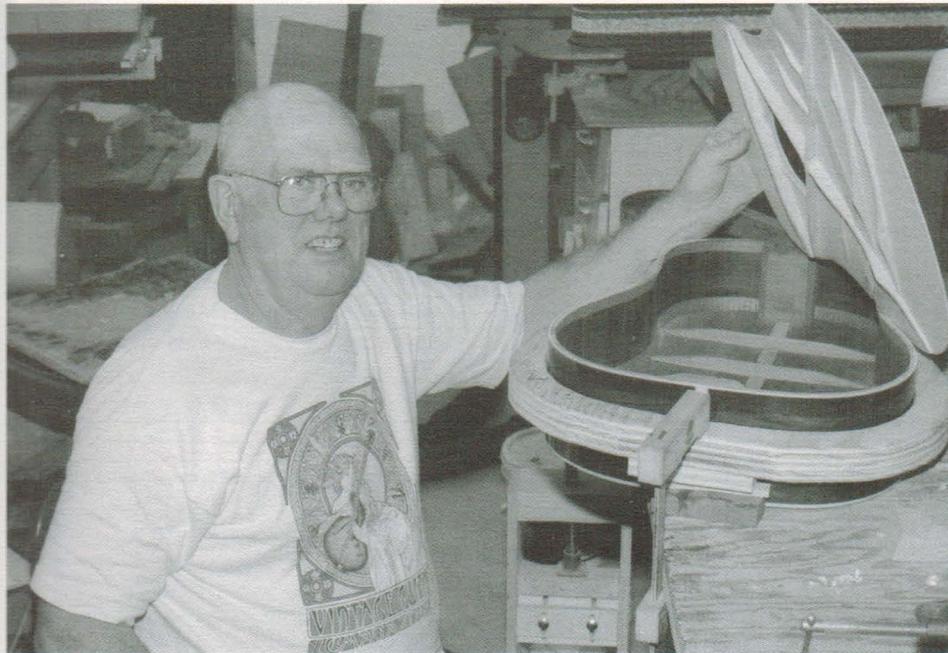


# Luthier Jim Grainger

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

came to understand what to listen for, a skill he uses to great benefit today. It is one of those “ah ha” moments where Jim says he gained true insight into instrument construction and sound.

After Jim was discharged from the Army, Mike Longworth (who in the interim had been hired by Martin Guitars to do the pearl inlay work on their reintroduced 45 series guitars) asked Jim to come to work with him at Martin. Jim declined the job offer, but still continued to work with Mike. Jim recalls one time when Mike spirited two fully braced, soon-to-be D-45 tops out of the Martin factory and, with Jim tagging along, took the tops to an elderly gentleman who had been in charge of voicing the tops at Martin in the 30s and 40s when Martin scalloped their top braces (Martin ceased scalloping their tops in 1944). Again, by watching this gentleman’s practiced hands as he carefully scalloped and voiced these tops, and by being allowed to do some of the scallop work himself, Jim gained valuable knowledge about the craft of building acoustic guitars. Jim and Mike then stealthily returned these tops to the Martin factory where they became D-45’s for two of Mike’s friends.

After graduating from college, Jim worked full-time in the furniture building industry and continued to repair, build, and restore many guitars part-time out of his basement. Eventually, word-of-mouth advertising brought him so much work that his part-time repair job began to consume all his free time, requiring him to work nonstop from the time he returned home from work until bedtime. Finally, in June of 1989, with a backlog of approximately eight months of repair work, Jim quit his job to devote himself full time to instrument building, repair and restoration, opening Custom Fretted Instruments and Repair.

Jim is a hard man to impress when it comes to guitars, having seen and played them all. In fact, many an owner of a nice old D-18 or D-28 may be deflated to hear Jim strum their guitar and pronounce simply, “Yup, it’s a Martin.” However, Jim thoroughly enjoys comparing guitars, and especially performing A/B comparisons of older Martins and Gibsons with the newer generation of quality, handmade guitars like Huss & Dalton (for whom Jim is a dealer). In Jim’s experience, many of the newer hand-built guitars can be so close to the older Martins and Gibsons that it is hard to justify the price of a pre-war guitar. In Jim’s opinion, this is truly “the golden age

of acoustic guitar.” However, Jim’s pick for best guitar still is the old Gibson J-35, which many have labeled “the Banjo Killer.” Of course, the mid thirties D-18s and D-28s are no slouches either, and Jim has repaired and played numerous examples. His own guitar is a 1954 D-28 that he bought for \$100 in 1958. Jim and Mike Longworth also scalloped the braces on this guitar, which contributes to its marvelous sound.

Jim never knows what will come in his door on any given day because old Gibsons and Martins still do trickle out of the Tennessee mountains. Recently a 14-year-old girl brought in a guitar previously owned by the late husband of a family friend. The friend had given the girl this guitar to learn on. The girl had brought the guitar to Jim to inquire about fixing a crack in the bridge. Another repairman had told her that the guitar was beyond help and had offered her \$200 for it (a tempting offer, but she declined). Opening the case, Jim was greeted by a remarkably clean, sunburst 1936 D-18. Needless to say, the girl left Jim’s shop with a much greater appreciation of what she had and, after fixing the bridge, Jim returned the guitar to her with the stern admonition that this was not a guitar to “practice on” at school!

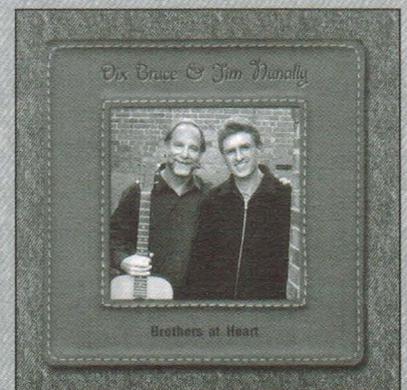
In addition to his many repair and restoration projects, which include neck sets, refrets, refinishing jobs, custom fabrications, re-tops, and other structural repairs, Jim continues to build beautiful custom banjos, like the one played by Blake Williams while with Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys, which resulted in Bill Monroe himself inviting Jim to dinner. Jim also continues to build custom guitars and the occasional hammered and mountain dulcimer and frequently can be found communicating his vast wealth of knowledge on internet posting boards like [www.flatpickin.com](http://www.flatpickin.com) and the Vintage Guitar Bulletin Board.

So when your guitar starts buzzing and it’s time for a neck set, or if you need a good, bone saddle for maximum tone, send it up that Gravel Road to Grainger’s and discover just how good your guitar can be.

Custom Fretted Instruments & Repair is located at 400 Firetower Road, Sparta, TN 38583-3746. Custom Fretted Instruments is an authorized warranty repair center for Martin, Fender, Taylor, Guild, and Ovation, and is a dealer for several high quality musical instruments including guitars made by Huss & Dalton, J.W. Gallagher & Son, and other manufacturers. Jim Grainger can be reached at (931)-657-2398 or via e-mail at [customfret@blomand.net](mailto:customfret@blomand.net).

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