Orfeo MAGAZINE

N°10

SPECIAL USA

West Coast Road Trip

Pepe Romero Sr. and Jr.

Richard Reynoso

Harris Foundation

Jeffrey Elliott

Gregory Byers

Eric Sahlin

N° 10 - Autumn 2017
English Edition

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From the Editor

orfeo N°10
MAGAZINE

Desert wildflowers

In the deserts of North America, a truly miraculous spectacle can be observed: The sparse rains of December and January are enough to call forth spring flowers in these vast expanses of intact geological grandeur.

The phenomenon reminds me of the generation of luthiers that blossomed in the United States in the mid-sixties. Far from the European context, where for centuries knowledge has been passed from father to son or transmitted through schools of lutherie, American luthiers had no such institutes, and so learned their craft in isolation.

Concert tours, firstly by Andrés Segovia, and later by Christopher Parkening and the Romero family, inspired an interest in the construction of classical guitars in a country renowned for its Martins and Gibsons.

From the 1970s onwards, publications by the Guild of American Luthiers, as well as José Romanillos' guitar building courses, greatly contributed to these luthiers' training.

For this tenth edition of Orfeo, I invite you to meet some of the USA's West Coast luthiers.

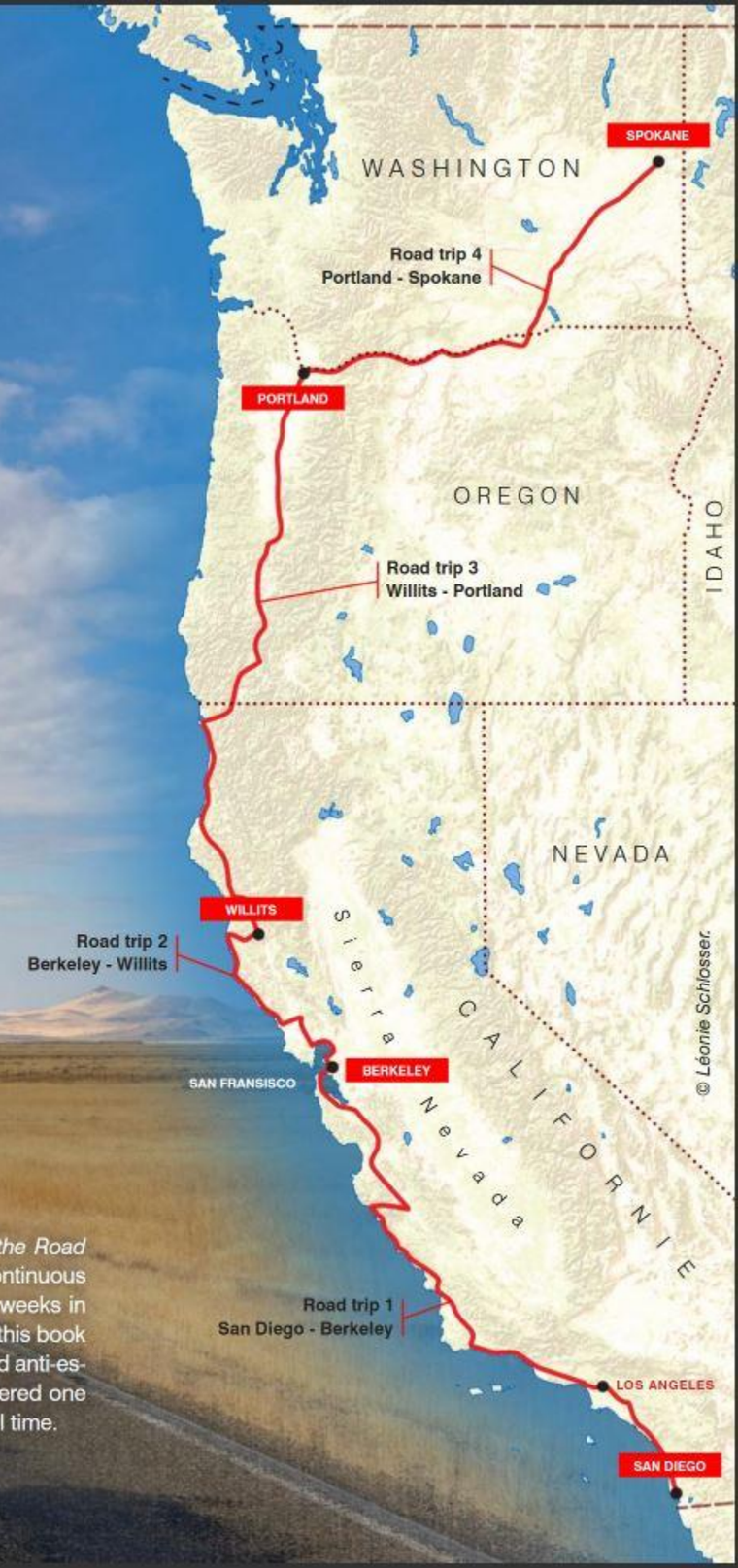
Bon voyage!

Alberto Martinez

West Coast road trip

I'll admit it: I love to get behind the steering wheel of a car and just drive… The windshield has always been the best movie screen that I could ever imagine. In my time as a photographer, it has been through this marvelous screen that I have viewed African deserts, thriving capitals, Alpine summits and American parks.

> "Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as is ever so on the road."
>
> Jack Kerouac
> *On the Road*



So when planning my itinerary to visit luthiers on the West Coast of the USA, the automobile really is the obvious choice of transportation. My Road Trip begins in San Diego (California), where Pepe Romero Jr. lives, then there's a visit to Richard Reynoso in Los Angeles, followed by the Harris Guitar Foundation, near San Francisco, Gregory Byers in Willits, Jeffrey Elliott in Portland (Oregon), with a final stop in Spokane (Washington) to see Eric Sahlin. The promise of 2,500 kilometers, stretching from southern California, down near the Mexican border, right up to Spokane, in the state of Washington, near the Canadian border, is just too much: no other form of transportation will do. I am beckoned by US Route 101, laid out in 1926 all along the Pacific coast…

My traveling companion is a book: *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac. Typed on a single continuous scroll of paper over the course of three weeks in April 1951 and finally published in 1957, this book was immediately adopted by the Beat and anti-establishment generation. It is now considered one of the best English-language novels of all time. Time to hit the road!

Pepe Romero Jr., guitar in his veins

Pepe is doubly lucky: not only is his lutherie inspired by his father's beautiful guitar collection, but he also has a famous family of "guitarristas" to test every guitar he makes.

Father and son, at the family home, with two guitars made by Pepe Jr.

Pepe Romero Jr. dedicates all of his guitars to his grandfather, Celedonio.

Orfeo – Being Pepe Romero' son, why did you decide to become a "guitarrero" (guitar maker) instead of a "guitarrista" (guitar player)?

Pepe Romero Jr. – When I was a kid, my father was travelling all the time and I missed him a lot. I learnt to play guitar and I love to play guitar but I said to myself: "I don't want to be a guitarist; I don't want to live in a hotel; I want to stay at home with my family."

Then when I was 12 or 13, I started to really love woodworking and my grandfather, Celedonio, encouraged me to become a guitar maker. Unfortunately, he died before seeing my first guitar completed but I dedicate all my guitars to him, as you can read in my labels.

I have a very close relationship with my family: when I finish the guitars, very often I string them with my father, if he is around, and then he and my uncles give me their opinion. I learn a lot from them. My father often plays with my guitars #30 and #90 for his recordings.

Orfeo – How did you learn lutherie?

P. R. Jr. – I made my first guitar in 1996 with Dake Traphagen, with the intention of building only one. I enjoyed the process very much and when the moment came to put the strings on it… I understood that this was my vocation!

Then I travelled to Spain and I spent quite a bit of time in the workshop of Miguel Rodriguez; he was ill and was not working but we would spend hours and hours talking about guitar construction. I also took a course with José Romanillos in the same summer, in Cordoba.

In the late 1990s, I spent two full summers in

"MY UKULELES HAVE TO BE GOOD QUALITY: I'M PUTTING MY REPUTATION ON THE LINE."

In 2010, I went to Hawaii with my wife and daughter for a vacation and we fell in love with both the island and its music. Once back in San Diego I decided to build a ukulele, and so I bought a couple of old ones and studied them.

I build them like flamenco guitars, but with only three light reversed braces. It's a bonus that I can use small pieces of wood that are unsuitable for guitars. The market for ukuleles is very strong and my instruments are very well received.

Then I also created a line of cheaper models, designed by me and made in Vietnam and China. They have to be good quality; I'm putting my reputation on the line. I also have a line of strings, made by La Bella to my own specifications.

Examples of bracing: five- or seven-strut reverse fans and slanted treble bar.

Pepe Jr. takes much of the inspiration for his guitars from Miguel Rodríguez.

Tuners signed by the luthier.

Twelve-hole tieblock.

Madrid with Pablo Contreras, watching him and learning from him. I miss him greatly…
And then, after having built 24 guitars, from 2000 onwards, I went to Germany every summer to study with Edmund Blöchinger. I spent more time with him than with anybody else. Under Blöchinger I really refined my craftsmanship.

Orfeo – Why are you using a reverse fan bracing?

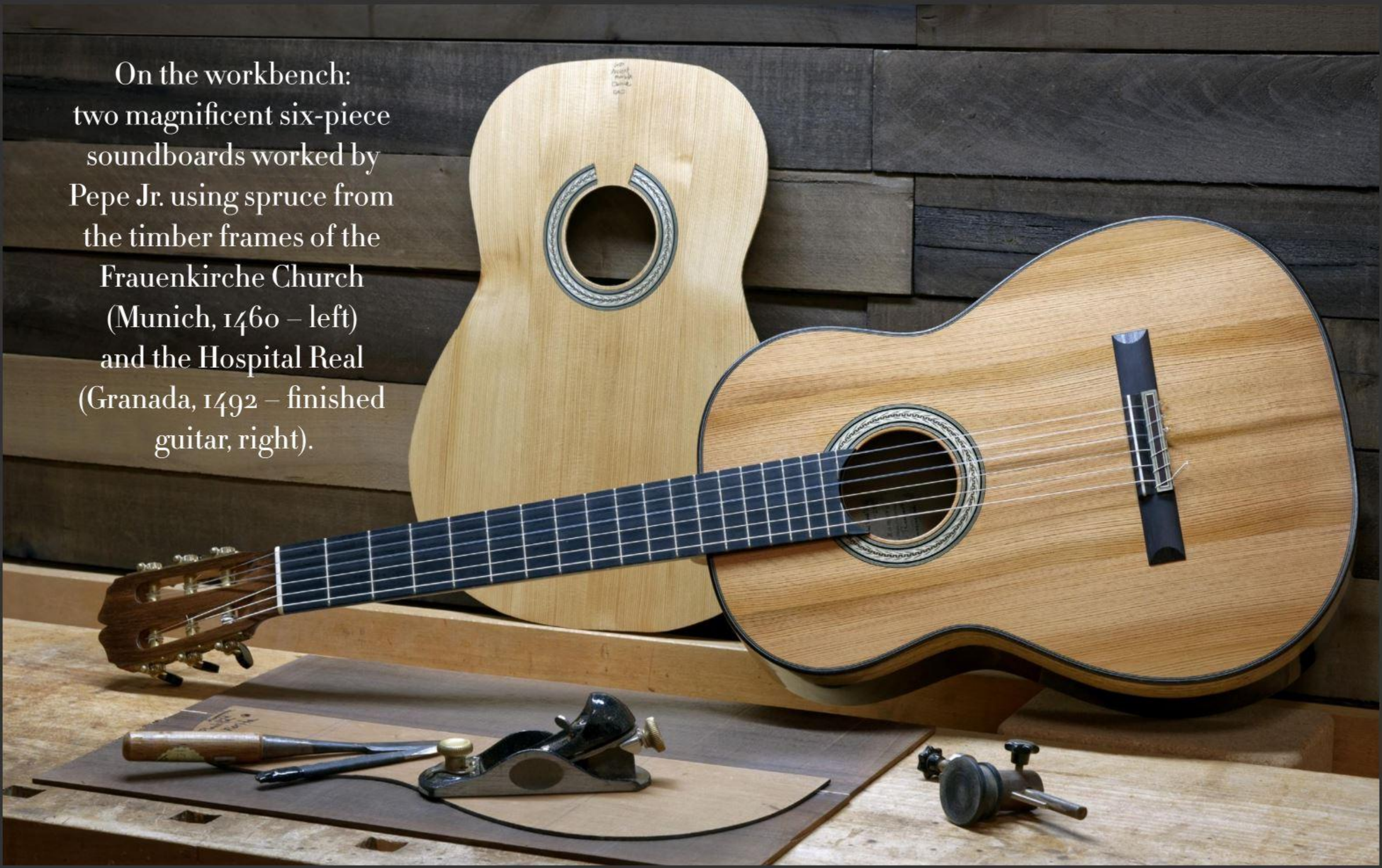
P. R. Jr. – It comes from Miguel Rodriguez Jr. He made three or four guitars with the reverse fan bracing in the 1970s following an idea of his father's. A fan-braced top is stiffer where the braces come closer together, and more flexible where they open out. So by reversing the fan, I give more freedom to the top over the bridge.
At the same time, I make the braces progressively thinner as they converge in the tighter part, to achieve more balance. In this way, the energy, the sound of the instrument, comes out more freely.
From #17 up to #170 I used the Rodriguez pattern (classic five-brace fan and a treble bar). Later, I started using the reversed fan, initially with seven braces, and then from #230 up until now with five braces.

Orfeo – What changes do you notice when you modify the bracing?

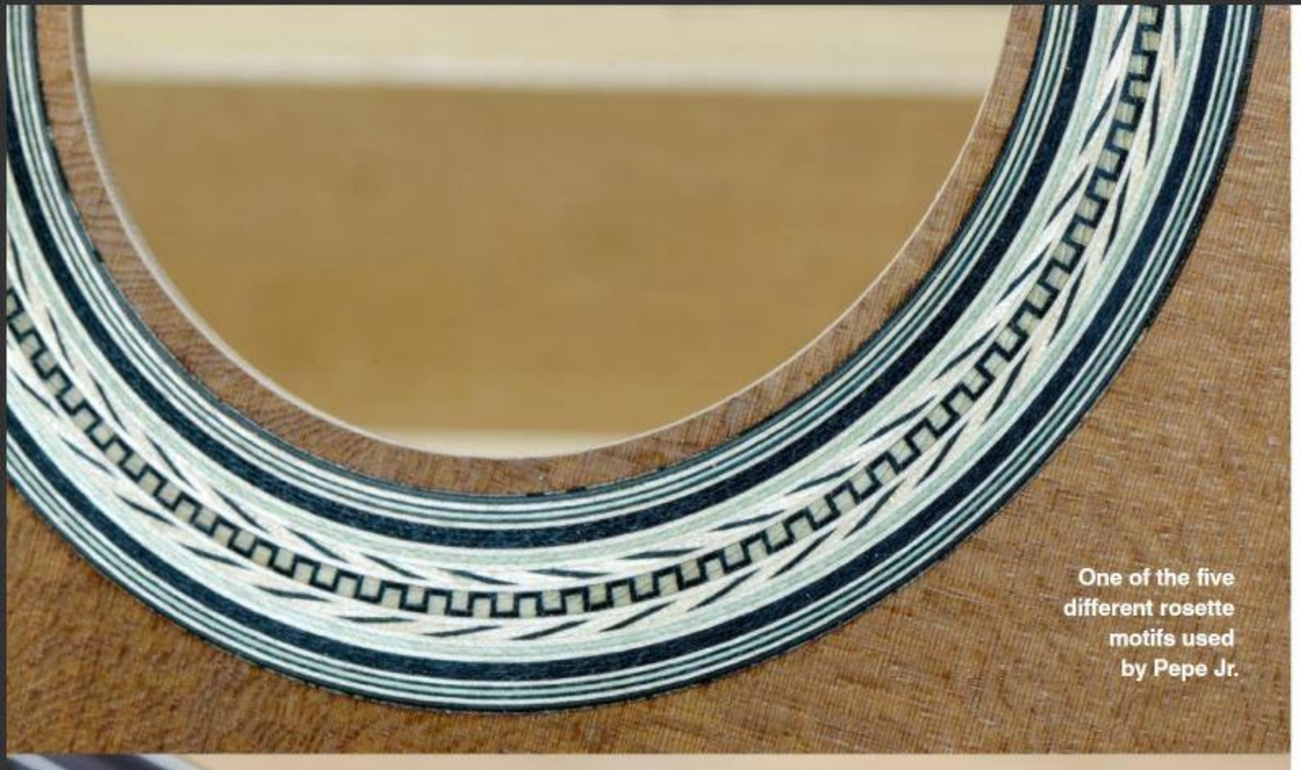
P. R. Jr. – When I build with the reverse fan bracing, the power is the same but I get more overtones and greater sustain. I love it!
On the other hand, the sound remains similar, there's no escaping your personality: the guitar's fundamentals are always going to stem from your heart and your hands.
I'm very happy with the way my instruments are turning out but I don't ever feel like "well, now I can happily settle on this and churn them out, all identical".
The whole point of what we are doing – building guitars or playing guitars – is to make beautiful music: big, round, the old Spanish sound.

Orfeo – What other details are unique to your construction?

P. R. Jr. – I'm putting more arch in the back than I used to. I can work it a little lighter because the arch provides more physical strength, resistance. I can use lighter bracing and allow the wood to vibrate more freely.
Since the back is stronger, I can go lighter with the rest. It's a question of balance.
My philosophy is that every part of the instrument should vibrate and move; I want the energy to move throughout very freely and to be alive. So my aim is to inhibit the wood as little as possible. I make a thicker top, domed even in the upper part, and use very light bracing.
Most guitars are domed only in the lower part. The top has one part arched and one part flat; this is not a natural way for the wood to flex. For me, the entire top should be domed so that less tension is felt in the guitar, so that the top can move more freely. Additionally, it offers even more strength and will thus be better for the longevity of the instrument.



On the workbench: two magnificent six-piece soundboards worked by Pepe Jr. using spruce from the timber frames of the Frauenkirche Church (Munich, 1460 – left) and the Hospital Real (Granada, 1492 – finished guitar, right).



One of the five different rosette motifs used by Pepe Jr.

In some cases he uses a bronze nut, to brighten the notes.

Ukulele made of koa, with three-strut inverse fan bracing.

The idea is to create an overall balance in the construction: the way you design the top, the dome, the thickness of the braces and how you arrange them. No one element alone holds the key.

Orfeo – Who are the luthiers that inspire you the most?

P. R. Jr. – Personally, I see Miguel Rodriguez and Santos Hernandez as my idols. And, of course, Edmund Blöchinger, with whom I did the most study. His guitars have influenced me a lot. Blöchinger is very close to Torres in the way he builds; Torres is his hero.

Orfeo – Why do you use a brass nut in some of your guitars?

P. R. Jr. – To me, the brass nut is a tool. If I have a dark guitar and I want to give some focus, some edge to the notes and to brighten them up, I use a brass nut. I do it to refine the sound at the end, to make it more round, more flexible. I use it when I am looking for that particular quality.

Orfeo – What woods are you using?

P. R. Jr. – I spent my first twenty years buying woods and now I think I have enough wood to last me for the rest of my career.

I have a lot of spruce from Germany, lots of red cedar from Washington State and many other woods from retired guitar makers. Anyway, with the CITES restrictions, we will have to work more with woods other than rosewood.

I love cypress, even for classical guitars; to me it's not solely a flamenco wood; it's a great option. I can prove it tomorrow, when you come to photograph some of the guitars in my father's collection!

Heading off to photograph the guitars of Pepe Romero Sr.

His favorite guitar, "La Wonderful", built by Miguel Rodríguez in 1973 and with which he has made over sixty recordings.

Pepe Romero Sr.'s guitar collection

"Every guitar teaches us something."

Pepe Romero Sr.

Pepe Romero Sr. has communicated the beauty of the classical guitar to millions of people throughout the world, made more than sixty recordings and performed with many of the world's greatest orchestras and conductors.
His father, the legendary Celedonio Romero, his only guitar teacher, was the founder of the guitar quartet The Romeros, with Pepe and his brothers Angel and Celin.
Pepe Romero owns a guitar collection that is an extraordinary source of inspiration for his son Pepe Jr.

Manuel Ramírez
1912, crafted by
Manuel himself.

Miguel Rodríguez
1958, “Henrietta”,
his first Rodríguez.

Santos Hernández
1932, which
belonged to his
father, Celedonio.

Hermann
Hauser II 1975.

Richard Reynoso, a luthier to watch

Involved with the arts throughout most of his life, Reynoso studied lutherie with a local guitar maker and worked in a small repair shop.
Today he has his own workshop and with 17 years experience, stands out as one of America's most promising guitar makers.

Preliminary drawing for the rosette design.

Orfeo – Which are your favorite woods?
Richard Reynoso – I like them all. Since we are building instruments, it is the tonal characteristics of the woods that are important. Of course, the crucial part is the top, the membrane, but the wood used for the back and sides color the sound. I really like cypress; I find it creates a beautiful fundamental quality to each note.

Orfeo – Which elements are unique to your way of crafting guitars?
R. R. – I add a shelf, an extension, to the upper part of the typical Spanish foot, to better combine the neck and the top. I'm trying to extend a wide mahogany neck as far as I can into the body to prevent any soundboard cracks along the fingerboard.
My bracing is a seven-brace fan, or sometimes a five-brace pattern, with a transverse bar below the harmonic bar. Some braces are fitted underneath this bar but the bar is not left open. I like a stiff, rigid structure and I try to have as much energy as possible focused in the lower part of the soundboard. I believe the top works as a whole rather than as designated treble and bass side.

Orfeo – Where does the inspiration for your rosettes come from?
R. R. – It comes from a chandelier I had seen in a museum. What caught my eye was the further out from the center, the shapes continued to change. It's also an Art Deco inspiration; if you look at my guitar heads you can see the square lines. I am not creating a copy but I am attracted to the Art Deco esthetics. Sometimes I find inspiration from old Los Angeles buildings.
The head is carved by hand from one piece of ebony. Cur-

Head carved by hand, with ebony veneer.

His guitars undergo French polishing except for on the headstock and bridge, which are finished with oil.

Spruce soundboard and its bracing.

The extension at the top of the heel.

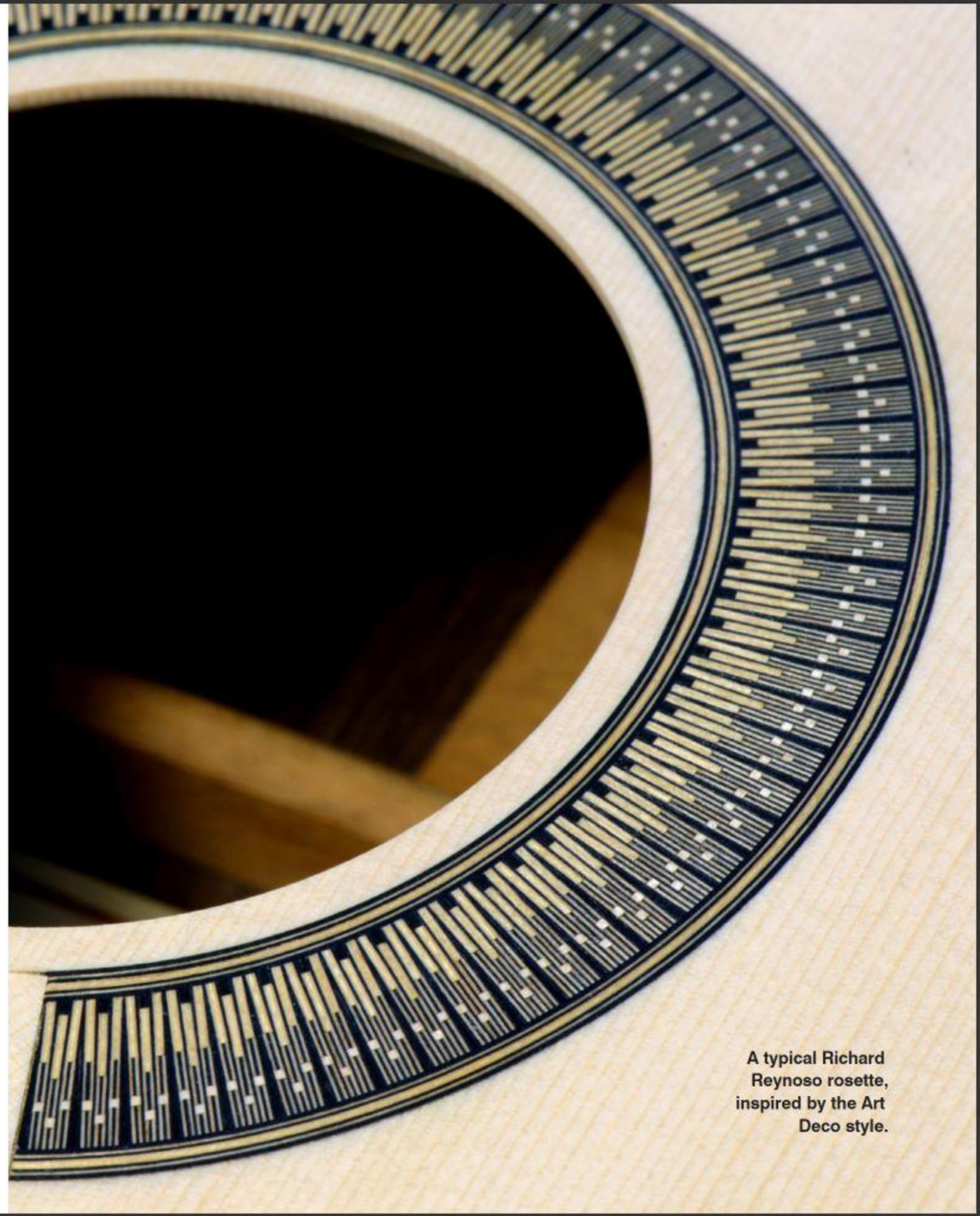
Sides made of cypress.

Rosette in progress.

“As an artist, I choose what feels right for me.”

rently I’m working with wenge wood, which I dye to get a nice black with some grain to it. It’s not easy; it’s tough to work with this hard wood.
My guitars undergo French polishing everywhere except on the head and the bridge, where I prefer to use oil; I keep them natural.

Orfeo – Which guitar makers have influenced your work?
R. R. – My bracing patterns are influenced by Torres, Hauser and Fleta. I have also studied and repaired guitars by Miguel Rodriguez.
I’m happy with the sound my guitars produce; my focus is to create a membrane that is sensitive to the touch, has depth and is rich in color. I'm not trying to achieve a Torres or a Fleta quality of sound but one that is uniquely my own.
One of the best guitars I've ever played was a Hauser from 1957 played by Julian Bream. I grew up listening to this guitar in my dad's car. This guitar was for sale at GSI and I had the opportunity to examine it and play it several times. It resonated with me, it sounded great. I'm also influenced by the guitars made by Daniel Friederich, I admire his approach to the craft and understanding of the guitar.
As an artist, I choose what feels right for me and my work and not what the market is looking for. Fortunately, what I’m doing happens to be what people seem to like.
Also, I spend a lot of time playing guitar, which allows a closer relationship with my work but also my clients as well.



A typical Richard Reynoso rosette, inspired by the Art Deco style.

San Diego to Berkeley

"Mañana, a lovely word and one that probably means heaven." Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

San Diego

Guitar Salon International, Los Angeles

Working in such privileged conditions only happens once in a blue moon! There I am, at the Romero family home in Del Mar, San Diego, and Pepe Jr. is helping me set up my portable photo studio in his former workshop, a little room overlooking the garden. And while I am adjusting my cameras and lighting, there, in the very next room, is Pepe Sr., practicing for his next concert. Imagine the joy of photographing his guitar collection to the sound of his playing on "La Wonderful" for my ears alone!

The next day I drive to Los Angeles, where I have two important appointments. This super-sized, excessive metropolis is surely the city that best reflects "the American dream", with its cars, movie stars, surf and jogging.

My first rendez-vous is in Santa Monica, at Guitar Salon International – an absolute must for any classical guitar enthusiast. Even if you travel the world over, you would be hard pressed to find any place offering a comparable range of exceptional guitars for sale, where you can try them out in comfort and be welcomed like an old friend. A slice of heaven for guitarists and collectors.

My second engagement is in North Hollywood, with Richard Reynoso. His artistic background shines through in his workshop and indeed in everything that he does. He pieces together his magnificent "Art Deco" rosettes, barefoot, in a charming little studio. He possesses the ear and the manual dexterity required to become a master luthier.

As I set off for San Francisco, I was thinking of taking a detour and driving up the Pacific coastline, but I find myself having to head back onto Route 101 as of Paso Robles because of road-works. So much for those magnificent beaches, those wave-battered cliffs and those rugged coves. Big Sur, Carmel, Monterrey, Salinas: adios, and better luck next time.

The clouds come down just as I arrive in Berkeley, having crossed the bay from San Francisco via the San Mateo Bridge (11 kilometres, California's longest), under torrential rain. John Harris and his collection are there to greet me.

Los Angeles

Scripps Pier, San Diego

Rodeo Drive, Los Angeles

Pacific Coast Highway

Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles

San Mateo Bridge, San Francisco

Harris Guitar Foundation: A living guitar collection

John Harris is no ordinary guitar collector. He shares his guitars with students at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, organizes concerts and lectures on the history of the guitars in his extensive collection. An inspiration to us all.

Pepe Romero, John Harris, Richard Bruné and Marc Teicholz, during a “Guitarrada” session.

Panormo 1837

Torres 1878

Rubio 1965

Bouchet 1968

Simplicio 1929
« Moderna »

Arcángel Fernández 1962

Hermann Hauser I 1948

Hernández y Aguado 1969

Manuel Ramírez 1912

Orfeo – What is your relationship with the San Francisco Conservatory of Music?
John Harris – The Harris Guitar Foundation is a charitable foundation with an official mission to support the educational program of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music's guitar department, headed by David Tanenbaum.

Orfeo - When did you start your collection?
J. H. – I started collecting in the nineties and got into it more seriously after making a film about the Romero guitar family in San Diego. They don't consider themselves to be collectors – but they are! – and they have a fabulous collection. After meeting them, I fell in love with the special sound of vintage guitars – especially Antonio de Torres and his heirs – and then collecting became an obsession; it's like an illness!
The collection grew and we started doing the "Guitarrada", a semi-annual event at the conservatory with Pepe Romero, Richard Bruné, David Tanenbaum, Marc Teicholz, myself and a few others on stage, playing historical guitars and talking about them. The audience loved the passion, knowledge and humor of these guys. After five or six years of presenting Guitarradas, in the early 2000s, I said: "Let's make this permanent." So I went to a consultant to create a foundation, associated with the SFCM, which offered the beautiful space where my collection is now displayed.
The display cabinet holds 14 guitars at a time, so I rotate new guitars every two weeks. We have ten sessions per semester with the students, and each session takes us through a particular stage, and the various "schools" of lutherie, in the history of the "modern" guitar. And, of course, we play and discuss the guitars associated with each theme. The students fall in love with these guitars, too, which is the whole point of the foundation.

San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

Berkeley to Willits

"We suddenly reached a height and saw stretched out ahead of us the fabulous white city of San Francisco on her eleven mystic hills with the blue Pacific and its advancing wall of potato-patch fog beyond, and smoke and goldenness in the late afternoon of time." Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

Bodega Bay

Pacific Coast Highway

Leaving the San Francisco Bay over the San Rafael Bridge, I let the brilliant sunshine persuade me to take a coastal detour and visit a legendary location from the world of cinema: Bodega Bay. It was here that Alfred Hitchcock decided to shoot "The Birds".

This small fishing town, a hundred kilometers or so north of San Francisco, still harbors its signature mists and disquieting sadness. In an interview about this film, Hitchcock stated that "the film shows that man can't take Nature for granted, because if it turns on him, he's in trouble… He thinks he is the master of everything." Visionary, huh?

After the haze of Bodega Bay, my route takes me back out into bright daylight and I wend my way up the Pacific coast, passing rugged inlets and seals basking in the sun.

Willits, where Gregory Byers lives, with its population of 5,000 souls, nestled in the heart of Mendocino County, is not exactly what you'd call a bustling megalopolis. It is best known for the California Western Railroad, a heritage railway that takes tourists out to Fort Bragg through forests of giants trees.

Tomorrow, after my visit to Byers' workshop, I think that I might just have to come and take a closer look at these majestic trees…

San Rafael Bridge, San Francisco

Gregory Byers, a tireless researcher

Gregory Byers indulges in research.
He built an experimental guitar that could be disassembled and reassembled so as to study the functions of the various components, and a special neck for understanding and fine-tuning his instruments.

The experimental guitar's back and ribs, which can be reassembled.

Below: The experimental neck.

Orfeo – You have worked a lot on intonation. What are your conclusions?

Gregory Byers – Some 25 years ago I became frustrated with the intonation of the classical guitar so I tried to find solutions. Typically, guitars do not play quite in tune, and typically they play out of tune in just about the same ways. This means that, as we fret higher on the fingerboard, the notes will sound progressively sharper than they should. The traditional way to compensate for inharmonicity is to move the saddle back.

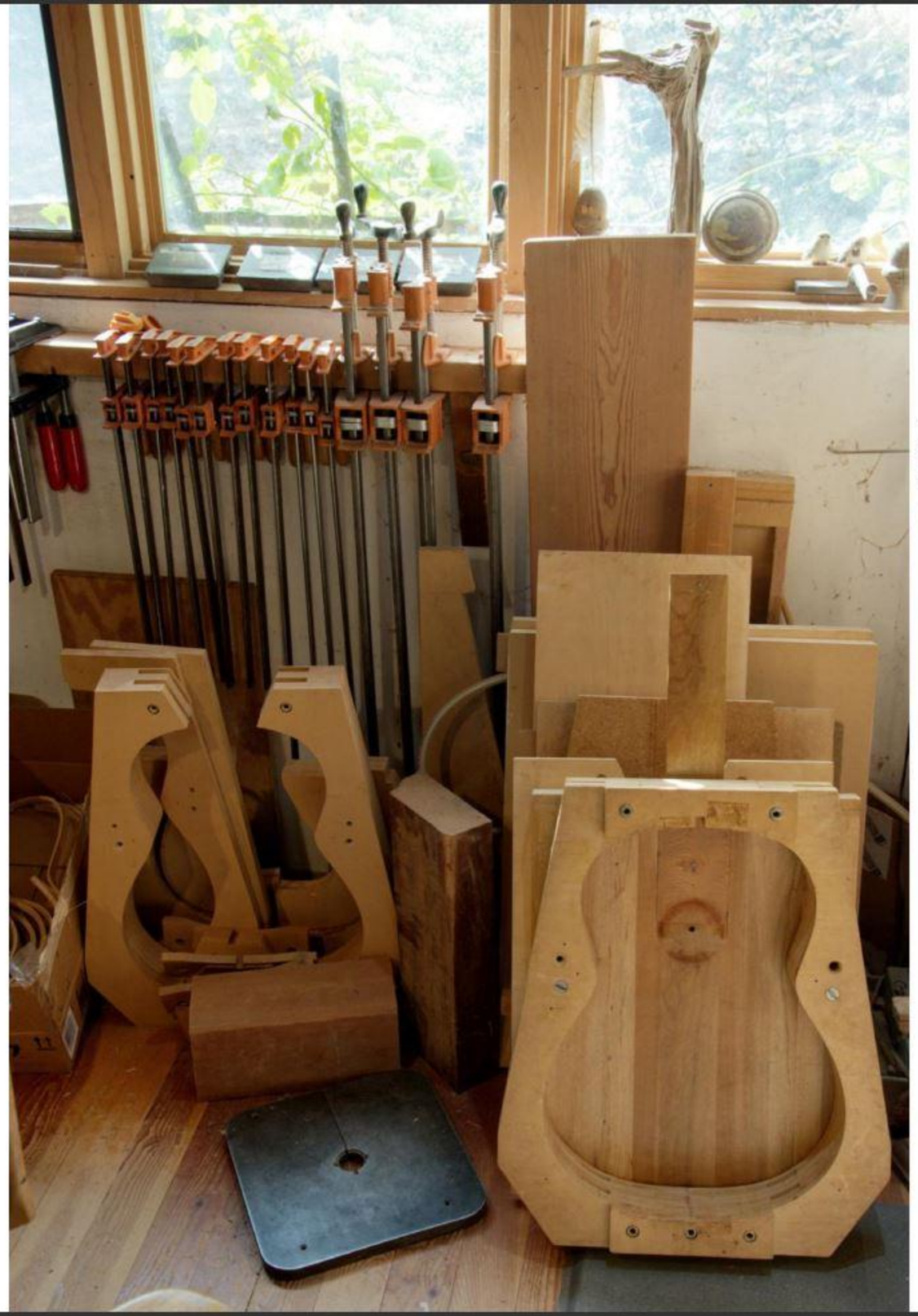
First, I worked with some theoretical models and then I prepared a tool to adjust the scale and the position of the fretboard.

I found that every string needs a different setting. The G-string, for instance, should be longer in the saddle end and shorter in the nut end.

The other problem is that when you fret a note, wherever you are in the fretboard, you stretch the string and by stretching the string you are raising the pitch a little bit. The only notes where you are not raising the pitch are the open strings. So, in order to minimize the rise in pitch from stretching the strings, you have to move the nut forward. This is why compensation is necessary at both ends – nut and saddle – though traditionally it has only been practiced at the saddle.

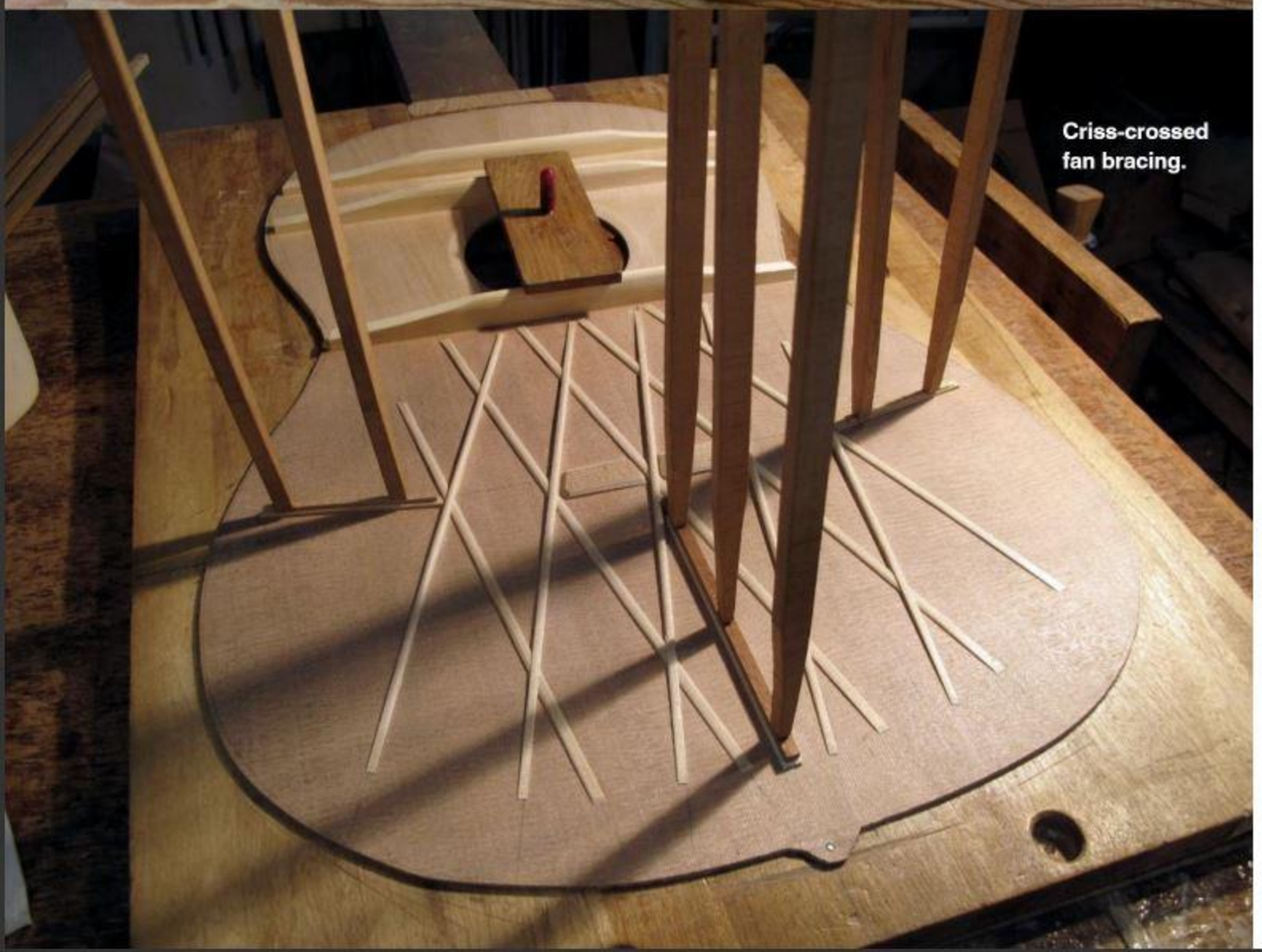
Orfeo – Have you worked with different bracings?

G. B. – Yes, I have tested different bracing systems. A few years back, with the help of some friends, I built an experimental guitar with all the parts screwed together so that I could change tops, sides and backs. Until about ten years ago I concentrated on a fan-braced system: a six-brace fan with a "treble bar" and two lower "closing" bars. In recent years, I have been working with a personal lattice bracing system, overlapping two fan-bracings: I have taken two sets of five- or seven-brace fans and rotated them with respect to each other to form a lattice. This approach maintains the timbral palette and offers strong support in front of the bridge, inherent in a fan-braced design, while also introducing the main advantage of a lattice: more uniform support to the entire soundboard. For me this system tends to offer greater presence, with big basses, excellent evenness from note to note and great clarity and projection.



Molds and tools in Byers' workshop.

Tops from the experimental guitar.



Criss-crossed fan bracing.

Rosette on a cedar soundboard.

“I developed a personal “lattice” construction style.”

I even experimented with soundports; I found that they raise the pitch a little and it’s a good idea if you are playing in an “ensemble” because you get more feedback.

Orfeo – Why do you elevate the fretboard?
G. B. – I started doing it in 1993. At that time, Thomas Humphrey was very popular and guitarists loved his elevated fretboard. I liked his idea and I adopted it. It does mean that you have to build the top differently: it should slope downwards from the rosette to the heel. It surprised me a little at the beginning; I had the idea that I was messing with the conventional shape but the guitars are easier to play in the area of the 12th fret and above.

Orfeo – And why do you to build with a V-neck?
G. B. – I use a V-joint in the neck instead of the scarf joint. It’s not to have a bigger gluing surface; it’s because it matches the two pieces in a better way. I got this idea from Romanillos, who in turn got it from Hauser. I also dome my tops slightly, mainly in front of the bridge. It offers just enough resistance to overcome the tendency for the top to cave in under prolonged string tension.

The head is attached with a V-joint.

Stunning central motif with alternating leaves and ears of wheat.

The headstock with the three lobes is a sort of modern homage to Torres.

"My work is very much focused on the bridge area."

Decorated central back joint.

Having a raised fretboard means that the guitar top needs to slope down towards the heel.

Orfeo – I love your rosettes with the wheat. They are gorgeous!
G. B. – Thank you, I like to alternate the leaves and the grains.

Orfeo – Which are your preferred woods?
G. B. – I like cypress very much. It's not common in the classical guitar but it's a wonderful wood. Out of the rosewoods I prefer Brazilian. Nowadays, it's risky to send guitars made with this wood overseas and it's becoming too complicated. That's why I am working with maple and cypress; that is probably where our future lies.

Orfeo – What is a beautiful sound to you?
G. B. – I like a sound that has depth, richness, sweetness, and which comes out easily. The problem often is that the trebles are too thin, but I think I'm able to solve that issue now, by leaving the soundboard thicker.

Much of my attention is focused on the central area of the lower bout, the balance between the fore and aft of the bridge. That's the area where I dome the top. The entire top is important but I think that, as you are applying energy with the strings right there, on the bridge, what happens in this spot is especially critical for the transfer of energy.
Many luthiers make a very lightweight bridge but I read that Daniel Friederich prefers a bridge that has a little more mass and that this helps enhance sustain. I found that to be true also. I don't think that the flexibility of the bridge is so essential, but mass is.

Orfeo – Where did you learn guitar making?
G. B. – Let me tell you my story. I had no intention of becoming a luthier but one day I went to Puerto Rico and I met these guys who get together in the evening and play music in the "Cantinas" with nylon string guitars. I had played guitar before, but never with a nylon string guitar; finally I borrowed one and I really enjoyed playing with these guys. I tried to buy a guitar from a local guitar maker but, as I had to wait two years, I said: maybe I can make one by myself.
First I studied cabinet making and when I started to build guitars seriously, I asked myself whether I should make steel or nylon string guitars. Everybody played steel string guitars in America; hardly anybody played classical. On the other hand, their ideal was Martin or Gibson, factory made instruments, and it was difficult for a luthier to make his living. Finally, I decided to build classical guitars and, in 1981, I went to one of the José Romanillos guitar building courses in Toronto and that was a tremendous inspiration for me.
The Guild of American Luthiers has also given us all a fantastic boost; it started in the 1970s, it is informative, is published quarterly, and facilitates the sharing of information among luthiers.

Willits to Portland

"The road must eventually lead to the whole world. Ain't nowhere else it can go, right?" Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

California Western Railroad

I'm pleased with my decision to take the "Avenue of the Giants": about 50 kilometers of what was formerly Route 101, winding between enormous trees. This road and the Redwood State Park, a little further along, are home to two primeval forests, predominantly sequoia. The moist, temperate climate, greatly influenced by the Pacific Ocean, offers optimal growing conditions for the trees, which can reach up to 6 meters across and 100 meters in height, making them the giants of the plant kingdom. Moreover, these immense sequoias can live to be several thousand years old.

These forests are also home to Sitka spruce, whose wood is widely used for acoustic guitar soundboards.

I then regain the coastal road and follow it to the far reaches of California, and then continue my journey through the state of Oregon. My next stop is Portland, where I hope to visit Jeffrey Elliott and his wife at their workshop.

As I travel through these colossal forests, stretching from northern California to Canada, I find myself wondering whether or not Elliott uses local wood for making his guitars…

Highway 101

Logging trucks, a common sight on the route.

Portland

Willits

Avenue of the Giants:
about fifty kilometers of what
was formerly Route 101, winding
between enormous trees.

Jeffrey Elliott, a sonata for four hands

Jeffrey Elliott and Cyndy Burton are both luthiers, sharing their life and work: He does the building and she does the polishing. Just like the Estesos and other husband-and-wife teams in the history of the guitar!

Since 1977 Jeffrey Elliott has been adding carvings to his rosettes upon request.

“I prefer European spruce for my sound-boards.”

Orfeo – Yesterday, I was driving through these fantastic redwood forests and I was wondering if the luthiers here on the West Coast could source all the woods they need for their guitars locally. Do you use American spruce, red cedar or maple?

Jeffrey Elliott – And yew wood! I like yew very much. I use it for multi-piece backs because the pieces are never very large. I have built several guitars with multi-piece backs; as much an aesthetic choice as an effort to conserve materials.

We have a couple of tonewood suppliers in Portland; they import woods from all over the world so we can get everything we need locally, not only American woods. I have made guitars with Sitka spruce but I prefer European spruce for my tops because it has the broadest tonal palette and the greatest variety of sound and color; more than any other tonewood, more than red cedar, Sitka, Engelmann, or red spruce, and I want this color palette for my guitars.

I prefer the lighter woods, not too dense, and that’s what’s wrong with Sitka and red spruce: they’re too dense. Engelmann is almost the opposite; it’s light, like cedar. It has a big, open sound, and is immediately responsive, but it doesn’t have the color range, the variety, that I like. Red cedar is similar, but it has a different sound: it’s warm, the trebles are bright and the overtones are very active – sometimes they can be too active – but the low frequencies are sometimes less clear, and the separation of voices less distinct, than with spruce.

In order to overcome these issues I leave the top about 10% thicker so that the end result is nearly

Cyndy Burton and Jeffrey Elliott in front of their home in Portland.

equivalent to spruce and I always brace my tops with European spruce, no matter which wood is used for the top, so as to bring out the color range that I like. I like European maple, too! American western maple is beautiful but is not dense enough and East Coast maple is too dense, too hard, and too heavy, for my taste.

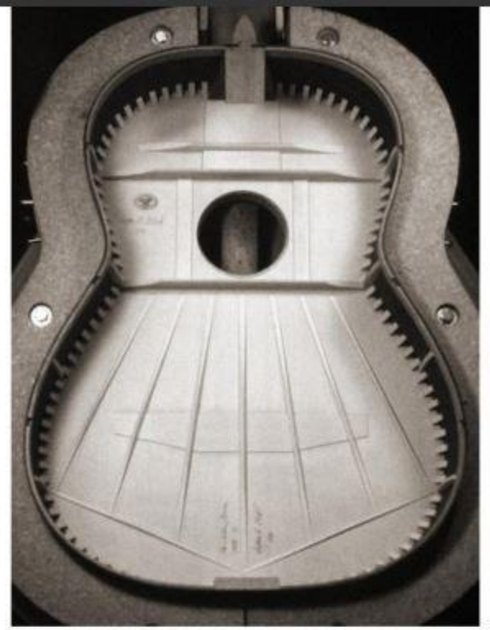
Orfeo – When did you get started in lutherie?
J. E. – From 1966 to 1972 I studied with Richard Schneider, then I attended courses at the Toronto guitar festival given by David Rubio in 1975 and '78 and José Romanillos in 1981 and '84.
When I began my work under Schneider, he was making traditional instruments. Then Dr. Kasha approached Schneider with his own design, and Schneider emerged as the most representative maker of the Kasha guitar. I helped make the first 20 or so of those instruments. Early on in my own work I made instruments incorporating some of Kasha's principles, and I feel that they were more successful in steel string guitars than in classical guitars. I concluded that the instruments I wanted to make would be based on the traditional design.

Orfeo – Your bracing is very personal; can you explain your open harmonic bar system?
J. E. – The starting point is the traditional Torres seven-brace fan top with the open harmonic bar below the waist. In my system, all three harmonic bars are open. The result is that the guitar sounds more mature from the beginning. It has a more balanced, open, complex sound with increased volume and projection. It doesn't sound like a new guitar. Interestingly, I have discovered that when my traditionally braced guitars come back after 15 or 20 years of regular playing, they have developed those qualities. I have used this bracing design for 28 years now, and I'm convinced that it avoids the structural problems I've seen in previous versions.
Louder guitars can and have been made, but it is usually at the expense of the character of the sound, especially in guitars with non-wood components and inorganic glues in their tops. Those materials change and override the natural wood sound, making it over bright, and limiting the color palette. Of course, this is a personal judgment: loudness is one criterion, but not the most important.

The three soundboard bars are open and reinforced.

His guitar plans were published, life-size, by the Guild of American Luthiers.

Veneer on both faces of the headstock: a typical feature of his guitars.



Inside the Julian Bream guitar built by Elliott in 1985.

Orfeo – Your rosettes are also innovative, how are they made?

J. E. – The central band of my rosettes is a natural-state wood, replacing the traditional mosaic. Spalted maple sometimes has tiny holes made by insects and, instead of filling them with glue and mastic, I'll inlay silver or gold, with mother-of-pearl or abalone, or turquoise. The inspiration came from the astronomy photos taken with the Hubble telescope, where you see the Eagle Nebula and the shining new stars, just born.
Sometimes I'll also do a chip carving on either side of the central band.

Orfeo – Why these unusual carvings?

J. E. – The idea comes from lutes, which usually have decorative carvings. I liked it and wanted to use it, so in 1977 I started carving rosettes. People liked it, so I kept it up. But it's a special feature, which I offer as an option, as it is rather time consuming.

Orfeo – What was your connection with Julian Bream?

J. E. – I revered his playing and his musical vision so much, and I wanted to show him my guitars to ask his opinion of them. Then I was introduced to

"Quincy", a guitar made in 2012, sporting a traditional rosette.

His craftsmanship is of the highest caliber. He often fashions the neck out of a single piece of Spanish cedar.

a woman in Los Angeles who owned two Hauser I guitars and she let me study them for a few days. I learned how they were constructed, drew up plans from my observations and then made instruments based on those plans. In 1975, this same woman introduced me to Julian Bream, which gave me the chance to show him a guitar and I was quite encouraged by his feedback. We met a few more times, and in 1980 he commissioned one. When we met in Vancouver BC in 1985, Bream bought my guitar. He played the evening concert with it, then continued with it for the rest of his tour.

Orfeo – Has your lutherie been influenced by your restoration work?

J. E. – I appreciate my predecessors; they crafted wonderful instruments using only a few hand tools, without the technology that we have now. Their work was guided mainly by instinct and intuition. When I look these makers' instruments, I can see that they loved what they were doing. For me the main lesson is "less is more".

Orfeo - What kind of sound do you aim for?

J. E. – I take my inspiration from a combination of three sounds: a Romanillos 1973, such a gorgeous sound and in the perfect hands of Bream; the Hauser 1937 played by Segovia; and a Torres 1856 that belongs to Pepe Romero, Sr. There are other influences, but those three stand out.
There are probably some other guitars, built by very good makers, some undiscovered gems that were just as good as the Romanillos or the Hauser, but we don't know of them because they never fell into the hands of a Bream or Segovia. The perfect pairing of the right player with the right guitar is what makes it so special. You don't know if you've made a really great instrument until it's in the hands of a great musician! I can predictably make a guitar that is clear, even, balanced, with good separation, lots of sustain, and loud enough for the concert hall. But what I can't control is the personality of the guitar. The same person can build two guitars, side by side, using sister-cut materials, and the guitars may turn out like sisters but not like identical twins, not exactly the same. Mother Nature will never let that happen!

Orfeo – Cyndy, you are also a luthier; how did you get started?

Cyndy Burton – I took an intensive six-week course with Stringfellow Guitars in Massachusetts, making my first guitar under William Cumpiano. In the beginning my idea was just to achieve a better guitar to play. Jeffrey and I met in 1979 at a Guild of American Luthiers convention in Boston and we found that we were interested in making very similar instruments. I also attended the Romanillos' courses in the 1980s. For almost 30 years I made guitars under my own name and now I enjoy French polishing Jeffrey's guitars. The shellac lets the beauty of the wood shine through and I believe improves the sound, making it bigger, richer, with more sustain. Nowadays, I work in a separate "clean" room; it's better for our life as a couple – not to mention the finish!

Rosette comprising several pieces of of African blackwood.

The guitarist can choose whether or not to leave the sideports open.

Portland to Spokane

"There was nowhere to go but everywhere."

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

Drive straight for 317 km...

Oregon hit the headlines twice this summer.
The first time, in late August, Oregon was in the news because there was to be a solar eclipse, and visibility was expected to be at its best in the middle of the state. More than a million people, many of whom had travelled from other states, gathered along a 100 kilometer wide strip in central Oregon in order to view the moon completely block out the sun for a few minutes.

The eclipse as seen by NASA.

The awful sight of trees in flames.

NASA went a step further by photographing the phenomenon from satellites and aircraft in flight, capable of following the eclipse for longer and with less atmospheric interference.
The other major headline was of a less jubilant nature: the dreadful news of huge forest fires this summer. Oregon is prone to wildfires in hot weather, but seldom are the blazes as intense as this year's.
Leaving Portland (Oregon) to head to Spokane (Washington) for an interview with Eric Sahlin, I find that the road running alongside the Columbia River is blocked due to the fires and police are diverting traffic to the far bank, on the Washington State side.
I will forever look back on this leg of my journey with sadness: driving miles and miles with smoke blurring my vision and the horrible sight, in glimpses every now and then, of trees in flames on the far side of the river.

Ah, those American trucks!

Reduced visibility because of the smoke.

The countryside around Spokane.

Eric Sahlin, a self-taught luthier

A workshop surrounded by nature.

He learnt how to build guitars all by himself and lives nowhere near any music conservatories or capitals. Guided by his intuition, he “twist” the necks on his guitars and finishes them with refined elegance.

0rfeo – When did you get into lutherie?
Eric Sahlin – My brother played guitar and he had plenty of guitar records so, very young, I fell in love with the sound of the instrument. I was not interested in playing guitar but I liked the woodwork and the idea of building one. In 1975, I bought some Brazilian rosewood and I built my first guitar in my parents' basement.
Then, when I had the opportunity to build a guitar in my art class. After that I worked in a cabinet shop and made furniture for two or three years.
In 1979, I was introduced to George Dauphinais of the Dauphin Company (guitar mail-order). He was importing Ramirez guitars, which Segovia and Parkening had made very popular in America at that time, and he was looking for a cheaper alternative for his customers. So I started building seven-, eight- and ten-string guitars for him in the Ramirez style.

Adding mother-of-pearl offers the rosette eye-catching brightness.

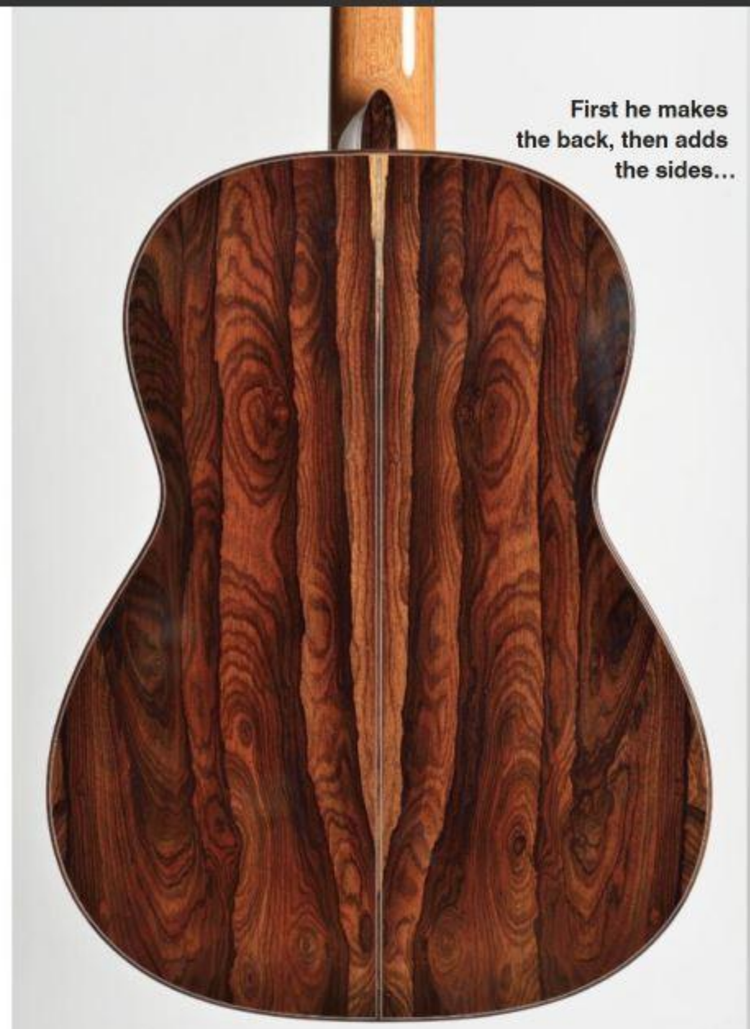
Once the body is finished it's time to glue the neck and screw it on.

In the early 1980s the bottom fell out of the guitar market, so I started making lutes due to the influence of a lutenist friend, I went back to building furniture and only made a handful of guitars.
In the late 1980s the guitar market recovered and I started getting orders again, so from then on, guitar building became my main activity. At the same time I was studying lattice bracing, like the Australians were using, and I built more than 20 guitars like this. The problem that I found with this kind of construction – a very thin top and the lattice bracing – is that the sound is very percussive, like a drum. That's why I started making the top thicker and thicker and the bracing smaller and smaller. In the end, the guitars sounded as if they had seven-strut fan bracing, like a Hauser or Torres. As it was much more complicated to build, I dropped the lattice and moved to the classical bracing.

0rfeo – Did you ever have the opportunity to see a Hauser or Torres guitar?
E. S. – I've never seen a Torres or Hauser I, but I have seen a Hauser II in my shop.

0rfeo – So, you learnt lutherie all by yourself; have you ever had classes with another luthier?
E. S. – I visited Robert Ruck and Robert Lundberg in their workshops.

0rfeo – What is the sound that you have in your mind?



First he makes the back, then adds the sides…

…and finishes by attaching the top.

The wood used for this guitar built in 2015 is ziricote.

Like Elliott, Sahlin adds veneer to both faces of the head.

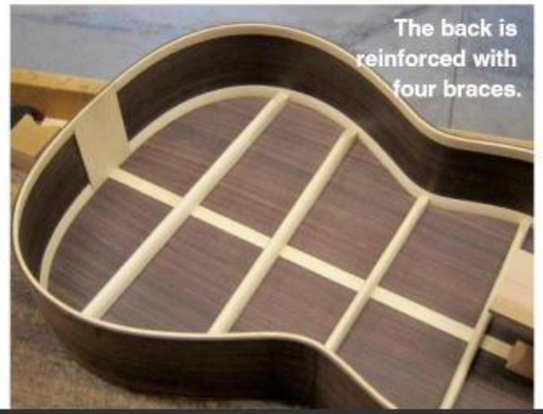
The soundboard is French polished and the back and sides sprayed.

Superb purfling around the heel.

E. S. – It's difficult to describe my ideal sound. I like the sweet tone, balanced sound and more musical third string of the Hauser style guitars, and yet I also like the quick response and the more colored sound of the old Spanish guitars. I would like the best of both worlds!
Once, I had an order for two flamenco guitars together. As I didn't want to build guitars that didn't sound flamenco, I built an experimental guitar that enabled me to try out different tops and bracing patterns.

0rfeo – Do you have any special details for achieving perfect intonation?
E. S. – Yes, I cut about a 1/2 mm off the top of the fingerboard, to shorten the distance between the nut and the first fret. And I also pay a lot of attention to the nut, filing the bone slots differently for every string.

0rfeo – Your fretboards are "twisted", why?
E. S. – Yes, I add a slight «twist» to the neck profile so that I can make the bridge saddle the same height bass to treble. This not only evens the tension across the strings but also gives you more latitude in action adjustment. It also makes the neck a bit more comfortable for the left hand of the player in the lower positions.


The back is reinforced with four braces.

0rfeo – Which are your favorite woods?
E. S. – I work with red cedar and spruce but I prefer the Engelmann spruce for the tops. As I live in Washington State, I can easily find first quality tops around here.
The same is true for red cedar; the best red cedar can be found all along the Pacific Coast, from Washington to Vancouver, Canada. We also have wonderful maple everywhere here, but as I build what people want, I use Brazilian or Indian rosewood for the back and sides. Personally, I like to work with Brazilian rosewood: I like the color, the grain, the smell, and when you tap on it, the wood rings like a bell.

0rfeo – Do you have some good players around to test your guitars?
E. S. – Yes, I'm very lucky: there is a group of great players in this area that have being supporting me. As I don't play, it's very important for me to talk guitar with them and understand their relationship with the instrument. These conversations pushed me to lean more towards the Hauser style, with a thicker soundboard: I can get a sweeter tone and I have a better chance of achieving a good first string!


His soundboard bracing is inspired by Hauser.

“
All he needed
was a wheel
in his hand
and four
on the road.
”

Jack Kerouac
On the Road

Paris, November 2017

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