

Heir to a guitar-making dynasty,
luthier Manuel Delgado adds
kindness and care to his instruments

HEARTSONG

TEXT BY KAREN PETERSON
PHOTOS BY BILL STEBER





Delgado "Monica" flamenco hybrid



Delgado "Marta" classical hybrid



Delgado "Rosario" OM steel string

For 87 years, the Delgado family has crafted guitars and traditional fretted instruments for musicians such as Andrés Segovia and Los Lobos, doing so primarily from their iconic East Los Angeles location. Today, third-generation Delgado luthier Manuel continues to carry on the family tradition, but not in L.A. He's moved to Nashville, where the trained boxer, who once toyed with the idea of joining the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, is carving out his own niche as a master craftsman.

In a world so often defined by its sharp edges, a conversation with the 43-year-old Delgado is pleasantly disarming. Deeply philosophical, and spiritual, he is keenly aware of his heritage as son and grandson of renowned classical guitar makers, and how that birthright informs who he is and how he works today. He's a grateful man.

"I feel I've been given a gift and look at it as a responsibility. I can take it and squander it, hide it or not share it, or I can look at what I have and do something good with it," says Delgado, who custom builds both nylon- and steel-string guitars, adding, "It's how I feel about everything."



The Delgado family's Candelas Guitars on Cesar Chavez Avenue in East Los Angeles is as legendary as its list of clients. It was established in 1948 by Delgado's grandfather, Porfirio Delgado Flores, and his great-uncle, Candelario Delgado Flores (Candelas).

The Delgado brothers began making guitars in a small Mexican village, moving to Juarez, Mexico, and then to East L.A. classical-guitar legend Andrés Segovia, a repeat customer, put the brothers on the map, and there was no turning back: pop, folk, country, and flamenco players such as Jackson Browne, José Feliciano, Burl Ives, Arlo Guthrie, Hoyt Axton, Charo, the Kingston Trio, and many others, bought and played Delgado guitars. Walt Disney called on the master craftsmen to build the original Mickey Mouse Club guitar.

For Manuel Delgado, the move in 2005 to Nashville with his wife, singer and songwriter Julie Mooneyham, was an exodus and a struggle, he admits. It meant leaving behind strong familial and cultural roots, and, of course, the family business, to face the competitive reality of establishing his own Delgado Guitars from scratch—and doing so not just in any city, but in the anointed Music City.

"I currently build more steel-string acoustic guitars over classical nylon, but I build a great many instruments that are used in Latin music that can have either nylon or steel strings," Delgado says. "For example, the Cuban Tres I'm making has steel strings, the Bajo Quinto has steel strings, but the Jarana is nylon, the vihuela is nylon, guitarrón is nylon.

"But I think being in Nashville, I get a lot more steel-string players over classical guitars."

Left
Candelario Delgado Flores in 1971

ARTISAN AS BUSINESSMAN

That was then, this is now, and the past is behind him, save for his unwavering attachment to the memories and the lessons learned by the men he repeatedly invokes during the interview: his father, Candelario, who died in 1996, and grandfather, who passed in 1999. Both inspired how he approaches his artistry: always with respect, and always by hand.

Unlike many modern luthiers, Delgado handcrafts his guitars and the 35 other folk instruments in his portfolio, painstakingly and throughout, often spending hours on just the details. He has no assistants.

The exacting process limits the number of instruments he makes each year—20 to 25, he estimates. (Prices are generally in the \$6,500 range.) But methodical, rapt attention to the task is the only way he can work; it's a process, he says, that allows the "individual potential of the instrument to come out."

Much like a sculptor who sees the form within the raw material, Delgado says he has a conversation with the wood. "It tells me if it wants more thickness at the top or which way it wants to be planed," he says.

He also has a conversation with the person who has commissioned the instrument. Or, rather, an in-depth interview (sometimes, he jokes, it's more like "spending time on the therapist's couch"), the point of which is to discover who the future owner is, beyond the obvious. It's about unearthing the details of the heart that might then be incorporated into his final design, whether it's a type of wood more compatible in its tone with the client's voice or, as in a recent commission, fashioning a guitar rife with symbolism.

In the latter case, the personalized features included a 25-inch body span from nut to saddle, signifying the client's 25 years of marriage, and a rosette designed as a three-banded



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crown of thorns, with South American bloodwood as a backing, here in honor of the man's deep Christian faith.

With his research in hand, Delgado begins to fashion his creations. "I begin with the end [product] in mind. I design and build it in my head, and play it in my heart before I start."

"I'm not intent on building what others are doing," he adds. "If a client wants a guitar to look like a Stratocaster, I say, 'Someone else is building them already.' But if they want a Strat built from a unique angle, I say, 'Now you've got my attention.' I want to build what you can't find somewhere else."

DEDICATED TO AUTHENTICITY

Happiest in his shop, Delgado muses that "I could build all day long, Segovia playing in the background."

That shop, attached to the home he shares with his wife and two young daughters in the hip and historic East Nashville neighborhood, houses not only Western guitars—classical and

steel string and his acoustic bass optimized for amplification—but also a catalog of world instruments, from flamenco guitars and ukuleles to the Irish bouzouki and classic Latin instruments like the guitarrón, vihuela, and the Cuban tres.

For Delgado, it doesn't matter what type of instrument he's commissioned, or wants, to make—it goes back to the all-important initial conversation with the instrument and, in this case, an added analogy: "A surgeon can operate on someone from the US or Cambodia," he says. "While each patient may have a different outer look and different DNA, the important things—the heartbeat, the blood flow—are the same."

To successfully render any instrument, from any culture, the craftsman must "respect and honor what makes them unique," says Delgado, from the traditions that define them to the native wood that creates their tones, whether it's a Western guitar or a bajo sexto, a stringed instrument originally from southern Mexico and now a fixture in Tex-Mex music.

For Delgado, it's about building authenticity into all that he crafts, a mission that today involves a commitment to ensure the accuracy of his own musical culture, mariachi, which has exploded in popularity in classrooms and communities across the United States. In Nashville, too: just before he spoke with *Acoustic Guitar*, Delgado had been at a meeting about the proposed Plaza Mariachi—Music City, a 60,000-square-foot mixed-use plaza complete with an entertainment stage.

The renaissance of the joyous sounds of mariachi is good news for all involved, Latino or not, but with the caveat that mariachi, like any musical genre, sounds best when played with its native instruments: most used in schools aren't the traditional stringed instruments, like the guitarrón and vihuela, which make mariachi soar, but with substitute standard guitars.



A



B



C



D

A
Birdseye maple headstock overlay on a Delgado “Guitarra de Golpe”

B
Delgado “Hutzel” square neck resophonic with a Sitka spruce top, African ebony fingerboard, Honduras mahogany neck

C
Andrés Segovia with Candelario Delgado when they met at the Sheraton West in Los Angeles, 1960s.

D
Delgado “Monica” flamenco Hybrid model. Spruce top with maple back and sides, Honduras mahogany neck, African ebony fingerboard with rope inlay

In 2006, Delgado opened a second business, La Tradición Music, with the goal of handcrafting true mariachi instruments and, ambitiously, pricing them affordably. It was a tough business model to actualize, but in 2012, La Tradición Music partnered with national instrument dealer West Music, which serves the education market. While the instruments are not fully handcrafted, Delgado assures they're up to his high standards.

DEFINING HIS IDENTITY

As a child, Delgado hung out in the family shop, at first building wooden toys, then graduating to handcrafting his first guitar at age 12. Still, following in his family footsteps wasn't always in the forefront. There was a period in his life when the idea of going into law enforcement struck a chord. His father had been a boxing coach for the L.A.P.D. After his death, Manuel stepped in as his replacement. He was planning to attend the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Academy.

Yet at one point, he realized that his heritage “was my identity. It is who I am, I can't separate the two.”

His father's passing hit hard, and as he talked he recalled synchronistic moments in recent years when the “who I am” became abundantly clear—seeing photographs of his father when he was Manuel's age today; remembering that his father had once thought of relocating to Nashville (“It felt like I'd received a blessing from dad,” he says); getting a call from Arlo Guthrie, who learned of his Nashville shop and wanted to know if he'd do some repairs on the guitar Delgado's father had made him years ago.

“I learned from my father,” Delgado says, “and when I close my eyes, I can still see my father's and grandfather's hands, telling stories.”

Now *his* hands are telling the stories, notable among them is one that stands in homage to what else he learned from his mentors—“to be respectful of others' struggles.”

Following the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center, Delgado began

creating his charity “Unity Guitar.” Colored in patriotic stars-and-stripes, it is built of wood from around the world: African ebony for the fretboard, Honduras mahogany for the neck, Canadian spruce on top, and US maple on the bridge, sides, and back.

The sides and back of the guitar display autographs signed by some of popular music's biggest names: Glen Campbell, Emmylou Harris, Smokey Robinson, the Dixie Chicks, Earl Scruggs, Dwight Yoakam, and Los Lobos' Louie Perez and David Hidalgo, as well as other Latin entertainers, such as actress Alejandra Guzmán and rockers Jaguares.

The kick-off was held at a street party in front of the Delgado's East L.A. shop, where eclectic funk-rockers Ozomatli performed for free. When the auction was over and more than \$35,000 was raised, Delgado donated the money to help families of undocumented workers, of any ethnicity, who died in the collapsed Twin Towers.

“Kindness and love, that's what music is about,” he says.