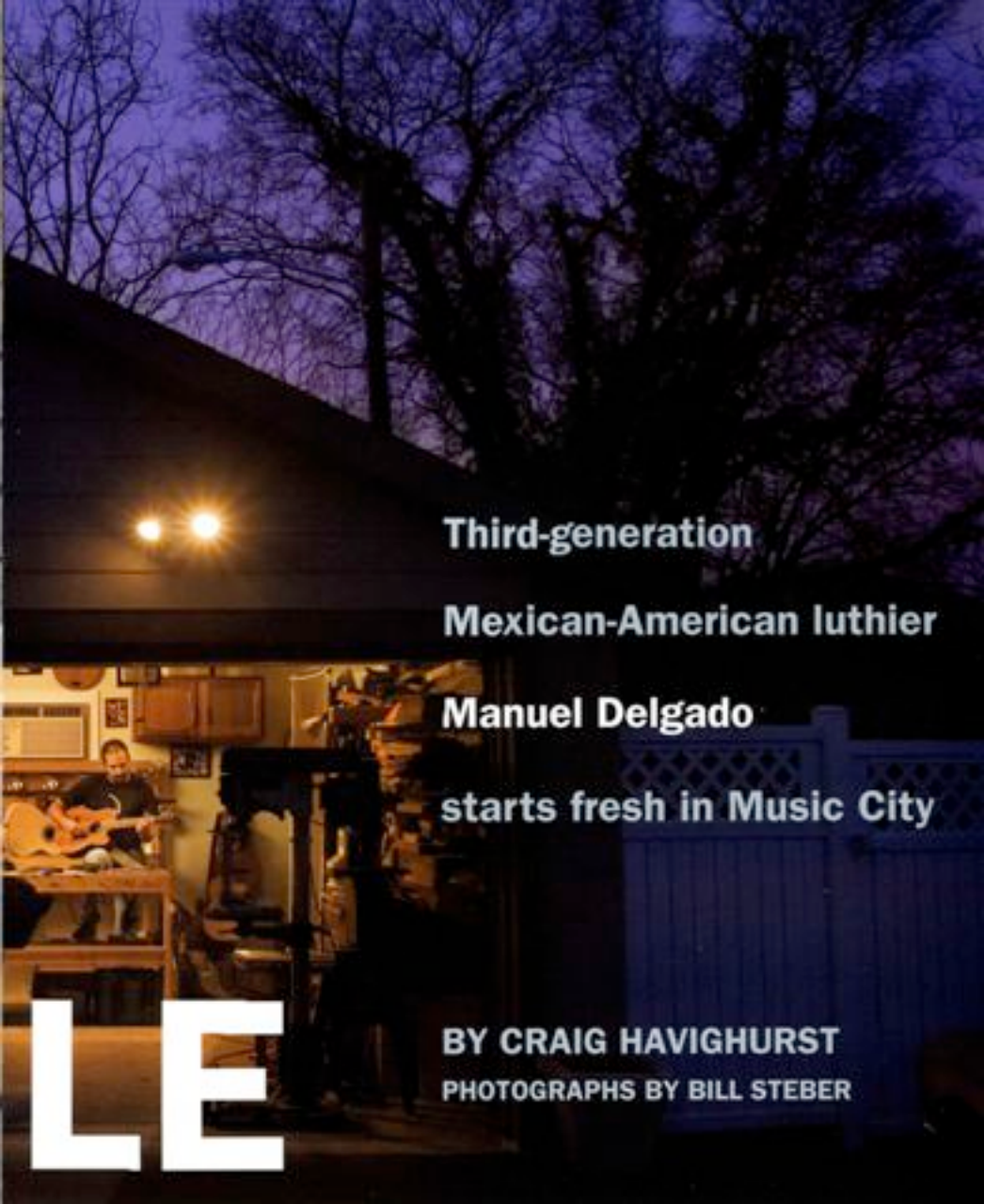




FROM  
EAST  
L.A. TO  
EAST  
NASHVILLE



**Third-generation**

**Mexican-American luthier**

**Manuel Delgado**

**starts fresh in Music City**

**LE**

**BY CRAIG HAVIGHURST**

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL STEBER**

A

**BATTLESLAKE BATTLE**, cut decades ago from what was clearly a very large snake, passes the years in the dark, inside the body of Manuel Delgado's first guitar. Not the first guitar he owned or played, but the first guitar he ever built, the first of many. He was 22 years old and keen on beating his father's benchmark age of 14. And with his father guiding, Delgado made a requinto romantico, a traditional Mexican instrument strung with nylon strings and built with an extra-deep cutaway body.

"It's kind of a superstition," Delgado says of the rite. "They believe it helps improve the sound of the instrument. It was kind of part of the ceremony when I first got it finished." Today, the requinto sits on a stand in his workshop — the first guitar as midwife to every guitar that's come since.

Birth, death, family and tradition all play major roles in the life and career of Manuel Delgado. Just 35, he's still young in luthier years, but he's conscientiously carrying on a family heritage that stretches back to at least 1918. That's when Delgado's grandfather and great-uncle opened their first guitar shop in Terrell, Mexico. Self-taught, they wound up building for some of the most demanding guitarists in the world. Self-motivated, they nurtured a business in the United States that still thrives in East Los Angeles.

Along the way, the Delgado family has filled a cultural niche, supplying a wide range of traditional fretted instruments to a musical community unique to Los Angeles, where one of the world's largest populations of Mexicans shares a metropolis with an entertainment industry. The family built or dealt hundreds of instruments for mariachi, son, trio, salsa and jarocho musicians; in addition, Manuel's brother Thomas has built a tree for Jackson Browne, and Manuel has done repair work on Gene Simmons' battle-axe bass.

Delgado watched Segovia play his father's guitars in his family's store. Delgado clientele over the years included not only Segovia but also members of the

famous Romero classical-guitar clan, folk legend Arlo Guthrie, the progressive Latin rock band Ozomatli and L.A. rock stars Los Lobos. The requinto jarocho you hear toward the end of the smash hit "La Bomba" is a Delgado instrument.

Ozomatli's Raul Pacheco owns eight or nine instruments from Candela Guitars, the Delgado family business at 2718 Cesar Chavez Blvd. He says the presence of the shop in the neighborhood was inspiring to Latinos like himself growing up in East L.A. At the shop, he saw instruments being made as well as legions of serious Mexican-American musicians who shopped there for bajo sexto and jaranas. He calls the shop a community resource.

"I have a classical guitar from them that is the best guitar I've ever owned," Pacheco says. "Any time I've used it in any studio in any city, people say that guitar sounds amazing, and they ask me questions about it. It's a darker-sounding guitar, beautiful inlay. For whatever reason, it has that quality that's just magic."

**DELGADO'S FATHER DIED** of cancer in late 1996, and his grandfather passed in 1999. Manuel Delgado never considered moving away while those patriarchs were alive. But six years ago, he married songwriter and singer Julie Moonenham, whose interest in Nashville led the couple to uproot. He left a large family and the shop behind, a bittersweet move.

"It was a grieving process," Delgado says. "It was really about me supporting her and wanting her to go after her dream. And I feel like, in return, God has kind of blessed me because I went from having the storefront and selling the strings and doing the picks and all that to going back to what I love, which is just the building."

Delgado speaks with an enthusiastic, infectious spirituality when the subject is building stringed instruments. His ambitions place quality above quantity. He is fearless about trying new instruments, and

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** Manuel Delgado turns the midnight oil in his garage workshop in Nashville.



he approaches every new guitar as a unique work of art. He continues the traditional woodworking methods he learned from his family — not out of a sense of duty, but because, in most cases, he prefers the way they feel in his hands.

Delgado, who never throws anything away that hasn't been recycled or reused within an inch of its life, saves shavings from various parts of his guitars and gives them, in plastic baggies, to his customers along with their instruments — like locks of baby hair. He also takes photos at every stage of his instruments' construction and gives them to clients as a slide show on DVD. He says he even listens chiefly to a client's preferred genre of music — bluegrass, Americana, flamenco, classical, what have you — while building an instrument with that music in its future, like a soon-

to-be dad playing Mozart through headphones on his wife's pregnant belly.

His high degree of dedication to the building process has fostered fervent opinions about what is and isn't lutheric. His philosophy is prominent on his website, and he brings it up in our first hour together. "There's a market out there for everything," he says, "but I really believe that the craft that I was taught is a dying art, and I truly am a luthier. I truly am somebody who builds instruments by hand. And if you wanted to kill all the electricity in here, I could build you a guitar.

"Yeah, the band saw helps me shear the wood, the belt sander helps me when I'm sanding pieces, but take it all away, and I can still build you an instrument. Even without heating up that pipe" — a standard galvanized plumbing pipe used to bend wet wood into sides — "I

Delgado builds by hand every instrument that bears his name, allowing him to add unique custom features such as this fancy inlay.

could light a fire and figure out a way to do it. So that to me is what I love about what I do. And it's unfortunate because people don't know there are still instrument builders that do it that way. So they expect that when you have companies that are able to produce hundreds of instruments a day, they look at what you do and they kind of want to compare price-wise, and there is no comparison."

Delgado's guitars aren't inexpensive, ranging from just under \$1,000 for the smaller traditional instruments up to more than \$10,000 for some of his classical models. He says each one takes at least 100 hours, and it's all him. Delgado works entirely alone,

EAST NASHVILLE is the city's indie/bohemian counterpart to industry-minded Music Row. Across the Cumberland River from downtown, in what until recently was considered the city's over-the-tracks, don't-go-there-at-night district, an enclave of home recording studios, nightspots, creative professionals and entrepreneurs has taken root. Delgado's house is a diminutive Tudor revival cottage on a historically charming street, a few blocks from East Nashville's hippest music venue and bistro. Only in the context of the larger story of the neighborhood and of Nashville's recent Latino influx — Manuel could never have gotten a proper taco here five years ago — does the man in the

## "I truly am somebody who builds instruments by hand. And if you wanted to kill all the electricity in here, I could build you a guitar."

though his workshop is a welcoming place where friends frequently drop in to visit while he works. He says he could build about 25 instruments a year, but deliberately keeps his total closer to 15.

"If I'm rushing on getting a certain number out every week, then some are going to get through with mistakes, and that doesn't happen," he says. "These instruments have my family's name on them, and I care too much about that to let them go out with a problem. And they have a lifetime warranty. I've never had somebody say they don't like it, but if they did, I'd happily build them another one."

garage, who can build bajo sextos and guitarrones, make a postmodern kind of sense.

Delgado greets me at the door and takes me by surprise. Speaking to a third-generation luthier on the phone, I too easily imagined silver hair, wisdom wrinkles, glasses on nose. In fact, he is trim, tall and wired with youthful excitement, eager to show off his craft. He's wearing a black "East Los Angeles" T-shirt and sporting a black beard. A former boxer, he could probably be intimidating, but his eyes are wide, dark pools of childlike kindness, and he exudes warmth. He invites me upstairs to the music studio where his wife

**OPPOSITE:** Delgado was steeped in the culture of traditional Mexican instruments, but he's not afraid to experiment with some decidedly non-traditional designs, such as this semi-acoustic bass.





works and where some of the finished guitars live, usually briefly, before finding their new homes.

"It's hard, I want to keep all of them, but I got to make a living," he says, laughing.

The first guitar he lets me play is a 000 model he calls the Rosario, after his grandmother. "Most of my guitars have names," he explains. "My flamenco is a Monica, which is my sister. My classical is Maria, which is my mom. My steel-string is the Julia, my wife." The names tie certain personalities to each instrument.

Clearly, there are secrets to be picked up in Manuel Delgado's workshop out back. He'd only set up the place eight months prior, and it still feels like it's being broken in. He's finished five instruments since moving, including two instruments he'd never tried before—a *luajo* and a square-neck guitar in the Dobro style. Photographs line the walls, including some that reach back to the 1940s, with his grandfather and great-uncle surrounded by half-finished instruments in their then-new Los Angeles environs.

## “And Segovia said, ‘No, no, no. A guitar is like a woman: The way she is is the way she is. Make me another one . . .’”

"My flamenco guitars are known for having just a really sharp attack and a bright, brilliant sound, and they're very elegant in look and very traditional, but yet they're surprisingly strong. That's my sister. I could describe her the exact same way!"

If the 000 is a *play* to soften me up, it works. Topped with bear-claw spruce and backed in mahogany with a subtle tobacco sunburst, it's a fingerstyle's new best friend, featherweight but very vocal and responsive. Also on hand is a dreadnought he calls "The Healer," inspired, he says, by watching several of his family members battle cancer and a small niece struggle with diabetes. This particular guitar is going to be signed by star musicians and raffed off for charity, something Delgado has done successfully before. Inlaid abalone forms rays around the soundhole, in a design that suggests the American Southwest. Its bass register is almost shockingly aggressive, like notes struck on a grand piano.

A hand saw and a couple of belt sanders are the most conspicuous tools to technology. Mostly what one notices are stacks of wood: rare Brazilian rosewood, several kinds of spruce, Honduran mahogany, bubinga and Palo Escrito, a Mexican rosewood so named for its highly figured grain.

"I'm fortunate that I have a lot of people that have done business with my father and my grandfather, so I'm able to get really old wood, aged wood," he says. "I don't need that much material. I just continually buy things, date it and then just put it away and forget about it, every year. So I have Brazilian rosewood that people nowadays are spending thousands of dollars for. And it's worth that, but I'm not going to charge my customer that because I was able to get it at a better price."

Manuel puts on a denim apron that's grown stiff under a crust of wood glue. He points out some of the projects on his bench on a typical Friday afternoon. A flamenco guitar is in its early stages. He's begun an

**OPPOSITE, TOP:** The Delgado workshop tries to meet the demand for ukuleles during the diminutive instrument's second wave of popularity in the early 1990s. Manuel's great uncle is standing in the back on the left, and Manuel's grandfather is seated in front on the right. The two other workers are unknown.

**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT:** Customers sample the Delgado wares in the late 1980s at the shop at 1618 Sunset Blvd. in Los Angeles.

**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM RIGHT:** Three generations of luthiers: Porfirio Delgado is on the left, his son Caselario Delgado is in the middle and his grandson Manuel A. Delgado is on the right. Manuel has two more cousins in Mexico's Oaxaca.





Delgado sands the binding to the curve of a requinto romantico.

elaborate inlaid tree design on the guitar's rib over its bottom block, with green branches spreading out from a brown trunk. Delgado says he's following the flamenco superstition: no black anywhere on a guitar. The top is well along, with its signature Delgado-family fan-bracing pattern elegantly visible for the last time. The neck, like all his necks, will be a one-piece, hand-carved block of mahogany. His neck adjustments all take place before the frets have been set or the guitar has been varnished.

"Once I'm done, I'll glue a fingerboard on," he explains. "I'll glue a bridge on, I'll cut out my headstock and put my machine heads in, and then I will string it up and raise it to pitch and let it sit. The neck is going to settle in slightly, and it already has a slight angle to compensate for that. But I'll let it sit for a week, whatever. Every now and then I'll check the tuning. And then I'll look down the neck. If the fingerboard has given at all, if it has a slight angle, then I'm going to

plane it level, and then I fret it. So you never have an issue where the neck meets the body, [and] you have a fingerboard that jumps or droops down because the fingerboard and the neck were put in all at the same time. Again, it's just an older style."

Also in the works is a *requinto romantico* similar to his Number One. There's an old Martin in for bridge-plate repair, too. He's fabricated a perfect replica of the original Martin part, entirely by hand, out of rosewood. And on the wall is a half-finished electric bass of his own design, a fretless that evokes a Hofner bass as re-imagined by Dr. Seuss. It's testimony to his pursuit of variety within the context of traditional building techniques.

"Even if you were to come to me and say, 'I really like this particular model, build it for me,' it wouldn't be the same [as the others] because I'd be building it for you," Delgado says. "I'm going to want to know things about you. I want to know where you're from, what your

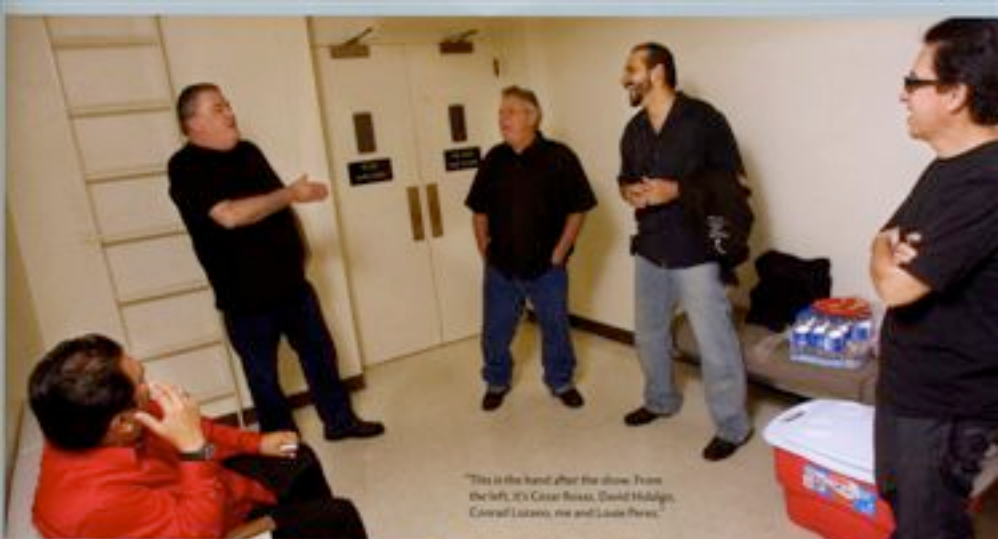


**UPPER LEFT:** Delgado's Julie model, which is named for his wife.

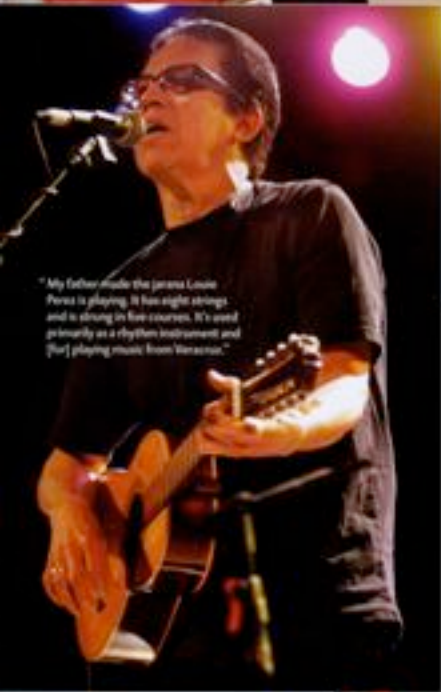
**UPPER MIDDLE:** Delgado's new semi-acoustic bass. "The inspiration came from Paul McCartney's Hofner bass," he says. "Rather than give it the sharp cutaways of the Hofner, I gave it nice rounded edges. I thought I had come up with a unique shape, but then someone pointed out to me that it looks like a Weissenborn steel guitar."

**UPPER RIGHT:** The Mutzel resonator guitar is named for Delgado's father-in-law, who is from Mutzel, Tennessee. Unlike most resonator guitars, which are built with laminated tops, the Mutzel features a solid top.

**LOWER LEFT:** Delgado uses an elegantly stylized lowercase "D" for his logo.



"This is the band after the show. From the left, it's Cesar Rosas, David Hidalgo, Conrad Lovato, me and Lucero Perez."



"My father made the jarana Lucero Perez is playing. It has eight strings and is string in five courses. It's used primarily as a rhythm instrument and [for] playing music from Veracruz."

**M**iguel Delgado first met the various members of Los Lobos when they were still in high school. "The guys in Los Lobos had great compassion for my father and grandfather and had them make lots of instruments over the years," Delgado says. "When I was growing up, I used to see them all the time when they would stop by to visit or have their guitar worked on. I hadn't seen them for a while, and when they were playing in Bowling Green, Kentucky, which is about an hour from here, they called me up and invited me to the concert. It was a great chance to catch up with them and to see some of the instruments my father and grandfather built for them."



"David Hidalgo is playing a requinto romántico made by my grandfather. The requinto is smaller than a regular guitar and is tuned up five frets to A. It's used a lot in mariachi music."



"When my father made this guitar, he wanted to put Louie's name in the fingerboard, but Louie said he didn't want that. But when he picked it up, he saw my father had inlaid an L and a P in the bridge tips, which he's pointing out. At the time, Louie was annoyed, but now he looks back and laughs at it. He told me this is his favorite instrument."



"Casey is playing a guitar that he and my father designed. It has a shallow body, and they worked quite a bit together to get it to look right. The pickup was designed by Lloyd Biggs. Lloyd's pickups do an excellent job of bringing out the tone of these instruments. The controls are mounted on the top because this guitar is shallow."



"This is the band strategy. The only instrument up there not made by my family is Conrad's guitarron, which I believe was made by Don Martin Macias in the 1950s. Macias was one of the greatest Mexican luthiers ever. His lute series are really sought after these days."

likes are. Things like colors. If you're a person that likes the mountains, I'm gonna use earth tones on the inlays. If you're someone who likes the ocean, maybe I'll use abalone shell and blues and yellows, different colors that will kind of bring you closer to the places that you love. Because aside from the tone and the sound, which I think is the most important thing, it's got to be a custom-built instrument to where you feel like it's an extension of you."

across the Rio Grande in El Paso, Texas. Much of the demand for their work began to come from Los Angeles, however, and in 1948, Pilo and Candelas opened a shop at 1278 Brooklyn Ave. and then a second on Sunset Boulevard a couple of years later. One of their first significant clients was a music shop that said it had too many guitars, but that would buy as many ukuleles as the brothers could make. They cranked out 700 in two months before the music store said it had enough.

**"I'm going to want to know things about you. I want to know where you're from, what your likes are. . . . It's got to be a custom-built instrument to where you feel like it's an extension of you."**

THE DELGADO SAGA began like something out of a novel. Two brothers, Porfirio, known as Pilo, and Candelario, called Candelas, were orphaned as children after their parents died in an accident in the Coahuila state of Mexico. They were sent to different homes, then ran away together in their early teens. They got jobs working with wood — carpentry and cabinetworking. Local musicians began asking them to repair their guitars, and soon the musical brothers had launched a Cuban-style band of their own, for which they built all the instruments. They set up a business in 1928 in Tereón, Mexico, and found they were the only luthiers within 800 miles.

In 1937, the brothers relocated to Juárez, Mexico, and in 1946, they opened their first U.S. operation

Pilo trained his only son, called Candelitas ("little Candelas"), to build. Manuel's great-uncle tended more to the business side. "He was really more the business mastermind behind everything," says Delgado. "He liked to be up front and loved to wheel and deal and talk to customers. He was the one who sought out Andrés Segovia."

That story is, naturally, a family favorite. A friend of the brothers was a photographer who was assigned to shoot the great Spanish guitar master during a visit to L.A. He tipped off the Delgados to Segovia's hotel. "So my great-uncle built a classical guitar for him — you know, German spruce top, Brazilian rosewood sides and back, Honduran mahogany neck. Just a beautiful instrument." The brothers got a letter of recommen-



dition in order to ease the meeting, where Candelas presented his finished guitar to the maestro. Segovia loved it.

"Who is this for?" he asked, and Candelas said, of course, "It's for you."

Manuel Delgado picks up the story.

"Segovia says, 'This is a wonderful guitar. I'm honored.' But he said, 'I love everything about this, but I actually play with jumbo frets.'"

"So my great-uncle said, 'No problem. I'll take it back to the shop, and I'll take those frets off, and I'll put the jumbo frets on there for you.'"

"And Segovia said, 'No, no, no. A guitar is like a woman. The way she is is the way she is. Make me another one with the jumbo frets. I'll be back in town next year and I'll purchase it from you.' And he ended up commissioning three guitars."

The Delgados made fans of and friends with a

large array of customers. Pilo became godfather to Pepe Romero of the famed Romero family of classical guitarists. They built for Burl Ives and Choro, for Hoyt Axton and Jose Feliciano. Despite (or because of) the guitar-centric world in which he grew up, Delgado nearly became not a luthier but a cop. His father had taken up boxing and became a trainer in the L.A. Police Department boxing league. Manuel and his dad would start their days at a gym down the street from the Candelas shop. Then Manuel would head to the shop after school, where he'd work on guitars. The relationships built with the police led the younger Delgado to seriously entertain the idea of becoming a deputy sheriff. He was set to enter the academy when his father was diagnosed with colon cancer.

"That kind of put everything into perspective" he says, "and I thought I just wanted to go back and build with him and my grandpa." His father survived three

Delgado works on a requinto romantico while three unfinished guitars await their turns on the bench.



A slotted headstock is cut.

years, and 9/11 years later, Delgado still misses him every day. As for finally giving in to the lure of lutherie, he says, "I don't regret it at all. This is in my blood. I would have had to figure it out one way or the other."

DELGADO STEPPED ONTO the national stage with a guitar that, while not his most understated, carried perhaps more meaning than anything he'd done before. A day or two after September 11 — while Los Angeles tried to go about their lives wondering if their city was the next target of terrorism — Delgado had a flash of inspiration that resulted in the "Unity Guitar." A stars-and-stripes top and a star-shaped soundhole are just a couple of the most conspicuously patriotic design elements of the one-off instrument. Its worldly vision is harder to see, but it's there, the builder says.

"I wanted it to bring people together. So I thought

it's got to represent unity. So I used woods from around the world to build the instrument. The binding is Indian rosewood. The fingerboard is African ebony. The neck is Honduran mahogany. The top is Canadian spruce. The sides and back and bridge are maple from the U.S." And the finishing touches were autographs on the back and sides from a constellation of musical stars. The guys from Los Lobos were first to agree, but among those who followed were Glen Campbell, Smokey Robinson, the Dixie Chicks, David Lee Roth, Mary J. Blige and Emmylou Harris.

Some L.A. law firms and media outlets helped the luthier realize his idea to use the guitar to raise money for the families of 9/11 victims. He found a charity specifically dedicated to helping the families of undocumented workers, which some employers were reluctant to admit they had had in the Twin Towers

when they collapsed. The Delgados closed the street in front of the store and sold raffle tickets to win the guitar. Ozomatli played a free show. Altogether, they raised more than \$15,000.

IT'S A LOVELY FALL DAY when I return to Delgado's studio, and his garage door is open to the fresh breezes and domesticated sounds of the neighborhood. He has set aside the day to show me the luthier's-eye view of the world, an intimidating yet intriguing prospect.

Delgado has a book-matched spruce top already joined by a sturdy but nearly invisible glue joint — a polygon of thin lumber, still fairly rough to the touch, clean-smelling and white. It made a pleasing book when I knocked on it, but Delgado isn't a top-tapper. Nor is he an obsessive measurer. He says he's more likely to gauge a top by feel than with calipers. He takes off his glue-encrusted apron and gives it to me.

He is patience made manifest, a natural teacher who can guide a student without sounding anxious or condescending. Following instructions, I mark the guitar's center line with a pencil, then trace the body shape from a particle-board template. It is simple enough to find the center of where the soundhole was going to be and plunge a drill bit through the top into a hard work board as a guide post. Then I mark the edge of the soundhole and the concentric rings for a thin inner rosette and a larger outer one.

Now the tricks of old Mexico come into play. Delgado pulls a shard of mahogany out of his scrap bin and drills a hole in one end of it, so it can spin around on the drill-bit peg. Out comes a fairly ordinary hobby knife, and he shows me how to etch a groove in the top of the rosewood scrap until the blade just pokes through the other side into the spruce top. The blade hangs there like a sword in the stone as we swirl the crude but effective scoring/cutting device in ever-deeper circles around the drill bit.

"And if you break a few blades, it's cool because that's the only way you're going to know how strong and how fragile it is," says Delgado. It reminds me of something he told me about his apprenticeship with his father: "He would actually let me ruin some things just to learn." Still, I'm very careful not to ruin his lovely spruce top.

We repeated this process a half-dozen times around each preordained circumference. Then he watches as I use wood chisels to gouge out the grooves. The inner ring turns out a bit wider than we intended, so Delgado recommends two strips of green inlay instead of the one we'd planned for. To make the strips pliable enough to bend, you use an ancient technique: You run them through your mouth. The fear of splinters is horrible, but the strips, lubricated by wood glue, slip into their slot without much ordeal.

The wider outer ring proves more difficult; it's very easy to lift flakes of wood off the top of the guitar. Delgado restores them to the top with a tiny dolly of glue. I wet some wider decorative purfling, which resists bending. Delgado encourages me onward, telling me it's OK to bang the strips into their groove with the handle of one of his home-built knives. I cut off the purfling at a point that seems right to complete the circle and make a not-too-ugly joint at the top, a place that will mercifully be covered with a fretboard.

The final steps are where the work blossoms into magic. I pass the top through a wide belt sander, which shaves the excess purfling off the top and makes a flush, seamless rosette. Then we redraw the body shape, and Delgado uses his hand knife to shave away most of the wood outside the lines. He then shows me how to use a rougher belt sander to pare the top almost to its perfect body shape.

Finally, he pulls out a jar of varnish. When I paint a bit over my rosette, it glistens, and the contrasts emerge. It's a thrilling end to an already extraordinary encounter. Holding "my" top, I feel a rush of emotion; I've found new insight into a process I'd always held on par with alchemy.

I still like to believe that Manuel Delgado and his fellow traditional luthiers are born into a wizardly class of people not quite like the rest of us. But I also sense (thanks to Delgado's empathy for the non-luthier or the would-be luthier) that this art and craft is a kind of music unto itself. It can be learned and it can be practiced, but if you are to live up to the standards of the masters — those who are still living and breathing and those who've gone on to sleep with the rattlesnakes — you must dedicate your life to its pursuit. **Q**