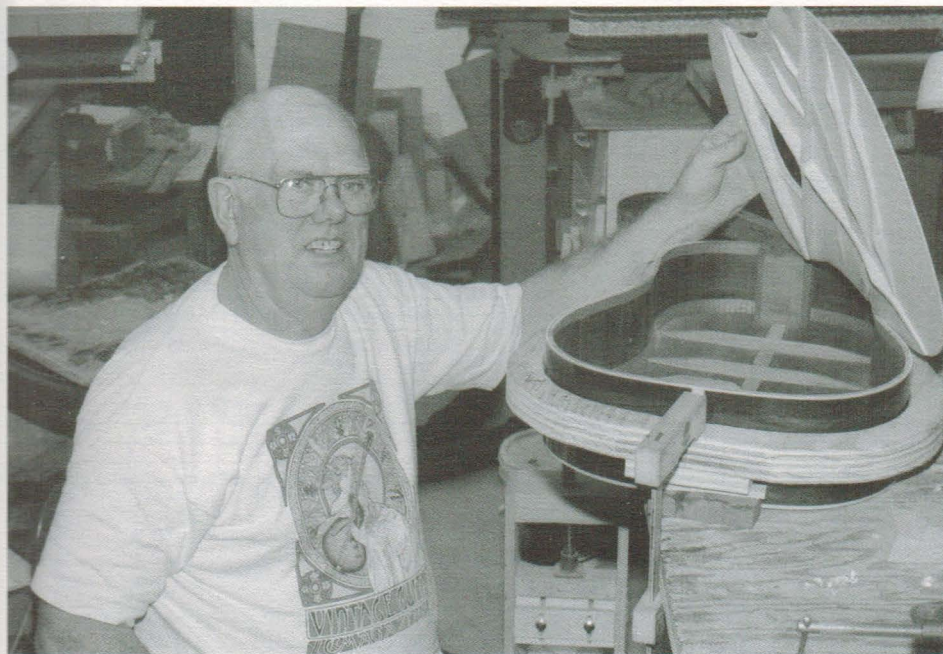


Luthier Jim Grainger

by Tres Indermark and Terry Barnes



The Gravel Road to Grainger's Repair and Restoration Guru Jim Grainger of Custom Fretted Instruments and Repair

Jim Grainger, the owner of Custom Fretted Instruments and Repair, literally is the "guru on the mountain." However, in this case, the mountain is a fifty-acre, heavily wooded piece of land on the Cumberland Plateau just south of Sparta, Tennessee. There, at the end of a steep and winding gravel road, Jim and his able assistants—Steve Moore; his son, Doug Grainger; and inlay artist Joyce Carroll—tirelessly repair countless acoustic (and electric) instruments and, like Victor Frankenstein, have restored to life many an old Martin "cannon." Jim's shop in the woods truly is a refuge from the hustle and bustle of today's busy world, and also is a great place to look at wonderful guitars, pick a tune, or just swap stories. Few people have better stories (or a broader depth of knowledge about acoustic guitars) than Jim, who also is one heck of a nice guy and truly one of the few people who can be entrusted to work on a pre-war Martin or Gibson without worry.

Jim Grainger has been building, restoring, and repairing musical instruments longer than many of today's players and builders have been alive. Jim did his first instrument repair as a teenager in Chattanooga, Tennessee in the late 1950s when he refinished an old Kay banjo with leftover materials his father had used to refinish the kitchen table. Shortly thereafter, a neighbor (who had seen Jim working on the banjo) gave Jim a Martin 00-17 with a damaged top that she had planned to throw away. Jim promptly set to repairing this Martin, using every tool at his disposal, including placing the guitar under the leg of his bed as a makeshift clamp. After completing the structural repairs on this guitar, Jim decided to refinish this guitar. Wanting to improve on the refinishing job he did on the banjo, he went to the library and checked out every book he could find about finishing. One book told him that many instruments are finished with lacquer, so Jim went to the paint store and bought all the supplies recommended by the book. Using a spray gun his father had used to paint an old car, Jim followed the directions in his library book step-by-step. Finally, he now needed only

to replace some missing fingerboard dots. He called a music store, which directed him to a local Chattanooga man who did inlay work. This man told Jim to bring over his guitar. After inspecting the guitar, he told Jim he could easily replace the dots, and asked if the guitar had been refinished. Jim said it had and the man asked who had done the work. Jim replied "I did." The man said "You're just the guy I've been looking for!" This statement changed the course of Jim's life because the man was Mike Longworth, who later would gain fame as Martin Guitar Company's official historian and pearl inlay specialist.

Thus began a long relationship between Jim and Mike Longworth, who, at the time, had been doing inlay work for many famous musicians such as Lester Flatt. Together Jim and Mike converted many 28-style Martins to 45-style guitars (Martin had discontinued the 45 series at the beginning of World War II and the 45-style was in great demand.) Jim and Mike also continued to do repair work, with Mike doing the inlay and binding and Jim the structural repairs and finishing work. During this time, Jim also began to build banjo necks, which he and Mike used to convert four string banjos to five string banjos. While taking a woodshop class at Middle Tennessee State University, Jim decided to make a copy of a 1902 Gibson F-2 mandolin (now in the Country Music Hall of Fame) that he and Mike were repairing. Jim decided, however, to place a banjo neck on the mandolin, thus creating the infamous "Bandola," which Jim still plays to this day. Not only did Jim get an "A" for this project in his class at MTSU, but received an unintended compliment when, at the 1966 Asheville Folk Festival, the Bandola fooled the practiced eye of George Gruhn who was heard complaining that Jim had ruined a nice old Gibson mandolin by sticking a banjo neck on it!

In 1966, Jim entered the U.S. Army, where he continued to do some repair work using the woodshops that are located on most Army bases. While stationed in Germany, he met a classical guitar builder who was interested in learning about Jim's experience building steel-string guitars. Jim in turn learned from this gentleman the art of tap-tuning, a technique builders use to evaluate the potential sound of a guitar by tapping the wood and listening for a particular sound or characteristic. At first unsure about this method, Jim learned under the tutelage of the German builder to recognize the benefits of tap tuning and