, he also bought an I-35 and the 290, which both sound amazing. You know the old saying, "If you love something set it free, and if it comes back too you it was meant to be?" A few days before my next tour in Europe, I bought Brad's Collings that I had picked out for him and took it with me along with the '54 Les Paul. A guy that has been watching us play for years walked up to me after our set and said, "Man, you were doing stuff and getting sounds out of that guitar that I never heard you play before." And he is a fine player himself. I used the Collings for most of the tour, and had a blast exploring the Collings side of the highway of tone. My CL Deluxe is a fantastic guitar, and that's coming from a long-time (and stubborn) traditional Gibson player.

Our take on the Collings electrics mirror Jonn's, even though we didn't have the opportunity to fondle more than two, and we didn't test them on the road. The I35 semi-hollowbody we received for review was indeed an acoustic guitar with pickups. Weighing just 6.4 pounds, it's a stunning work of art that fulfills its intended purpose flawlessly, from the fretwork, to the perfect neck profile, the gracefully carved, contoured neck heel, the exceptional mahogany back and 3-D figured maple top, and the precise Sperzel tuners. Like the acoustics, the Collings electrics challenge you to find a single flaw or imperfection (you won't). The Lollar bridge pickup sounds strong, bright and sharp with Lollar's trademark bass and midrange balance, while the neck position is jazzy, mellow and warm. Combine the two and season to taste. The acoustic qualities of the I35 produce extraordinary resonance and beautiful sustain with, as Jonn observed, a solid piano-like

quality on the lower strings. Overall, a remarkably vocal, *singing* guitar.

The single cutaway City Limits we received is the identical model Jonn acquired, and we also noted the full, high crown on the medium jumbo frets, which could make some other guitars easily seem a bit clunky and awkward. Our CL weighed 8.35 pounds – enough to suggest some weight and authority, but not at the expense of treble bite and presence. Aside from their sheer beauty and craftsmanship, our strongest impression of both Collings was how they seem to develop an airy, soaring voice rich in harmonic content and lively, ringing sustain that inspires moves you might avoid on another guitar. They also throw down a clear, cutting clean tone that will hold up in a loud band, as Jonn noted. Lollar pickups have always excelled at sounding balanced with good midrange and well-defined harmonics.

If you're waiting for a criticism to balance out our comments, we can offer one... For some, the Collings may be almost too pretty and perfect. Sorry, that's the best we can do.

"Bird Lives..."



Some time during the early '90s (about the time Collings guitars were taking flight in Austin), an earnest and resourceful human being devised a way to leave meandering, perfect purple footprints on the sidewalks of Greenwich Village, occasionally adding a curious phrase every four or five blocks that simply said, "Bird

Lives." We first noticed the footprints while walking south one morning from Grammercy Park to the Cupping Room, and over the course of a long, hot summer in New York they seemed to multiply overnight. At first no more than a curiosity, a new trail would appear, then another, and another, and throughout the summer in Manhattan these perfect, purple footprints began to symbolize something more than what they seemed... Man's artful ingenuity, of course, and more than a little stealthy determination, but they also came to represent clues to something deeper – our basic need to leave something behind that says, "I was here." Yes. Yes, you were... "Bird Lives."

When it comes right down to it, people like Bill Collings choose to build guitars not for money (there is no money in the first guitar, and no guarantee of a second or a third), nor

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for recognition, but simply to make something of enduring quality and beauty that marks their time on earth. Success is a fringe benefit. Lacking a Collings acoustic ourselves, Delta Moon guitarist Mark Johnson loaned us his 1999 Collings OM1, a finely crafted, diminutive

guitar made with perfect spruce, mahogany and ebony. You may like the bigger ones, but the OM1 is the equivalent of comfort food in the guitar world – an instrument that encourages you to pluck away your troubles with a soothing, melodic voice that calms the soul. Call it six string therapy. Having just played the OM1 at a time of day in the middle of the week when work would normally postpone such pleasures, we don't feel inclined to offer a dry summation of features – only benefits. Yes, the mahogany back and sides impart a mellow warmth we prefer over rosewood, which Jimmy D'Aquisto once said was suitable for cabinets, but not guitars. And like every Collings we have ever seen or likely ever will, the OM1 was flawlessly assembled and finished to a degree that immediately gives the impression of an heirloom, even new. The nickel Waverly tuners on the slotted headstock are burnished and precise, and the ebony fingerboard lends the perfect measure of treble presence to the rich tone of the mahogany. The wide neck and fingerboard are gloriously forgiving of imprecise fingering technique, rendering a guitar that can be played and enjoyed with no fussiness whatsoever on stage, a porch, a beach, a hammock or a couch. For what it is, and what it does, there is nothing finer. Bird Lives.

Time Traveling with Gord Miller & GM Vintage

Jason Lollar first turned us on to the restoration and finishing work of Gord Miller in British Columbia, and we asked Gord to explain how he developed his chops restoring relatively affordable vintage wrecks to their once former glory. With people like Gord Miller at your disposal, some of the 'project' guitars you may have passed over in the past have never looked better...

TQR: How did you get started doing refins and restorations?

My vintage guitar education began in Ontario in the early '80s. I was playing various nasty, pointy headstock guitars on



the bar band circuit and working part time in a steel mill. There was a music store

near my bus stop to go to work, and that was where I met my good friend Colin Cripps. Nowadays, Colin is a successful songwriter and producer (he recently played with Bryan Adams on the 40th anniversary remake of Sgt. Pepper, which was produced by Beatle's legend Geoff Emerick). Back then he was a part time repairman, and Colin was the first guy I knew who appreciated old guitars. I remember walking in one day and he had an all-gold '56 Les Paul and a pre-war rosewood J200 that he was taking to show Paul Stanley of Kiss. He thought he could get around \$1600 for the J200, and I remember thinking that was an awful lot for a used guitar!



In 1982 Colin and I hopped in my '56 Chevy and drove out to Vancouver to seek fame and fortune. He only lasted a couple of months, but during that time we took a week-end trip to Seattle to check out guitar stores. After scouring various stores downtown, we ran across Mick's Guitars, then a major player in the Seattle area. I remember two long rows of pre CBS Stratocasters covering the front wall – the top row were rosewood board models for about \$600 each, and the bottom row was maple board '50s models for \$800 and up. I asked Colin why the bottom row was more expensive? He explained that they were older and therefore more valuable. More money for an *older* guitar? How stupid! Then we looked behind the counter where the bigger fishes were kept – an all original Flying V and a nicely flamed '59 burst, each for the princely sum of \$3000. All I could think was that three grand would buy a hell of a nice Jackson!

Fast forward to 1990, and I had come to understand what all the fuss was about. For the most part, the horses (cheap vintage Strats, Teles and Les Pauls) had left the barn, but if you

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