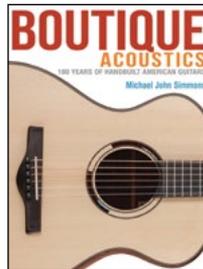




**Boutique Acoustics:
180 Years of Handbuilt
American Guitars**
Michael John Simmons
Backbeat Books



The New Golden Age

The inside story of the American custom-guitar industry

BY GREG OLWELL

The history of guitars has been told many times before, but a new book takes a fresh approach. In *Boutique Acoustics*, writer Michael John Simmons chronicles the story of the American steel-string guitar and how today's premier crafters of acoustics are producing some of the best guitars since the "golden age" of Gibson, the Larson Brothers, and Martin.

Simmons traces the American guitar's evolution, from the pre-steel-string Viennese-style instruments made by C.F. Martin in the 1830s through later waves of influence from Spanish builders and Hawaiian guitarists, as players worked with luthiers to create louder guitars and the instrument moved out of the parlor to larger concert stages.

Later, of course, as the quality of guitars coming from large manufacturers dropped in the late-'60s through the '70s, small custom shops blossomed all over the country, building guitars that were, in many cases, superior to anything else on the market. This new generation of makers was working at both refining classic models, almost exclusively from Martin's hallowed designs, and creating new models that blended the best of the past with modern characteristics. The names of some of these crafters are familiar. They include Michael Gurian, Santa Cruz Guitars, Jeff Traugott, and Kathy Wingert.

As a writer, Simmons has his bona fides—he's the co-founder of the *Fretboard Journal* and a Grade-A guitar nut. Reading this book, you get the sense that Simmons knows this

material so deeply that if he talks in his sleep, it's probably about the benefits of X-bracing vs. ladder bracing.

Today's boutique guitars are for players wanting a personalized instrument, one that is unique to them. *Boutique Acoustics* is geared toward that guitarist. More than just recapping history, the book also includes a reference section, detailing some of the options available to players, with guides to body shape, tonewoods, and construction, and a selected list of contemporary boutique-guitar makers.

You shouldn't judge a book by its cover, as the old saying goes, yet buyers could easily be faulted for expecting this book to focus on the traditions and innovations of the contemporary boutique guitar-building scene. In focusing on the development of steel-string flattops, *Boutique Acoustics* spends too much time with the back story of Martin—which has been covered many times before, including the recent *Inventing the American Guitar* (Hal Leonard)—and other early makers.

Overall, Simmons missed a chance to tell more stories about the small-scale builders of the last few decades who have been crafting some of the finest guitars ever made. Many of these important makers are still alive, pushing new boundaries and reviving guitars pushed aside by history. Perhaps the absence of the makers who are building archtops, nylon-string guitars, harp guitars, and resophonic guitars leaves the door open for another book.

Let's hope so.

AC