



## MASTER LUTHIER

# Preston Thompson

A master guitar maker romances the wood.

WRITTEN BY LEE LEWIS HUSK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMY CASTANO

**P**reston Thompson holds the unassembled sound board to his ear and thumps it.

“I’m listening for fullness and rumble and liveliness,” he said. The master luthier, or guitar maker as he prefers to be called, is standing in the assembly room of Preston Thompson Guitars on Main Avenue in Sisters where pieces of spruce, mahogany, rosewood, ebony and myrtlewood are being transformed into resonant works of art—coveted by acoustic guitarists worldwide.

Last year, Thompson and his team of craftsmen sent sixty-three custom-made

acoustic guitars to music shops from Japan to Germany and New York to California. This year the shop is on target for 110 instruments. Prices range from \$3,500 for an all-mahogany parlor model up to \$15,000 for a Brazilian rosewood deluxe abalone inlaid guitar.

The names of musicians with Thompson guitars include Grammy award-winners Peter Rowan and Al Petteway, international blues player Eric Bibb, flatpicker Tim May, and Seattle jazz, rock and bluegrass musician Chris Luquette. In production is a custom guitar for the 2013 International Bluegrass

Music Association’s Female Vocalist of the Year, Claire Lynch of Nashville. “We are proud that the word about our guitars keeps spreading,” he said.

At the center of this enterprise is sixty-year-old Thompson, a native Texan who attended the Guitar Research & Design Center in Vermont in the 1970s and, after a stint in Nashville, gained attention when the National Flatpicking Championship selected a Thompson guitar as a top prize for its winners. “It propelled the name,” he said.

All Thompsons are designed and made in the style of Martin and other legendary, →



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→ vintage American-made guitars of the 1930s—the golden age of acoustic, steel-string guitars. His reputation got a further boost when Charles Sawtelle and Peter Rowan, both virtuoso bluegrass musicians of the 1980s, acquired Thompson guitars. Sawtelle gave Thompson access to his collection of rare instruments, which Thompson studied and measured for patterning his own instruments.

Thompson worked alone through the late 1980s, constructing “accurate period craft” guitars, first in Texas and then out of his Central Oregon shop. Then, for almost two decades, he took a hiatus—working in the resort and golf industry. In 2009, his reputation for full- and rich-sounding instruments gained momentum online, pulling him back into the craft. Thompson

cites the Sisters rural enterprise zone and the city’s lively folk and music scene as reasons for locating his business there in 2013.

The 2,000-square-foot workshop showcases the dozens of steps involved in custom-designed guitars. Some of Thompson Guitar’s twelve body types, including the delicate parlor model and the elegant 12 Fret 000 and dreadnought, hang near the front door. In an adjacent room, builders add frets, strings and finishing touches before shipping.

The largest room contains piles of wood awaiting construction into fronts, backs and sides. Three guitar makers cut, glue, clamp, and inlay intricate patterns on bodies and necks. Venting ducts run across the ceiling, with tools scattered everywhere and wood shavings littering the floor. The back room

is where these works of art are sprayed with twelve coats of lacquer and then buffed into a perfectly flat, lustrous finish. It’s “one of my favorite parts,” he said.

Musicians aren’t the only ones heaping accolades upon Thompson, *Acoustic Guitar Magazine* wrote, “With its powerful and immediate voice, deep resonance and protracted sustain, Thompson’s OM Brazilian model is the sort of magical guitar that one seldom encounters, especially in a newly-built instrument.” High praise from the industry’s signature publication.

When asked what he enjoys most about this job, the jean and flannel shirt-clad Thompson said, “I enjoy working with the guys and designing the instruments. It’s a joy when we get to see and hear musicians play a Thompson guitar.” 🎸