

LANCE McCOLLUM GUITARS

Lance McCollum's career was born out of frustration. Although he played countless fine guitars built by notable luthiers, he never heard the exact acoustic sound he was seeking. McCollum wanted a bigger, more balanced tone from an unplugged acoustic guitar, a cross between a concert grand piano and the equalized acoustic sounds on early Emerson, Lake, and Palmer recordings. "I wanted an instrument that had the tonal complexities of a grand piano, with all the notes speaking independently but still blending evenly, with the volume and sustain balanced on each string," McCollum said. As a fingerstyle player with a vision, his sonic mission eventually became his career.

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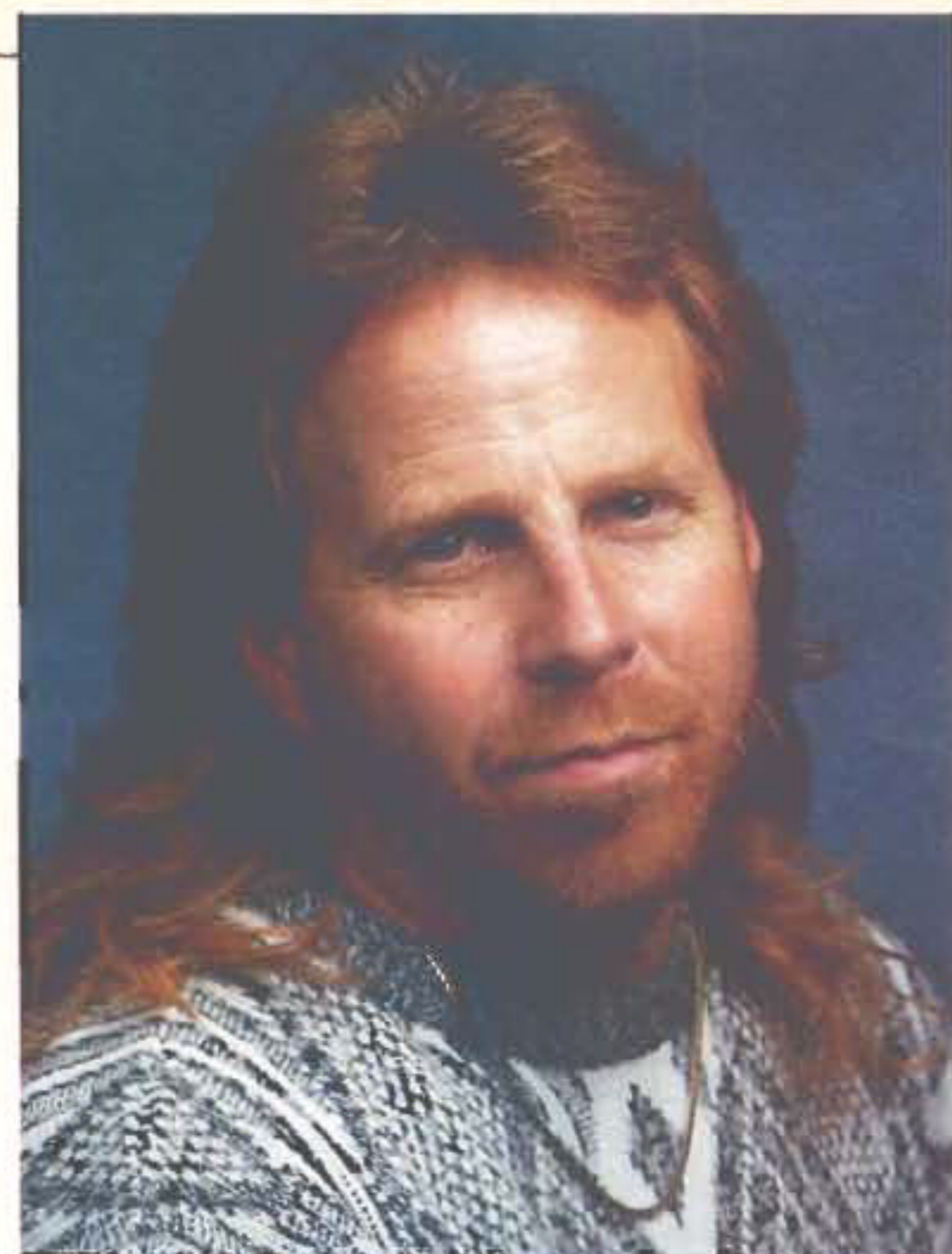


Left, a custom quilted redwood and walnut grand auditorium. Right, a Meghann with Engelmann spruce top.

After apprenticing in guitar repair and restoration for a year under luthier Luke Wilson and experimenting with his own designs, McCollum began building guitars in earnest in 1995. In the few short years that he's been building guitars professionally, he has gained a reputation as one of California's premier small luthiers. His guitars are known for their huge voice, uncommon balance, and immaculate workmanship. They're played by Scottish singer Dougie MacLean, Supertramp cofounder Roger Hodgson, National Fingerstyle Champion Todd Hallawell, producers Michael Dukes and Michael Cuneo, film composer Mark Mancina, and virtuoso guitarist Doug Smith.

Designing a guitar with McCollum is like going on an expedition. You start with one of his stock sizes—a Meghann 000, grand auditorium, dreadnought, Kayleigh (jumbo), 12-fret parlor guitar, 12-string, double-neck, or harp guitar—and step off the beaten track from there. McCollum enjoys building with unusual tonewoods, such as black walnut, Tasmanian blackwood, zebrano (aka zebra wood), figured ebony, Italian spruce, and Vietnamese rosewood (his personal favorites are walnut backs and sides and redwood or Italian spruce tops). He is known for his intricate sound-hole inlays, which employ one-of-a-kind materials and designs such as Celtic knot inlays and his trademark circle-octagon and interwoven rosettes. McCollum does most of the inlay work himself and uses the skills of Harvey Leach for some of the more elaborate and time-consuming designs.

McCollum guitars feature hand-carved dovetail neck joints, internally adjustable truss rods, laminated three- to five-piece necks, solid-wood bindings, and nitrocellulose lacquer finish. His variations on standard X-bracing patterns contribute to the open sound and tonal response of his guitars. His



braces are taller and thinner than most, and he manipulates the scallops and nodal points of the braces to promote vibration across the top.

McCollum's shop, a one-man operation in the Sierra foothills an hour east of Sacramento (PO Box 806, Colfax, CA 95713; [530] 346-7657; www.svlg.org/member/mccollum/mccollum.htm), is expanding out of necessity in response to the growing demand for his instruments. He began work on his 70th guitar in June 1998, and his back-order list has grown to 25. His shop is currently divided into several rooms dedicated to specific phases of construction: a room for woodworking machinery, a clean room for inlay and assembly work, space to store and dry batches of wood, and an outdoor lacquer spray booth. McCollum recently acquired a shaper, which he hopes will speed up and standardize some aspects of his production. His working environment is meticulously organized and reflects the professionalism of a builder used to house-sized projects.

"Knowing when to stop is the toughest thing about being a guitar maker," McCollum says. This applies to all of the steps in the process: spraying the lacquer, shaping the braces, thicknessing the woods, etc. Judging by the burgeoning demand on his shop and the amount of repeat business he handles (a number of his clients are on their second or third McCollum guitar), he seems to be stopping at just the right moment.

—Julie Bergman