

Luthier's Story

Bill Collings is a *luthier* — someone who makes stringed musical instruments. In Bill's case, the instruments are guitars and mandolins, creatively designed in his mind's eye and exquisitely crafted by 50 employees in his shop in Austin, Texas.



Well-known musicians including Lyle Lovett, Jerry Jeff Walker and many others choose Collings guitars for the way they're made and the way they sound. A measure of these musicians' devotion to Collings guitars is their willingness to pay for them full retail, no exceptions. The company has never had paid endorsers. It doesn't need them.

What it does have is a fanatical following of musicians who understand the joy that comes from playing an instrument built by hand to a degree of quality that is unsurpassed — some would argue unmatched — in the world.



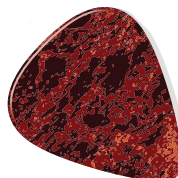
Bill Collings made his first instrument, a banjo, around 1970 while working in a machine shop when he was a college student. He built his first guitar in 1975, at his kitchen table, from mahogany wood from Honduras. That first guitar sparked the fire of perfection that burns furiously within him. It also helped create an order for his second guitar, made for a noted country, folk and bluegrass musician of the era. With that order, Bill Collings became a professional guitar maker.

An Obsession with Perfection

Those who know Bill Collings admire his ceaseless devotion to detail, superb craftsmanship, and uncompromising pursuit of perfection. These same people might also describe him as “nutty,” “crazy,” or “obsessed.” Steve McCreary, general manager of Collings Guitars, doesn’t disagree. He has watched his friend and business associate build guitars, a following, and a business for more than 20 years.

“Bill has the brain of an engineer, the hand of a machinist, and the eye of a designer,” McCreary observes. “He designed and built virtually every

piece of machinery in the shop, including complex heating and cooling devices for wood-bending. He has a passion for things mechanical that’s almost scary. He won’t accept less than perfection, and his ideal of perfection is always advancing. There’s nobody out there like him.”



While Bill Collings is revered for his acoustic instruments, his newest addition is a line of electric guitars. Just the idea of a Collings electric guitar has ruffled the feathers of some acoustic purists, but it's hardly the first time Bill Collings has created a stir. Always the visionary, he believes that he and his people can apply what they know about acoustics to put "a little more life into electric guitars."



Building the Best Guitars

Collings says he is on a mission to build the best guitars, not the most guitars. His business plan is "Do the best you can." While most manufacturing innovations are made to improve speed and efficiency, Collings' innovations emphasize creating a better product. If an idea leads to a better guitar that takes more time and costs more money to build, then so be it.

Doing the best you can appears to be a smart business plan. Increasing demand for Collings' instruments has resulted in his company moving into a new 22,000 square foot facility. Though the new facility is significantly larger than his previous one, his guitars and mandolins are still bench-made in a shop, not line-manufactured in a factory. The craftsmen who work for Collings Guitars are committed to their craft and to the master (chief visionary, teacher and dictator) who runs the shop.



“Blowing wet or oily air onto a finished wooden surface would be disastrous. If we didn’t have a constant source of clean, dry air, we’d be in big trouble.”

The foundation material in a guitar is the wood, and Collings selects certain species for particular applications, such as rosewood from Brazil for the back and sides, spruce from Germany for the soundboard, and mahogany from Honduras for the neck. Wood for a guitar being made today likely arrived at the shop nearly a year ago. Since then, it has undergone an extensive preparation process involving techniques unique to Collings Guitars.

A great deal of highly specialized labor goes into each instrument as well. The top and back of each guitar and mandolin are sanded and shaped by hand. The necks are calibrated to within one thousandth of an inch. The finishing process features twelve separate coats of lacquer totaling five thousandths of an inch in thickness. “That’s probably the toughest part of the process,” McCreary says. “You’re trying to make a piece of wood look like polished glass. That’s a pain. Wood doesn’t want to look like polished glass.”

Expensive, And Worth It

Collings’ integration of ideas, materials, and craftsmanship results in exquisite musical instruments — each a functioning work of art with a price tag to match. Basic acoustic guitar models start at \$3,000. Custom guitars can easily exceed \$10,000.

“They’re not cheap because man-hours aren’t cheap,” states Collings. “But they’re cheap when you consider the time and talent that went into them. It takes a lot of hands to make a guitar that looks like nobody touched it.”

Those with the desire and resources to buy a custom Collings guitar must also possess a modicum of patience. The time between placing an order and shipping a finished guitar is typically eight to ten months.





Wood Shop

Though Collings Guitars is a highly specialized operation, fundamentally it's a woodworking shop. One tool that's used in practically every commercial woodworking shop is compressed air.

"We use compressed air all over the shop," says McCreary. "Obviously we use lots of air in the three spray booths where we apply a variety of finishes, ranging from polyester to nitrocellulose lacquer to varnish. We also have four CNC machines with automatic tool changers running off of air. We have commercial planers and other large tools, lots of orbital hand sanders and we are constantly blowing dust off of parts

or blowing shavings from inside guitars."

The source of compressed air for Collings Guitars is an Atlas Copco WorkPlace Compressed Air System. For the new shop in Austin, McCreary selected a model GA18VSDFF with Atlas Copco's energy efficient Variable Speed Drive and high performance DD/PD integral filters. McCreary reports that one of the features users like best is the simple 'On-Off' pushbutton.

"Even though we build guitars and our needs might be a little different than some other woodworking shops, we have plenty in common. Blowing wet or oily air onto a finished wooden surface would be disastrous. If we didn't have a

constant source of clean, dry air, we'd be in big trouble. That's why we brought our old Atlas Copco unit over to the new shop for a backup, just in case."

The new shop is a place of focused activity where Bill Collings leads 50 full-time employees who build about 1,100 guitars and 500 mandolins a year. On a typical workday, Collings Guitars ships five or six guitars and two or three mandolins.

That is not a lot of instruments, but each is a unique consequence of one luthier's uncompromising pursuit of perfection.



Several years ago, Jim LaCombe, a photographer and owner of a Collings guitar, and designer Lance Brown, both based in Houston, approached Collings Guitars with a proposal for print advertising. The proposal included photographs of LaCombe's personal guitar, a custom 1997 Collings D-41.

Collings Guitars general manager Steve McCreary loved the concept so much he started the campaign using the photos in the proposal. Since then, LaCombe and Brown have built a campaign based on photographs of Collings guitars — not traditional product shots, but the actual instruments owned by Collings enthusiasts.

"Some companies need exposure," says McCreary. "Enough people recognize quality that we haven't had to wave our arms in the air to get noticed. Our print campaign is simply a way to celebrate players, the well-known and the unknown alike, who share a passion for music and Collings Guitars."

For more information: www.collingsguitars.com