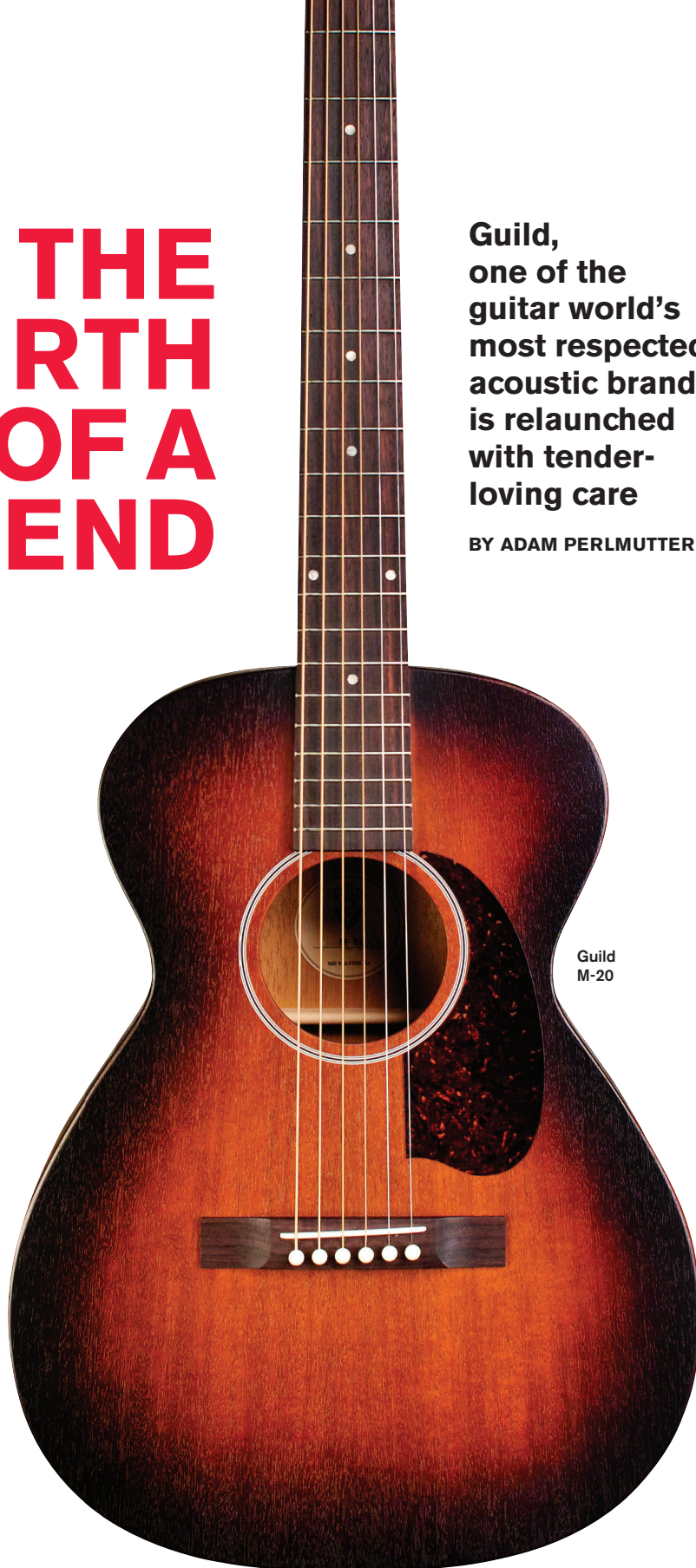


# THE REBIRTH OF A LEGEND

**Guild,  
one of the  
guitar world's  
most respected  
acoustic brands,  
is relaunched  
with tender-  
loving care**

**BY ADAM PERLMUTTER**



**Guild  
M-20**

**W**hen the Córdoba Music Group, the respected maker of nylon-string guitars, announced in May 2014 that it had purchased the Guild line from Fender Musical Instrument Corp., some industry watchdogs wondered what the future might hold for the storied steel-string acoustic brand founded in 1953 by music-store owner Alfred Dronge. Guild had enjoyed a heyday of high exposure in the 1960s, as its guitars gained popularity within the East Coast folk movement and on the West Coast psychedelic scene. But any trepidation on the part of industry wags was calmed with the subsequent announcement that Córdoba had enlisted master guitar builder Ren Ferguson to lead the Guild team as vice president of manufacturing and R&D.

Last year, in anticipation of the brand's then-pending relaunch, I drove up the Pacific Coast Highway to the new headquarters of Guild Guitars, located in Oxnard, California, a short trip from LA. Córdoba had begun construction of the plant in 2015, with the goal of building on Guild's legacy for high-quality, workhorse guitars. "Guild is one of the great American guitar brands, right up there with Martin and Gibson," said Jonathan

Thomas, president of Córdoba Music. "We're gearing up not just to recreate the originals, which have always been great guitars for the money, but to build the best Guilds that have ever been made."

Thomas showed me around the as-yet-uncompleted factory, walking past a large space that housed a library of carefully collated tone-woods for soundboards, backs, sides, and necks; a sealed-off finishing area; and the main room, where brand-new CNC machinery and decades-old fixtures existed side by side. Building the Oxnard factory from a cavernous 18,000-square-foot rectangular shell adjacent to Córdoba's own headquarters was no small feat, involving a protracted series of logistical and permitting challenges. Much of the heavy lifting had been completed by the time of my first visit, but the building was still awaiting odds and ends, like assorted electrical drops and plumbing for dust collection.

"On the machinery side," Thomas said, "we bought all of the equipment from the old Guild factory, in New Hartford, Connecticut, and trucked it out here to California. It took 13 45-foot flatbed trucks."

The only thing missing from this picture was a completed guitar, though production was soon to begin. Now, after 18 months of intensive research, engineering, and preparation, and with the recent release of the Guild USA M-20 and D-20 models, authentic reproductions of two classic Guild guitars from the 1960s, the picture is complete.

The design of the new factory is the brainchild of Ferguson, the master luthier who had led Gibson's celebrated acoustic division before joining Guild in 2012, when it was owned by Fender and based in Connecticut. Ferguson's input is apparent in the new factory. "Ren's driving the entire thing," Thomas said, during my first visit to the plant. "He's planning every aspect of the factory based on his 40-plus years as a guitar maker. Every machine he's ever wanted, he's getting, and every mistake he's made along the way, he's getting the chance to correct here."

**T**he Guild Guitar Co. was founded in 1952, when Avram "Alfred" Dronge—a music-store owner, teacher, and classical guitarist—partnered with George Mann, ex-vice president of the Epiphone Guitar Co. The



FELIX SALAZAR



Left  
Guild M-20

**I MADE A BEELINE FOR THE OXNARD GUILDS I'D BEEN WAITING ON WITH GREAT ANTICIPATION. IT WAS EXCITING TO PICK UP A FRESHLY COMPLETED M-20—THE NICK DRAKE GUITAR—ONLY A DAY OLD.**

pair opened a workshop in a Lower Manhattan loft, bringing along craftsmen who had made archtop guitars for Epiphone. Steve Uhrik, a seasoned repairman and proprietor of Retrofret Vintage Guitars, in Brooklyn, New York, says, “The fact that Al Dronge had this ready-trained workforce of former Epiphone guitar builders was huge.”

Guild’s first catalog, published in 1954, announced the new brand as the “Stradivari of Guitars” and focused on a line of electric archtops. During its first few years, Guild also offered a limited selection of flattops, like the Troubadour F-20, Aragon F-30, and Navarre F-50. Quickly outgrowing its quarters, in 1956 Guild moved across the Hudson River, to Hoboken, New Jersey, where driven by the folk-music boom it ramped up production to serve an increasing demand for steel-string acoustic guitars. “When the company moved to New Jersey, they added a great force of skilled immigrant woodworkers—mostly Italian and Portuguese, I believe, who brought their particular skill set to the party,” Uhrik says. “I met Carlo Greco, who had been one of the top luthiers at Guild in Hoboken. This was in the early 1970s, when I was first starting to repair guitars. Among many other things, he showed me a lot of interesting quirks about working on archtops.”

The 1960s—which saw the peak of the folk revival and an explosion of rock ‘n’ roll—was a fruitful period for Guild. The company branched out with a full line of flattops, including D series dreadnoughts and a series of signature 12-string models with jumbo bodies. Guilds sold for less than comparable guitars from Martin and Gibson and gained a reputation for durability. “Years ago, I had a fellow bring in a mid-’60s D-40 for repair,” Uhrik says. “When I opened the case I could see there were ‘puncture wounds’ all over the top. I told him the guitar looked like it had been stabbed. He confirmed that it had been. It also appeared that there was some dried blood on the top. He said it was. So, thinking he possibly wanted to re-top the guitar, I asked how I could be of help, to which he replied, ‘The action’s a little low.’

“That was one tough guitar!”

**T**he company earned high-profile devotees during the 1960s folk revival. Richie Havens played a D-40 when he opened the Woodstock Music and Art Fair, in August 1969, and would use that model for the rest of his career. Dave Van Ronk, the Greenwich Village folk-blues fixture who inspired the 2013 Coen Brothers film *Inside Llewyn Davis*, played an F-50, Guild’s signature jumbo. “I

rebuilt Dave Van Ronk’s old F-50 a few times,” Uhrik says. “He always blamed the airlines, but I knew he could be rough on guitars. Great thing with those old Guilds is, you can shake ‘em and break ‘em, but they go back together solidly and sounding great.”

In 1966, the Avnet Corporation (an electronics behemoth) bought Guild and moved it to a former furniture factory in Westerly, Rhode Island. The first new flattop guitar built at the Westerly plant was the M-20, a small-bodied mahogany guitar that would be adapted by the English singer-songwriter Nick Drake, who had a penchant for nonstandard tunings. The company also ramped up production of its electric guitars and basses.

In keeping with the times, Guild modified the constructional aspects on its mainstay instruments in the 1970s and ‘80s. To some ears, the acoustic guitars from this period are lesser examples than their predecessors from New York and New Jersey. “The Rhode Island-made flattops always felt—and sounded—a bit heavy to me,” Uhrik says. “They had bigger neck blocks and heavier bracing. [On certain models], laminated arched backs were a great boon for faster production. But in utilizing that method of construction, some of the tone and finesse of the solid-wood ladder-braced backs was lost, in my opinion.”

Still, weighty as they might be, Guilds from this era are highly prized by guitarists. Steve Gunn, a Brooklyn-based singer-songwriter known for his wide-ranging approach to the instrument, owns a 1977 D-35 (which he scored for \$600), a 1970 D-50 (\$700), and a 1982 12-string (\$600). “I’ve never been able to find a tone quite like my 12-string and D-35,” Gunn says. “There is something singular about the way they sound, and they can stand up to others with significantly higher price tags. . . . Traveling with an acoustic guitar is a delicate and tricky endeavor, and, for me, Guilds are the most reliable.”

Another big change for Guild came in 1995, when Fender purchased the company. Six years later, Fender moved the Guild production from Westerly to its own factory in Corona, California. With the acquisition of the Tacoma Guitar Co. and Kaman Music Corp. (then the owner of Ovation brand), Fender moved Guild yet again, first to Tacoma, Washington, in 2004, then to New Hartford.

But Fender was on to something when, in 2012, it convinced Ferguson to come out of retirement and commute between his homes in Montana and Connecticut to oversee Guild’s operations. Ferguson’s influence during his tenure in New Hartford is seen most

## GUILD RELAUNCH

prominently in the Orpheum Series that he designed, making use of hide-glue construction, Adirondack spruce soundboards, and other golden-era appointments. “I was very proud to use old techniques, which I learned by taking apart many vintage examples, in making great new guitars,” Ferguson says.

When Córdoba bought Guild in 2014, Ferguson came on board to undertake his biggest project yet—to build a new factory from the ground up, while honoring the original designs of one of the guitar world’s most respected brands. “We’re going after the beautiful simplicity of the early Guilds, while taking things up a notch,” Ferguson says.

**T**oday, production at the new Guild factory is well underway. On January 19, a few days before Winter NAMM 2016, the music-instrument trade show held in Anaheim, California, I returned to the Oxnard plant to attend the company’s open house marking Guild’s official relaunch. The day started in what normally serves as Córdoba’s North American distribution center, transformed for the occasion into a pop-up café, complete with artisanal coffee, a breakfast buffet, and heating lamps.

After some introductory remarks from Córdoba’s Thomas and others, a dozen American and European shop owners and I took a factory tour, led by Ferguson. In the factory’s main room, a vast cavern on my earlier visit, machinery now hummed with life, forming the interval of a minor seventh. Ferguson, a bearded and ponytailed man in his early 70s, was soft-spoken as he discussed the project that had consumed his time for the past 18 months.

I was reminded that Ferguson had put together the factory using a combination of old machinery, some of it dating back to the West-erly years, and newer CNC equipment—all working in concert to more efficiently produce guitars of consistently higher quality than ever before. The new factory is tooled up to build those classic Guild models—the M-20 and the D-20—and will soon introduce such flagship examples as the D-55 and F-512 before eventually adding electric guitars and basses, including the semi-hollow Starfire series.

As the tour filed outside of the room, Ferguson said, “We’re real proud of what we’ve built so far—all solid-wood guitars that are solid values.”

After the tour, the group returned to Córdoba’s distribution center, where a stage had been set with a range of Guild’s current offerings, including the new Westerly collection of affordable, all-solid-wood guitars; the Newark St. Collection of imported electrics and basses; and the

**Below**  
Richie Havens rocks his Guild D-40 at Woodstock.



all-mahogany guitars made in Oxnard. Also onstage: guitarist, singer-songwriter, and producer Julian Coryell, son of the jazz guitarist Larry Coryell, who shares his father’s virtuosic tendencies on the six-string, as well as his impressive hair. Julian played a handful of Guild guitars, coaxing unusual modulations and impossibly fast lines and making even the least expensive imported examples sound incredibly rich.

Lunch—quinoa salad with kale, and burgers made from grass-fed beef—was served from a food truck parked outside. Inside, a selection of locally produced beers and wines had materialized. Across from the spirits, I found an example of every guitar in the Guild lineup, grouped by series, including those in the revamped lines made overseas, as well as some of the first instruments to have been produced in the new



**Top**  
The M-20 and D-20 models made at the Oxnard plant.

**Bottom**  
Ren Ferguson leads the factory tour.



FELIX SALAZAR



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ELLIOTT LANDY/GETTY IMAGES

**'WE'RE GOING AFTER THE BEAUTIFUL SIMPLICITY OF THE EARLY GUILDS, WHILE TAKING THINGS UP A NOTCH!'**  
REN FERGUSON,  
GUILD MASTER BUILDER

factory. I made a beeline for the Oxnard Guilds I'd been waiting on with great anticipation. It was exciting to pick up a freshly completed M-20—the Nick Drake guitar—only a day old. The instrument was lightweight and smelled sweetly of wood and lacquer—it felt more playable than the vintage examples I'd tried, but still had a distinctive old-school vibe. Though it was difficult to hear the instrument above the drone

of the many other people playing guitars and talking about them, I could tell by the way it vibrated that it had a winning voice.

Noticing an older gentleman waiting patiently to check out the M-20, I surrendered this peach of a guitar. After playing a few Lester Flatt G runs, the man, who asked to remain anonymous, said appreciatively, "They made nice Guilds in the '60s and '70s, but nothing this good!" **AC**