DIVINE OBSESSION

*How respected builders **Dana Bourgeois**, **Roger Bucknall**, **Isaac Jang**, **Kevin Ryan**, and **Kathy Wingert** practice the high art of creating top-tier acoustic guitars.*

| BY TZVI GLUCKIN |

High-quality handcrafted acoustic guitars don't grow on trees.

Well, they do—sort of—but it takes more than a magical harvest to end up with one. Handcrafted acoustic instruments require months of labor, patience, and quiet determination to assemble. They aren't mass-produced. They can't be. And that explains why they cost so much. For example, the starting price, *sans* bells and whistles, for the instruments featured in this roundup is between $5,000 and $14,000. Lutherie is a test of endurance and not for the impulsive or easily distracted—leave that to the musicians. Builders are focused, careful, and long-term thinkers.

They also have strong opinions.

No issue, at least among the builders featured here, shows greater disparity than their embrace of machines and technology. Some builders rely heavily on CNC (computer numerical control), CAD (computer-aided design), laser-cutting and engraving tools, and high-precision tooling. Others use a band saw and router, preferring to do most of their work with hand tools and simple sanders. But despite their preferences and opinions, they aren't in the dark about alternative viewpoints. As U.K. builder Roger Bucknall of Fylde Guitars puts it: "It's difficult nowadays to draw a hard line between hand-making and machine-making."

Our featured builders also disagree about bling. Some build instruments that glisten with museum-quality artwork, intricate inlays—on fretboards, headstocks, rosettes, bindings, and backs—and elegant curves and bevels. Others offer simple, no-nonsense workhorses and have no intention of doing otherwise. Their business models differ as well and range from modest, 17-person factories to simple one-person operations. Most, at some point, have tried both.

For the most part, these differences are superficial. The art of guitar making has much common ground.

One shared skill is voicing tops, backs, and sides. Most builders don't choose wood just for its grain pattern or color, although aesthetic considerations are usually considered. Wood's most important component is sound. A skilled luthier will spend a good part of a day gently taping an unfinished top, listening for fundamental pitches and accompanying overtones, and then handcarving and reshaping its braces to bring out its resonant frequencies. What's more, every piece of wood is different. Discovering a material's—and ultimately an instrument's—unique sonic qualities is what makes playing a rich and rewarding experience.

It's also what distinguishes one builder from another.

The builders featured here also share an obsession with wood. They buy wood, usually more than they'll ever need—even whole trees, when possible—and store, age, dry, cut, and acclimatize it, usually for years and years, until they feel it's suitable for a guitar. To paraphrase instrument luthier Isaac Jang, "most builders suffer from wood acquisition syndrome."

We spoke with five builders about their instruments, techniques, building philosophies, opinions, and innovations. Their dedication and passion is palpable, and their hard work is obvious in the instruments they make. Brace yourself (pun intended) and get ready to learn, mostly in the words of the builders themselves, about a world you might know little of, but which is essential to the music you make.

ISAAC JANG:

GEOMETRY ADDS COMPLEXITY

Photo 1: Quality over quantity is Jang's building motto. Rather than increase production, Jang works as a one-man operation with a focus on improving his skill and making the best guitars possible.

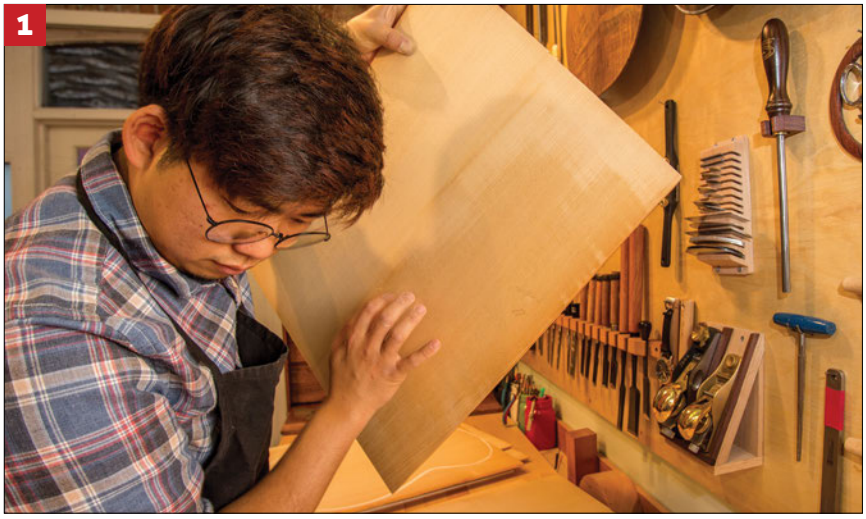
Photo 2: Jang apprenticed with luthier Kathy Wingert for a decade.

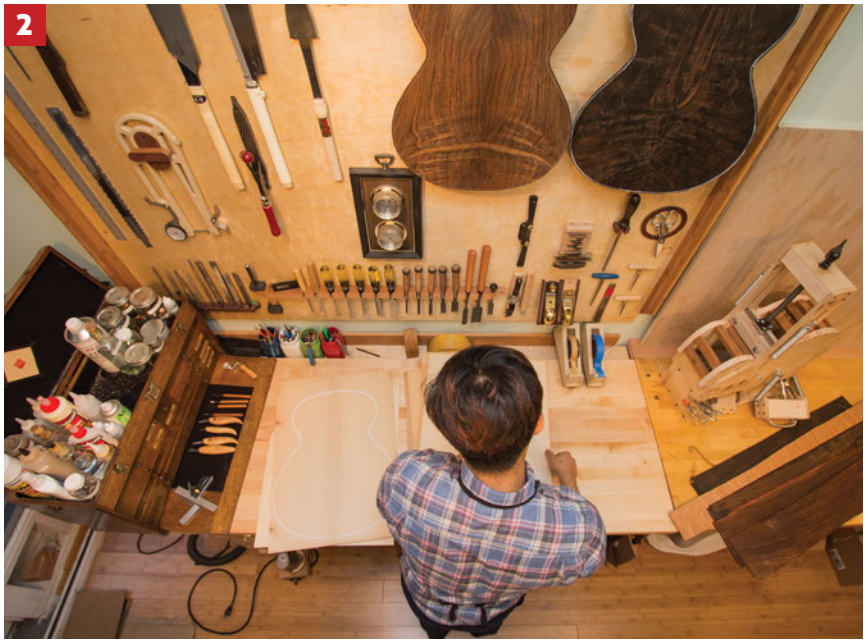
Isaac Jang, based in Hollywood, California, builds handmade, ergonomic, elegant guitars. He's the youngest builder profiled here and only recently finished his apprenticeship with Kathy Wingert.

"I got in touch with Kathy and said, 'I would like to study guitar making with you,'" he relays. "I was around 18-years-old at the time and she said, 'Since I have children your age, I'm going to give you my mom talk: You have to be in school, you have to build a few guitars, and you have to work in a repair shop.'"

He took her advice. He studied with Bryan Galloup at the Galloup School of Guitar Building and Professional Guitar Repair in Big Rapids, Michigan, built a few guitars, and got a job at Westwood Music in L.A., servicing A-list musicians—not that he knew who they were. "I moved from Korea and I wasn't aware of that many people in the music scene. I was just into guitars. Later, some of my coworkers were like, 'Do you know who that is?' I said, 'I'm not sure.' They said, 'Look him up.' I looked him up and I was like, 'David Crosby. He's a big name. Wow!' It seemed like that happened all the time with me." He also reconnected with Wingert. "I got in touch with Kathy. I said, 'This is Isaac, do you remember me? I'd like to show you my guitars that I built.' I started working with Kathy. I studied with her for about 10 years."

Some of Jang's builds feature an innovative and ergonomic cutaway—he calls it a bendaway—borrowed from Japanese master builder Mitsuhiro "Micky" Uchida. "I looked at different cutaway designs," he says. "There is the Venetian cutaway. There is a Florentine cutaway. I wanted to play with it a little bit. I came across Micky Uchida—he is an old-school luthier





"I like to have the wood speak for itself," he says. "I'm more of a designer who manipulates some parts to let the wood sing."

—Isaac Jang

Photo 3: Some of Jang's builds feature an innovative and ergonomic cutaway, as shown on this OM model. He calls it a bendaway—borrowed from Japanese master builder Mitsuhiro "Micky" Uchida.

Photo 4: A close look of Jang's end-graft detail on an OM model.

from Japan—and I asked him if it would be okay to use his design. He said, 'Of course. Perfectly fine.' The idea is to use the minimum amount of space from the guitar's body, to still have access to the upper frets, but without losing too much of the body or extra volume. I have a couple of guitars I'm working on now with slightly more of a bendaway—another two frets in or so. It seems to feel pretty good, pretty comfortable, and people seem to like it."

When viewed from the side, some of his guitars are wedge-shaped: thinner at the top than at the bottom, which is a design borrowed from California builder Linda Manzer. It's called a Manzer Wedge. "The big advantage is ergonomics," Jang says. "You're able to have a little bit deeper body without sacrificing comfort. Plus, having a slightly different geometry in the guitar body adds a little bit more complexity in the guitar box."

Jang's philosophy is wood-centric. "I like to have the wood speak for itself," he says. "I'm more of a designer who manipulates some parts to let the wood sing. My wood usually comes dried from the supplier, but I like to let it acclimate in my space for at least a couple of years before I start to use it. When I first started getting into guitar making, I started investing in wood. I bought wood anytime I had a little savings, so I actually have stacks that are about nine or 10 years old. Then it's one of those things: guitar wood acquisition syndrome. I always extend my stack. It's an addiction."

In addition to teaching lutherie at Musicians Institute Guitar Craft program in L.A., Jang's building goals are long-term. "My current objective for the next five-to-10 years is to refine every detail and every part of guitar making," he says. "I'm not looking to increase the number of guitars I make. I would prefer to really dial it in—focusing on the quality and the individual instruments that come out of my shop."