

HARMONIOUS HANDCRAFTSMANSHIP:

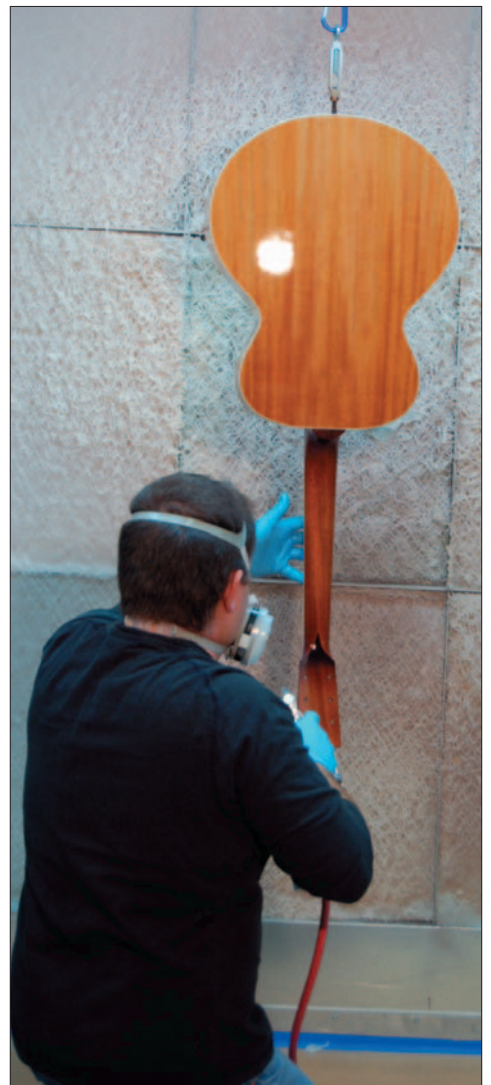
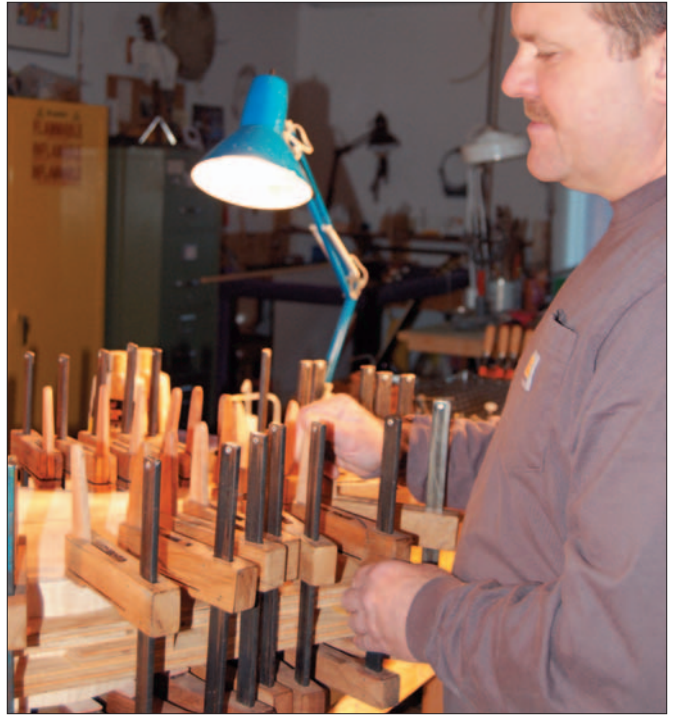
JOHN WALKER GUITARS...

BUILDING
ELABORATE
INSTRUMENTS
IS ALL IN A
DAY'S
WORK
FOR
AN
ALBERTON
ARTISAN.

By Brian D'Ambrosio



In a western Montana wilderness paradise full of rushing rivers, plentiful wildlife, and timbered forests, some may be more than a bit surprised to find a temperate craftsman making stringed musical instruments in a sequestered shop. However, eight miles east of Alberton, off a dusty, pebbled, and remote country road, there's a luthier named John Walker doing just that—one string and fretboard at a time.



Walker has been hand building fine, flat-top acoustic guitars from this location since 2005. The names of the models that he creates—such as Gus Creek, Lolo Creek, Clark Fork, and The Ruby—derive from the rippling rivers and rolling creeks that this uncommon architect enjoys and loves.

The elite Lolo Creek model is reminiscent of guitars built in the 1930s and early 1940s, with several more options incorporated into its design. It's a shallow-bodied guitar with a rollicking sound and colorful components, including a Sitka spruce wood body, red spruce bracing, and a hard maple rift-sawn bridge plate.

Part artisan, part machinist, part mechanic, John Walker spends dozens and dozens of hours building one guitar—first tracing it for perfect symmetry, then drawing and transferring its outline, and then cutting, molding, and sanding its wooden body.

"I have developed a couple of models that span a wide array of players' preferences. I'm trying to stick with a few different models and slight variations of those models, and build my guitars as similar[ly] as possible," says Walker, pointing to one of his more elaborate offerings—a new, unnamed model that is stylish and distinct, blending both maple and Honduran rosewood.

"I feel very fortunate that I am able to live my passion of building acoustic instruments for people to play and enjoy," adds Walker, a soft-spoken man characterized by shyness and modesty.

Walker's background in the acoustic instrument industry dates back more than 20 years. Indeed, acknowledgments for John Walker's work include reviews in a pair of vanguard guitar-related publications: *Gibson's Fabulous Flat-Top Guitars*, co-authored by Eldon Whitford, David Vinopal and Dan Erlewine, and *Gibson Guitars: 100 Years of an American Icon* by Walter Carter. While such accolades stir up a sort of jovial and pleasant excitement within him, Walker is even more inspired and touched when a satisfied client compliments the finished product, or treats the elaborate instrument with visible reverence and care.

In terms of describing his pathway in life, there's almost no other way of defining the learned John Walker: He's a linear luthier who has gained invaluable experience by studying the innovative and meticulous actions of some of the best masterminds of the guitar-making trade.

"I've found out that guitar making is all about design and knowing what to do with the materials that you have in front of you," he says.



HARMONIOUS HANDCRAFTSMANSHIP: JOHN WALKER GUITARS

Walker's calling to the craft started at the Flatiron Mandolin and Banjo Company in Bozeman back in the 1980s. "While at Flatiron, I began believing I could make a living working with guitars," he says. After a couple of years, Walker transitioned to the Gibson Montana Division, also located in Bozeman, where he studied the skills of building flat-top acoustic guitars. During his tenure at Gibson Montana, he also helped develop the business' custom shop.

"At Gibson, it was my privilege to build non-production instruments for artists and special orders. I was also involved in creating new models, and I learned tooling."

At the end of 1995, Walker left Gibson Guitars and relocated to Seattle to work for Tacoma Guitars, where he had the opportunity to work diligently for long hours with Michael Gurian, a famous guitar-builder noted in the industry for his innovation.

"From Gurian, I learned different aspects of the guitar industry related to the manufacture of marquetry, rosettes, bridge and end pins, and about handmade specialty files and laser work."

In 2001, Walker accepted the opportunity to work alongside Steve Andersen, a man famed for his fine arch-top guitars and his mandolin creations. Indeed, such slogging has paid appreciable dividends: Today, John Walker can tell a guitar made of Sitka spruce apart from one made of Engelmann spruce just by the distinct sound each finished instrument delivers, and he's thrilled to have his very own line of musical instruments, based on what he knows, what he's studied, and the delicate and precise actions of his trade.

"I don't want to build something that people are going to say something bad about. I want each guitar to be structurally sound and aesthetically pleasing," says

Walker, who loves the fact that solitary carving, measuring, buffing, and painting experiences are all in his day's work. Throughout the years, Walker has worked at smaller and smaller operations; now he works alone, which, he says, keeps him more engaged.

Even though he strives steadfastly to do his very best, Walker understands that perfection is hypothetical and abstract and will always remain just beyond his reach. "Continuous improvement is a more reasonable objective," he says.

Oddly, or perhaps not, Walker's love of guitar music and guitar building doesn't extend into the realm of self-taught musical proficiency.

"I play enough to know if an instrument is right or complete. See, my job is to build a fine, quality instrument that *you* love to play, not me." ♠

For more information, visit www.johnwalkerguitars.com.

