

**Don Gallagher** has large, gentle hands, the hands of a master woodworker, just like his father's. And for the last 15 years he has been continuing the work his father started in the 1960s at J. W. Gallagher & Son Hand Crafted Guitars in Wartrace, Tennessee.

Gallagher loves to talk of his work and his father, and the two are as intertwined for him as the rich notes that compose a chord on one of his guitars. "My father was a woodworker. In fact, he made this walnut desk." Gallagher sweeps his hand along the top of the dark, handsome desk in his shop. "The types of furniture that my father made, well, his guitars kind of pale in comparison to some of his wood-working," he volunteers in admiration. "He started making furniture in 1939 and made furniture up until the early 1960s."

Then in 1963 some businessmen asked J. W. Gallagher to design and make a low-price guitar at a plant in Shelbyville. He did, but the craftsman in J. W. rebelled at the idea *and* the reality of mass production. His goal had always been to coax the best out of wood, so he left and produced his first Gallagher guitar in the spring of 1965. And Don, who had worked with his father on furniture and on the Shelby guitars, naturally lent a hand.

As fortune would have it, the Gallaghers began producing their guitars at the time when the instrument was just coming into its own. Guitars were finally beginning to take the lead away from the fiddle, and the folk music movement



*Tennessee's Don Gallagher carefully places pearl inlay around the sound hole in one of his guitars, which he makes by hand.*

was bringing the instrument to center stage. During those early years—from 1965 to 1970—J. W. Gallagher experimented with the design in order to perfect a sound that flat-picking musicians would treasure. He kept up a dialogue with those who owned and played his guitars. The result? An instrument universally admired for its ringing, distinct projection.

Soon Gallagher guitars began gaining a reputation to match their resonance. Doc Watson insisted on having the first one he ever heard. Peter Yarrow, of Peter, Paul, & Mary, purchased one. Don Gallagher, who already worked summers, took a year off from college in 1968 to help out in production and promotion. It paid off, and a few years later Don found himself leaving behind his job as a psychological examiner to return home to the expanding business.

Until his father completed the 1,000th Gallagher guitar and retired, Don worked at his side. Although his father has been dead for more than 10 years, Don still feels his strong presence in both the product and the process of his craft. That presence surfaces in virtually all his stories, especially those about how the two developed different models. "That's what has been neat about this business," he says earnestly. "There's not—in this day and age—the opportunity for a child to have that type of relationship with a parent.

"Nobody in my family plays the guitar," Gallagher continues with a slightly sheepish grin. "My father could never play. And, really, when you stop to think about it, they are two completely different aptitudes. In fact, my father had a standing rule that he would hire nobody who could play the guitar."

Clearly, though, the Gallaghers' lack of musical expertise has not affected their product. The guitars have been honored at the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, and a Gallagher guitar has repeatedly been the chosen prize at the annual National Flat Pick Guitar Championships in Kansas. Artists such as Neil Diamond, Waylon Jennings, Paul Overstreet, and Charlie Daniels have purchased Gallagher guitars.

Obviously, Gallagher's goal, like his father's before him, is quality, not quantity. Since 1965 the company has produced only some 2,000 guitars. "That's the thing that's unique about what we're doing here and part of what makes it enjoyable, too. That's not very many instruments in the total scheme of instruments, but those have been spread out literally over the world."

Don Gallagher has faced his share of challenges, but his craft has remained foremost in his mind. Starting in 1986, his guitars began to develop problems with their finishes. For two years he fought what he now calls "the lacquer malaise." He even stopped production of new guitars altogether until he could again be confident in the quality of his product. That occurred in 1989. "By the time I started taking orders," he reports, "I got bombarded. I've got over 1½ years' backlog of orders now."

Single-handedly building each guitar does slow down the production, he acknowledges, but there is good news here as well. "This last year I've been enjoying what I've been doing, working by myself. I've worked in this shop all of my life. It's like an ingrained part of me. I want to make guitars and keep up the legacy, but I'd like to approach it more as an art and a craft than as a business."

No doubt, J. W. Gallagher would be pleased. ◇