Strings Attached

An amateur guitarist finds love at first sight
by Bob Horn with Patty May

I run my hand slowly over the surface of the guitar, smooth as silk from hours of careful sanding and polishing. It's been more than a year, and I still can't believe it's mine: A Huss & Dalton OM Custom.

Like many teenagers in the late 1960s, I was a guitarist wannabe. In high school, I diligently took guitar lessons, but didn't practice diligently and soon lost interest. Three years ago, I decided I needed a hobby, a distraction from teaching economics at James Madison University. A business card posted at Harrisonburg's Guitar and Amp Center pointed me toward local guitar teacher Eric Hedrick and weekly lessons.

Having long since sold the guitar of my teen years, I bought an inexpensive one for the lessons. As I realized my commitment was real, I began to yearn for more expensive, better quality guitars, a phenomenon often affects amateurs and professionals, maybe even more so the former. Many amateur players will admit that the compulsion strikes most often after you've been playing a while and can't resist adding another guitar to a growing collection.

I went straight for the coup de grace. I can't see myself ever getting a finer guitar than the one from Huss & Dalton. People who know guitars are blown away by the sound quality.

Why would I pay thousands (Huss & Dalton's begin at $2,550) when I could buy several at that price and most people wouldn't know the difference? I've got a one-of-kind instrument and I play with pleasure almost daily. The wood is polished to a high luster, the inlays, trim, and bindings are fitted perfectly and the sound beats any guitar I have ever played by a wide margin.

In April of 2000, I saw an ad in Acoustic Guitar magazine for a guitar company in Staunton. A friend and I called Huss & Dalton and asked if we could come visit their workplace. Co-owner Mark Dalton answered the phone and said, "no problem" and spent about two hours with us discussing all aspects of guitar making: both the craft and the business.

In business since 1995, Jeff Huss and Mark Dalton make acoustic guitars ranging from traditional dreadnaughts to cutaways and small-body orchestra models. The company is small by industry standards, with seven employees turning out about 200 guitars a year. Big-name companies produce thousands annually. Four or five workers make a single guitar over 70 hours of labor time. Workers often start out selecting tone woods and parts before moving up to more skilled operations such as “milling necks,” “inlays,” “buffling and purfling,” assembly and finishing.

If Huss & Dalton had been in Iowa, I probably wouldn’t have ordered one. But my motivations went beyond supporting the local company. I wanted to watch this guitar being made, and Mark agreed.

I asked for a shorter guitar neck so it would be easier for me to play, and I added a few more inlays than the standard model offered. Unlike some companies, Huss & Dalton does not use CAD/CAM (computer aided design/computer assisted machinery) to shape guitar necks; their system of routing tools, jigs, and circular saws offers them considerable discretion over the neck’s size and shape. During one of my visits, Jeff was carefully laying abalone inlay patterns. Another worker was shaping bodies, while Mark was involved in the final phase of the productioncycle: fitting fret wire, final set up, and handling the business end in the small front office.

The top wood on most quality guitars is solid spruce or cedar, book matched and glued to form one seamless piece. At Huss & Dalton, the top wood is less than 1/16 inch thick. That, coupled with the strong tension of the steel strings, requires an elaborate bracing system on the underside of the guitar top. Huss & Dalton use their own bracing system, styled after early Martin guitars. An elaborate latticework of scalloped wood strips crisscrosses beneath the top, providing strength and influencing the tone of the guitar. Huss & Dalton design and cut their own bracing woods, often experimenting to enhance tone and provide strength.

My guitar has a radiused Sitka Spruce top. Huss & Dalton is unique among contemporary guitar makers in that most of their guitars have a **25**-degree radius top. According to their web page, Huss & Dalton do this to provide greater structural integrity of their guitars. A positive byproduct of the radiused soundboard design, besides its load-bearing properties, is a boost in

the mid-range tone. This helps the guitars to have a more balanced tone than traditional designs.

To form a guitar's curved sides, a strip of tone wood is first prepared (cut to approximate length); the wood is then dampened and sandwiched in a heated blanket and then placed in a mold cut to the desired specifications of the instrument. After about an hour, the wood is removed from the mold, shaped and placed in another vise-like clamp for additional time.

The back of the guitar is made from the same type wood as the sides. Like the top, the back is usually two pieces of book-matched wood glued together. Scalloped braces for strength and tone are glued to the back, but the braces are not as important here since there is much less tension on the back of the guitar than the top.

My guitar has solid rosewood back and sides. All Huss & Dalton guitar bodies are solid wood. No laminates (pressed woods) are ever used. Each bridge is hand cut from ebony, a process that involves numerous steps and exact specifications. My diamond-cut bridge entailed more than a dozen separate cuts.

In September 2000, I returned from a week in Paris to an e-mail message– my guitar was ready. The e-mail noted it was "sweet sounding."

When I picked up the guitar, Mark lowered the action (distance from the string to the fret board) a tiny bit. Then Mark, Jeff, and several other workers gathered round while I had my first look at the finished product.

I admit it was really impulsive to order this guitar. But I make no apologies. The first time I played the guitar it was heaven. It has a perfect body; the orchestra size is ideal for me, and I love the new guitar smell. Fourteen months later, the aroma remains.