

*Artist  
in  
Profile*

Manuel Delgado

by Timothy C. Davis

Photography by Kathryn M. Johnson

The inside of Manuel Delgado's new custom guitar shop is a mess. Located in a tiny, nondescript industrial park right off Gallatin Road near Eastland Avenue, the new digs are coated with a fine sheen of sawdust and the regular, garden-variety stuff that accumulates on its own.

Today, the dust is from construction — and the mess is evident — because Delgado is working feverishly to begin the next chapter of the Delgado Guitars story.

Mind you, he's skilled at building and renovation, as one might expect from a boutique guitar luthier who spends his days choosing the perfect woods and crafting them into playable pieces of art. There's an area he's clearing to receive shipments of wood — he offers a choice of literally dozens of varieties — or any of the various materials (abalone shell, mother-of-pearl) he uses to make inlays or fretboard markers. He's also expecting his first shipments of his *La Tradición* guitars from a partnership he entered into with West Music to provide a more affordable guitar (still signed off on by Delgado) for people who'd balk at paying low- to mid four figures prices for one of his custom designs.

How he's arrived at this place, askew as it is, is a story all its own. It's illustrated in a parable of sorts he was told some time ago: If you make a dot on the ground and trace it exactly one mile, you'll have a straight line; if you place another dot an inch from the first dot, but vary the angle by even a single degree, you'll end up a mile later with two dots hundreds of feet apart. Which is to say, a little corner-cutting here and there in your work (or your personal life, Delgado says) might not seem like much at the time, and indeed, most people would probably never notice. But little things can become bigger things with the passage of time. His grandfather, who he called Papa Pilo, had a saying for when things got rushed around the shop: "Despacito, por que llevamos prisa." Which, translated, means: "Take your time, because we are in a hurry."

Indeed, family is so intertwined with his guitar making that Delgado has long since stopped seeing what he does as work, preferring to see it as of a sort of communion with those he loves. He makes guitars today much the same as his grandfather did way back in 1928. His grandfather, later aided by his great uncle and father, built guitars by hand, from scratch, first in Torreón, Mexico, and then Juarez, Mexico, and from there in East Los Angeles. Soon, word got out. Andres Segovia owned a few of the family's guitars, and Delgado still has pictures and a letter from Segovia, who wrote a glowing recommendation for the still-growing company. (To put that into perspective, having Andres

Segovia praise your work is the classical guitar equivalent of having Albert Einstein really dig on your new theorems, or Ted Williams telling you make a mean baseball bat.)

To that end, Delgado makes guitars (and steel-string acoustics, resophonics, bajo sextos, requintos románticos, requintos jarochos, jaranas, guitarrones and vihuelas) the old-fashioned way, completely by hand, not to stake a claim to any artisanal, back-to-the-older-ways-if-not-the-older-days street cred, but rather because he's still convinced it's the best way to make a guitar. If he only makes 15 or 20 guitars a year — along with a few smaller instruments, like ukuleles — so be it. He still makes a pretty penny on those, to be sure. But even after you factor in the cost of materials, the man still isn't retiring in the Hamptons anytime soon.

It's not uncommon for Delgado to spend 15 hours across a couple of days on a single ornamental rosette, or hand-sanding the inside of a guitar for hours on end to provide the guitar's future owner — whether Jackson Browne, Jose Feleciano, or Jimmy from Little Hollywood — as flawless a sound machine as he (and his family again, remember) knows how to make.

"I like to say, if the power went out for a month, I could still make you a guitar," Delgado says.

Delgado's father, Candelario "Candelitas" Delgado, was born March 1, 1944. By the time he was 11, Candelitas was working in his father's store, learning to repair instruments and learning the fundamentals of luthiery. By 1958, he'd built his first guitar. By 1968, he'd married a young lady. By the early '70s, he'd had children: Monica, Thomas, and Manuel.

After the death of his brother, Papa Pilo and his son Candelitas continued the business for some time. Eventually, the young Candelitas took over the business outright. Young Manuel would be there, chisel in hand, if he wasn't attending his studies, boxing classes, or a school-related function.

He dusts off some photos of his family, and shows me a picture of a younger version of himself, a proud look affixed on his face.

"I was 12 here, and that's my first guitar I'm holding. First one I made, that is. My father was 14 when he made his first guitar. I wanted to beat his record so bad! And so I did."

I asked if he still had the guitar — he did. Admittedly, I'm no authority on the subject, but it looked and played just fine for a 30-year-old instrument made by a 12-year-old. Better than that, in fact — it looked like something you might buy at a chain store for a few hundred bucks. Which is not meant as any sort of insult to the 12-year-old Delgado's work — most of us, if we're lucky, pick up the guitar at 12, not

make one — but in this case meaning low on flash, but solidly built.

I referenced the stacks of wood sitting in the next room, and wondered aloud what the young Delgado would think if he were told he'd still be making guitars 30 years later. He shows me a picture of his father that he'd recently found again, noting how he was struck that, in the image, his father reminded him of himself. Turning the picture over, he said, he found an inscription with his father's age at the time: 42, just like Delgado is now.

"You know, in many ways, so little has changed," Delgado says. "We're really blessed. We've been doing it for so long that even the suppliers I work with are often with the son or the grandson of the person that my father or grandfather dealt with. It helps with that feeling of continuity."

The family history of luthiery is such that Delgado says that newer suppliers often come looking for him — another way, he says, that looking after the family legacy keeps that family looking after him.

"Now, with the Internet, I'll get calls from people saying, 'Manuel, we have quarter-sawn Honduras mahogany,'" he says. "Or whatever it is that they may have. All these little things are instructive to the final piece. Electric guitar makers, cabinetmakers, they use flat-sawn wood, not quarter-sawn. With the quarter-sawn, your grain is going to match up, and have that book-match grain [where, say, on the top of a guitar, the wood grain on the left-hand side of the guitar is a perfect match to the right-hand side]."

"Another thing is that a lot of steel string builders — and classical builders, frankly — will build a guitar with an extra joint at the neck. It's cheaper to build them that way. It's extra work for me, but I will cut the neck and the headstock out of a single piece of wood. All my necks are one piece. They'll use all this marketing lingo to justify that decision, saying things like 'a two-piece neck is a stronger neck,' but that's not the case."

He laughs. "If that's the case, I mean, why even stop there? Why not an 18-piece neck, to make it really strong?"

He shows me an intricate inlay he's doing on a custom guitar. After sitting down with the buyer months ago to get his likes and dislikes — but, moreover, his story, as Delgado puts it, so that his guitar might also tell a story — the pair decided on an fretboard inlay that featured a ropey, vine-like motif. Delgado loves little challenges like this, and shows me, his pride evident, how he has painstakingly designed the inlay to make it look like the ends of the rope overlap each other. The result is impressive, and evidences a seamless quality that, say, a well-built luxury car might boast. It may not →



affect the sound in the slightest, but it shows an attention to detail that lets the would-be buyer know that no corners have been cut anywhere along the way.

I asked him if any of this ever gets tiring — spending a day on fretboard markers, say, or fine-sanding the inside of a guitar, way down there where no human eyes will ever see anyway.

“No,” he says flatly, but amiably. “But I know where you’re going with that. I just really love what I do. If I did use mass-produced rosettes or pre-made necks or plastic binding or otherwise cut corners, I just wouldn’t enjoy it. It would feel like a disgrace to everything my father and my family worked for all those years.”

He leans forward, cradling the guitar.

“My father was a man I admired more than anything, you know? I feel closest to him and my grandfather when I’m in here, making an instrument. All the traveling I do, all the computer work with the other [La Tradición] division, I don’t enjoy that. I enjoy working with the kids in the schools. But I hate all the airports. I hate all the standing around. I hate missing my family. But when you see a young kid playing a musical instrument that you helped get in their hands — not only that but you helped get them the materials that might help them play that instrument — then it’s all worthwhile. I always say that I never do anything for the money. I do what I do because I love it. It might sound like a cliché, but so be it. It’s the truth.”

I asked Delgado if he was ever tempted to do anything else (or, indeed, wanted to do anything else) with his life, knowing, for instance, that he spends weeks each year speaking to children and teenagers about the importance of education, and helps with pro-music-education programs.

“With my life? Or with my ‘work’? Not really,” he says. “I’ve done other things, but this has been my overwhelming passion since I was a kid,” he says. “I was going to be a police officer, because my dad used to train us in boxing, and he used to train the L.A.P.D. boxing team. From the time I was in fifth grade I was boxing, and being around that, I thought that I wanted to be a cop for a while. I was in the academy with the LA County Sheriff’s Department when my dad was diagnosed with cancer, and at that time I decided to go back to the shop. And I’ve been here ever since.”

“Here” didn’t mean Nashville until early in 2005, but “here” is relative to Delgado. “Here” is wherever his family is, he says. There were a couple of lean years when he first arrived here, he said, years before our “It City” began celebrating people who spent time doing things more for the love of them than for the money they could generate. He had fledgling agreements with a few well-known instrument retailers in

town, agreements that, for one reason or another — usually money, or the retailer’s inability to make money — never quite came to fruition.

“I tell my daughters — well, my 6-year-old, as my other daughter’s only nine months — that we are very lucky to be able to open up the cabinet and have a choice of the cereal we want to eat. Or if we don’t want cereal, we have eggs. Growing up, I never went without, but my folks came from very, very little. My mom lived in a basement with dirt floors. She used to remember the family upstairs, and they had a little girl who would look through the cracks in the floors to try and see the people — my mom and her family — living down there.

“I didn’t have any of that. We had a house growing up, and our own bedrooms, and my parents bought me my first car, a 1967 Ford Mustang that I still have. My mom stayed at home, and my dad worked his tail off. I wish he was around today. But I still don’t know sometimes how he did it.

“Our generation wants to be more involved in our kids’ lives. Back then a man did what he had to do to take care of his kids and his wife. We came from the housewife era to an era of stay-at-home moms and stay-at-home dads. Our focus is more on our kids than keeping up appearances, and making sure every sheet is folded.”

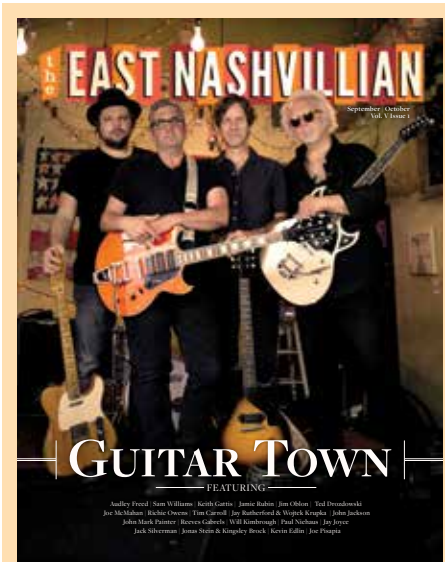
He gestures upstairs, where unfinished guitars, some merely faint suggestions of guitar shapes crafted out of pieces of solid wood, sit waiting for his attention. This is where Delgado is setting up his workshop, where he will be every day.

“Upstairs, I don’t know if you noticed, I let my little kid paint on the walls. I told her to go for it. I’m the only one in here, and I don’t need to keep up appearances. It reminds me of why I do this, you know? It ties everything back together.”

Delgado says he believes that the stories we tell are as alive as we are, and says that the only way he’d ever stop making instruments is if, in some way, it affected his family. But the two things are so intertwined, he says, going back generations, that the two constantly inform each other.

“There’s a French poet, I don’t know the name, who said, ‘With morality and with art, you have to draw a line somewhere.’ My dad used to say when we were kids — and this was way before Stephen Covey and ‘The 12 Habits of Highly Successful People’ or whatever it was called — he always used to say, ‘Son, you start with the end in mind.’ So if you come to me and say ‘Hey, Manuel, I want you to build me a guitar,’ I would ask you what you were looking for, get any specific details. But then I will literally write everything down, and construct the entire instrument in my head. And then we’ll

put it down on paper to discuss certain details — maybe the scale or something. But before I ever pick up a piece of wood, the guitar is basically done, if that makes any sense. The same thing goes with my marriage, with my friends, my faith, with anything that’s important to me in my life. You have to know where it is you’re going if you ever want to have any hope of getting there.”



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