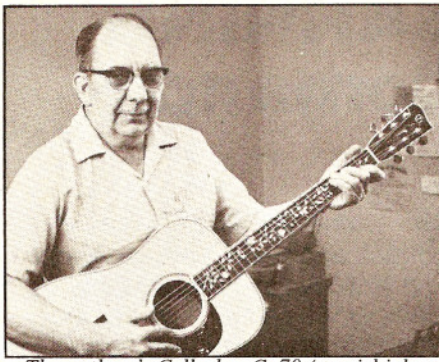


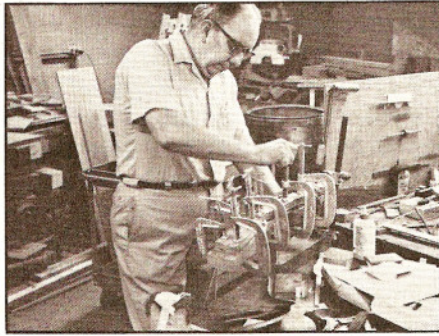
"A Good Little Box"

J.W. Gallagher & his country guitars

By Steve Buckingham



The author's Gallagher G-70 (special inlay done by Randy Wood in Nashville).



The scene was the historic record session of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band with Doc Watson, Merle Travis, Maybelle Carter and other country music greats. United Artists released the three-LP set as *Will The Circle Be Unbroken* (UAS 9801), and on it you can hear Merle struck by the sound of Doc's guitar. "... rings like a bell," he says. "It's a pretty good little box," Doc replies. "A Mr. Gallagher made that... lives in Wartrace, Tennessee."

Doc heads a list of pickers such as his son Merle, Randy Scruggs, Jerry Jeff Walker, Ramblin' Jack Elliot, Neil Diamond, John Kay, Peter Yarrow, and Jim Stafford, who are increasingly singing praises about the Gallagher guitar. It has acquired the reputation of an instrument with exceptional sound and craftsmanship hard to find in an age of mass production. The excellence of the guitars comes as no surprise upon meeting J. W. Gallagher and being shown through his small, but efficient shop in the rolling hill country of Tennessee [J. W. Gallagher, Wartrace, TN 37183].

Mr. Gallagher was born in Wartrace in 1915 and still lives in the same house in which he was born. His wife, Hazel, acts as secretary and hostess to those who come to admire the instruments. Their two sons, Bill and Don, have helped with the design and building of the guitars.

Any picker who visits J. W. Gallagher will be welcomed by a true gentleman and craftsman who takes extreme pride in making fine guitars by hand.

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Photos by Steve Buckingham

How did your association with Doc Watson begin?

I met Doc at the Union Grove, North Carolina Fiddler's Convention in 1967. It just so happened that a friend of mine had gotten the *Southbound* album (Vanguard, 79213) and I had heard it. So, one night at Union Grove, a lot of people were standing around the yard picking and I walked up pretty close to one fellow. I recognized Doc's picking from the album, so I introduced myself to him. After that, it was just a matter of getting acquainted and becoming friends. The next day, I went out to his house to eat dinner and he decided he wanted one of my guitars. It has developed into a nice friendship. He is the person most responsible for getting the Gallagher name around since he usually mentions the guitar when he plays concerts.

Does Doc ask for any modifications in the instruments he uses?

He never has. He still primarily plays the G-50 that he first got from me. His son Merle, has a G-45 and, later on, Doc got a G-70. I feel that he likes the mahogany back G-50 better, although he's never really said. Doc tells me that Merle has raised the action on the G-70 and now uses it for bottleneck playing.

What was your background and how did you get started in guitars?

I had the Gallagher Cabinet Shop which started making custom furniture in 1939. In 1964, I went to work with some people who were making guitars in Shelbyville, Tennessee. After about a year and a half, they decided to give up on guitars, but the bug had bitten me. I decided in my own hard-headed way that I could build a good guitar. Eventually, I just converted the shop to make guitars rather than furniture.

When was the first Gallagher guitar made?

I built the prototype G-50 in May of 1965. I wanted to get a lot of musicians to try it out and, as a result, it was loaned to just about every guitar picker on the Grand Ole Opry. It's one guitar I'm not going to sell since it is the first. The only label I had for it was a Gallagher Cabinet Company label which is still in it.

Are your guitars made any differ-

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Do guitarists from other countries inquire about your instruments?

Yes, particularly from Japan. The other day, I got a letter from a fellow in Tokyo who had heard a song on the radio by Doc Watson and said that the sound of the guitar "charmed his ears." Now he is very anxious to get a Gallagher. As a matter of fact, about 75 orders have come in from Japan over the past three months. I haven't had any other large scale reaction like Japan from other foreign countries, but have sold guitars to folks in West Germany, Norway, England, and New Zealand.

What are your plans for the future?

We will continue the business very much like it is. I hope to turn more responsibility over to my oldest son so that I won't have to keep working full time. However, as long as I'm living, I'll be around the shop. ■

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far, I've made a total of a little over 600 instruments.

How many different models do you now make?

I have ten models listed in my catalogue. I also have five special models starting with the G-71S and going through the G-75S. These have more select wood, elaborate inlay and extra work on the bracing.

I know you still have only two employees. Why have you decided to keep your operation small in spite of the demand for your guitars?

Frankly, my inclination is to be a craftsman and not a business man. I don't see myself as the head of a big organization. I just want to make a living building good guitars. If I was working for some business turning out guitars that I wasn't satisfied with, it wouldn't be worth it to me no matter what the salary was. I like to keep everything on a sound basis, too. I want to know what kind of wood comes in, how the work is done and that the guitars going out are as good as they can be. Also, if there are a large number of employees working, someone is bound to get careless. Working in large numbers makes it much more difficult to maintain quality standards.

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sides and backs are made from mahogany or East Indian rosewood. Either rosewood or African ebony is used for the fingerboards and bridges. The guitars have various types of marquetry and binding, including herringbone. The nuts and bridge saddles are made from ivory and mother-of-pearl is used for the inlay. Some of the special models also have abalone used for inlay.

Do you feel that the supply of quality woods used for making guitars is getting hard to find?

Yes, the supply is getting scarce and, also, much more expensive. In the last year or so, costs have skyrocketed. I have no way of knowing how much of a supply exists, but the people I buy from sometimes run out of wood altogether.

What do you think the future holds for the guitar as far as design and material changes?

I don't know of anything that can be done to improve the guitar in regard to different material or design. I don't foresee anything taking the place of wood to make guitars sound better. If designs and construction change, it will be primarily because of lack of materials.

How many guitars do you produce?

I made eighty guitars last year. So

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ently now than when you first started?

Yes, they are. For the first four years, I made a lot of changes. As a matter of fact, everything about my guitar has been changed in minor ways even though the basic design is close to the original. By experimentation and testing, I arrived at modifications in the size and shape of the bracing, neck and body. Everything was changed a little. About 1969, I got to the point where I was satisfied with the design.

What do you feel is the most crucial step in building a guitar?

The thing that is the most problem to get right is the installation of the neck. You have to go by the feel a lot in fitting the neck and installing the rod. You want to be sure that there's no abnormal stress in anything that could cause the neck to warp later on. The shape of the neck is no big problem because I've gotten to the point where I can shape them by hand and have them virtually identical.

What types of wood do you use?

On all the necks, I use a very straight-grained Honduras mahogany which is getting harder and harder to find. For the tops, I have used many types of spruce, but am now using Canadian and Sitka spruce, which are very similar. The

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