

HOW DANA BOURGEOIS BECAME NEW ENGLAND'S BIGGEST GUITARMAKER

HANDS ON

By Art Dudley
Photographs by Amanda Kowalski





Though he runs a small factory, Dana Bourgeois is still definitely hands on. On any given day, he can be found doing selecting woods, doing quality control or, as shown here, scalloping braces.







HE combined cities of Lewiston and Auburn—referred to by locals as LA, with varying degrees of irony—comprise the third-largest population center in the state of Maine. They face each other from opposite sides of the Androscoggin River, on whose eastern bank is poised the Bourgeois factory: an austere 19th-century brick building that was once home to a thriving textile mill.

This is the northernmost of three points in a constellation that, for 30-odd years, has led the way for small-volume makers of steel-string acoustic guitars (the other two being the Santa Cruz Guitar Company and Collings Guitars): Every bench-building, tap-tuning shop in America owes a debt of thanks to these people.

Among the most deserving of all is Dana Bourgeois, an amiable, articulate man whose reputation for sharing time and knowledge with other luthiers is the stuff of legend. Accordingly, during a visit to the Bourgeois factory on what had to have been Maine's rainiest day in all of 2013, my first question was: Have relations always been so cordial between contemporary builders?

"Oh, yeah. We all grew up at the same time, and we're on the phone with each other all the time. At my old shop, I'd get the intercom saying, 'Dana, call from Bill Collings'—or Bob Taylor, or whoever. Our

first association was the Guild of American Luthiers, before ASIA [the Association of Stringed Instrument Artisans] kind of split off from that, so we'd all go to the conventions to meet these other wild-eyed crazies, who all had the same interests. [And because] you never know where you're going to get a good idea from, you wouldn't ever want to miss someone else's presentation: It was that kind of thing.

"Everyone was influencing each other, and it got to be very collaborative, in lots of different ways. And we were at a stage where some people were established—but *everyone* was still learning."

Dana Bourgeois actually began learning on his own, in 1975, when he set about building a guitar in his dorm room at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. Bourgeois was raised around tools—his father was an amateur woodworker, and his maternal grandfather was a machinist—so he was conditioned to think that making things was an appropriate thing to do. "Yeah, I thought: I could do this! And then I ran into Irving Sloane's book, *Classic Guitar Construction*. There was no Internet back then. There were no guitar schools. There was just this one how-to book. And it was not a very good book, as a method of teaching. But the photography was really good, and inspiring."

A few years later, during a time when he was running the local folk-music club in Brunswick, Dana took an unknowing step closer to becoming a professional luthier: "I hired Eric Schoenberg to perform. And he showed up with two drop-dead, pre-war Martin OMs. And one of them needed a little bit of set-up work—so I did the work, so he could play the guitar that night.

"Eric was part-owner of the Music Emporium—they were in Cambridge at the time, fairly close to Harvard Square—and that was, to me, my ideal of a music store, with all their mahogany woodwork, mahogany cabinets, vintage guitars galore, a Mecca of records...and people coming in all the time.

"And there were biweekly concerts in Sanders Theater at Harvard, with people like Doc Watson and Odetta. And people like Norman Blake and Tony Rice would come in and play, or to do a master class at the Music Emporium. That was my world; that was my exposure. Russ Barenberg was living in Boston, Tony Rice was working out of Boston, Rounder Records was right around the corner. So it was like

Bourgeois' Soloist model is the luthier's updated take on the OM-style guitar. This guitar features a cutaway, German spruce top and pyramid-style bridge.





One of Bourgeois' latest innovations is his Aged Tone process. This unique curing process aims to make a more responsive, vintage sounding instrument by "cooking off" some of the resins, sugars and water found in a top wood. As you can see, it also darkens the wood quite a bit. Photo: Art Dudley

the center of the universe for acoustic roots music, really—even better than Nashville. And I was right there! So I ended up doing restoration work on all of these incredible guitars at the Music Emporium—and building guitars on the side. And my exposure to vintage guitars was really influencing my building.

“Eric Schoenberg had talked about how, as a solo fingerstyle guitarist, his favorite guitar was the OM: For his style of playing, it was like the steel-string equivalent of a classical guitar, it just had such incredible balance. But Eric wanted some modern features on his guitars, and Martin wasn't yet making custom shop stuff—like a cutaway, for example. So I designed the first cutaway on an OM, and built it for Eric, and I started making them and selling them through the Music Emporium, under the Bourgeois name.

“And then Chris Martin came down to do a clinic at Music Emporium when I was there. Martin had just started the Custom Shop, and Eric asked him, ‘Would you be interested in making these?’

“Chris said, ‘Well, we wouldn't make them with our name,’ and Eric said, ‘How about with *my* name?’ Chris said, ‘Well, we'll think about it.’

“So Eric and I formed Schoenberg Guitars. I did the wood selection and the voicing, and Martin did the manufacturing. I went down to Martin when the top was glued to the rim, the braces were still rough, and the back was fit, and I'd go down and shape the bracing, then glue up the back. I was sourcing the wood—we were supplying the wood. They were building in batches of 20, which is what Martin has always done.

“And then we marketed them, in the national market. I remember going to a dinner for *Frets* advertisers. There were only, like, nine guitarmakers there! This was in the mid-'80s, which was a tough time for lutherie, at least at the corporate level. And Chris Martin said, ‘Hey, the only reason we accepted this offer is because, you know, we just needed the business. Twenty more guitars means I don't have to lay a couple of people off.’”

The business relationship between Bourgeois, Schoenberg and Martin lasted for nearly four years: enough time to make and sell nearly 300 Schoenberg guitars. The fledgling company and their well-

regarded OMs then attracted the interest of yet another modern guitar brand: Paul Reed Smith. But Eric Schoenberg wasn't interested in selling his share of the company—and, at the same time, consumer interest in Martin's own guitars was once again on the rise.

“If Eric and I had done that in the '90s, just *think* where Schoenberg Guitars could be now. But Martin's business was picking up, and we were a little bit of a pain in the butt sometimes, just to build small amounts of these different things. I could see the handwriting on the wall, and I said, ‘Well, okay, I think we need to get set up and do it ourselves. We have the market. We have the demand, and that's the *hard* thing to get!’ But Eric didn't want to take that leap—with some justification.” In 1990, Eric Schoenberg stayed with the limited-production business model, while Dana courted interest from PRS.

“Paul said, ‘Look, we can build a guitar factory in Maine, make PRS guitars and you can run it.’ So I went with PRS for a couple of years. They were so successful; they were rolling in money at the time. But then they had a series of new products: they had a bass that flopped, they had a Strat-type guitar that flopped and they had an amplifier that flopped. Acoustic guitars were next, and they had just no money by this time.”

In 1995, after his time with PRS and a brief stint working as a consultant for Gibson, Dana set about doing what he was ultimately meant to be doing: hand building guitars whose headstocks bear the name *Bourgeois* (a logo that came about, simply enough, when Dana asked a friend “with really good penmanship” to write out his last name).

The combined effects of very fast growth and other complications led, in 2000, to a course correction: “I essentially wound that down and took on some new partners, and it became Pantheon Guitars. The whole idea was that we were going to build a stable of brands, and distribute, and maybe license, some designs. We talked with James Olson, and he was interested for a while. Imagine if you could buy a \$5,000 Olson in a music store, without having to get on a three- or four-year waiting list and pay \$20,000! A good idea, but it never really worked out. And then 9/11 came along, and dealers just stopped buying *everything*. And we barely survived that, just by making Bourgeois guitars. And then, after that, after we kind of grew back out of that, we just weren't interested in partnering with anyone—until Baden came along. Rather than us licensing Baden, they were going to pay us for tooling, and then buy guitars that they would distribute on their own.

Employee Elizabeth Teret installs the kerfing on a guitar's rim.





Unlike many guitars with bolt-on necks, which only have bolts in the heel, Bourgeois guitars feature a unique system that also includes bolts under the tongue of the fretboard. This allows the entire neck assembly to be easily removed or adjusted.







The Lewiston, Maine, building that houses Bourgeois Guitars. Each Bourgeois guitar is built over a two-month period. Index cards trace each instrument's place in the production line, from initial wood selection all the way through final set-up.

“And that worked—we built maybe 20 guitars, all very high-end—until the great recession came along and wiped *them* out.” Again, Dana and his crew survived, and ultimately thrived, by doing what they do best: making Bourgeois guitars.

“We’re watching an uptick in the market right now. We’re not going to double our sales overnight or anything; we’re going to increase by maybe 10 percent over last year. But if we increased by a hundred percent, there’s no way I could double the workforce, because it takes so long to learn this stuff. You wouldn’t want to have 10 new people in the shop at any one time, because you couldn’t keep track of it all.”

We spoke while touring the shop, occasionally raising our voices to be heard over the sounds of compressors and sanders and shapers, Dana explaining the work in which his co-workers were engaged on that busy Friday morning: “Mike Johnston has been here 10 years—he’s the guy doing the fretting over there—and he also does our repair work, finish stuff and set-ups. A lot of stuff, all really well, and really efficiently. And even to train one guy to do *one* of those jobs, to be reasonably efficient, it’s going to take a while.” I wondered: Are all of his employees responsible for so many different tasks? “Yes, they have to be. If you look at it number-wise, you can say there are a thousand operations in building a guitar, if you kind of slice and dice it. Well, we’ve got 10 people, so everyone has to learn a hundred operations. You can’t make a guitar without every one of those!”

Moments later, the same Mike Johnston suggests that the Brazilian dreadnought on his bench ought to have its frets dressed, pretty much *now*, in preparation for final inspection and shipping. The boss volunteers, and I follow as Dana brings the dread to a workstation dedicated to that purpose. Here, an open guitar case is fixed to a bench, with a small scissors jack—topped with a wooden neck rest—set inside, near to the headstock area. The neck portion of the lid is missing, along with a V-shaped chunk of the body area. (With a guitar inside and the lid fastened shut, the result is strangely reminiscent of a ’60s-era Rickenbacker electric.) The idea is that, with the jack pushing the neck in a forward-bow direction and the now-heavily-padded lid holding

the body in place, the jig simulates string tension on the neck, allowing the frets to be dressed under playing conditions. (Dana Bourgeois is quick to credit Dan Erlewine, whose own neck-jig design was the inspiration.)

At another station I spot a braced top, ready for tuning—an area of expertise for which Bourgeois is especially well known—and I ask Dana, is the overall shaping and thickening of the top considered part of the voicing process?

“That’s kind of like the last stage of voicing: You thicken the top, according to stiffness across the grain and along the grain; you actually pay more attention to the along-the-grain [thickness], because those side braces can really make a huge adjustment. You can either beef them up and make it stiff if it isn’t stiff, or you can make them really small, if it’s too stiff. But there are no braces really going *along* the grain.

“So we want it to end up at a certain place, and we voice the bracing to get as many distinct tap-tones as possible. And then, when the body goes together, we flex the top and tap it, and if it doesn’t quite seem lively enough, we still have the opportunity to thin the top before the binding goes on—that’s a hand operation.

“That happens on Mondays. The binding guys will level the overhang and do the basic sanding, and then come in and basically flex the top and see if it’s the right stiffness or within the right zone. They’ll tap it to see if it bounces: If it’s lively enough, you can tap on at the bridge, and you can *feel* it kind of pushing back at you. If it isn’t doing that, then we’ll talk about it, flex it, and decide if something else needs to be done to it.

“I work in collaboration with all of these guys. And in reality I don’t actually change much [in the other luthiers’ tuning work]. I mean, I’ll probably go through those nine tops and backs at the end of the day or tomorrow, and I bet I won’t change much, if anything—just because, you know, we work together so closely; they kind of *know* over time. And it’s only the senior guys who get to do that stuff, anyhow. You don’t put a new guy on voicing! You have the new guys *make* the braces, and if something’s wrong—well, you throw it away before it gets used.”

From there we visit the station where technician Steve Sossel is bending sides, using a spray bottle, a pair of microprocessor-controlled heat blankets, and an adjustable bending jig that has obviously seen a lot of use. After Steve brings to Dana’s attention an especially pretty pair of Brazilian sides, I ask if the sanding thickness of the sides is critical in any



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way other than structural. “Well,” Dana replies, “I went to all-wood braces, and I went to *spruce* wood braces. I think that there are some acoustically viable little ‘tweeter’ areas on the sides that are going on, and you don’t want to deaden those. But almost everything we do is at the service of getting a viable side.”

Then we backtrack to the sealed-off room used for wood storage, where Dana explains the technology behind a recent Bourgeois innovation: his series of Aged Tone guitars with Adirondack spruce tops that have been cured using a special torrefaction kiln developed in Finland. The relatively low-temperature variation of this process prescribed by Bourgeois has the effect of “cooking off” the waters, sugars and resins in the wood, much as those substances are evacuated over time—many decades of time—from the tonewoods of the best-sounding and most highly prized vintage guitars. The remaining structure, reduced to essentials of cellulose and lignum, exhibits less self-damping and a higher stiffness-to-weight ratio, all in the interest of a more timbrally complex and responsive instrument. The cured tops of the AT guitars even have the look and the smell of older tops.

For the AT series, Dana Bourgeois has also introduced a new type of finish. Long an enthusiastic user of catalyzed polymers—which he says are closer, in hardness, to a very old and properly cured layer of nitrocellulose lacquer—Bourgeois has selected a finish that’s related to cyanocrylate adhesives, and which exhibits even less of a damping effect on the spruce.

The combination is remarkable. At the end of my

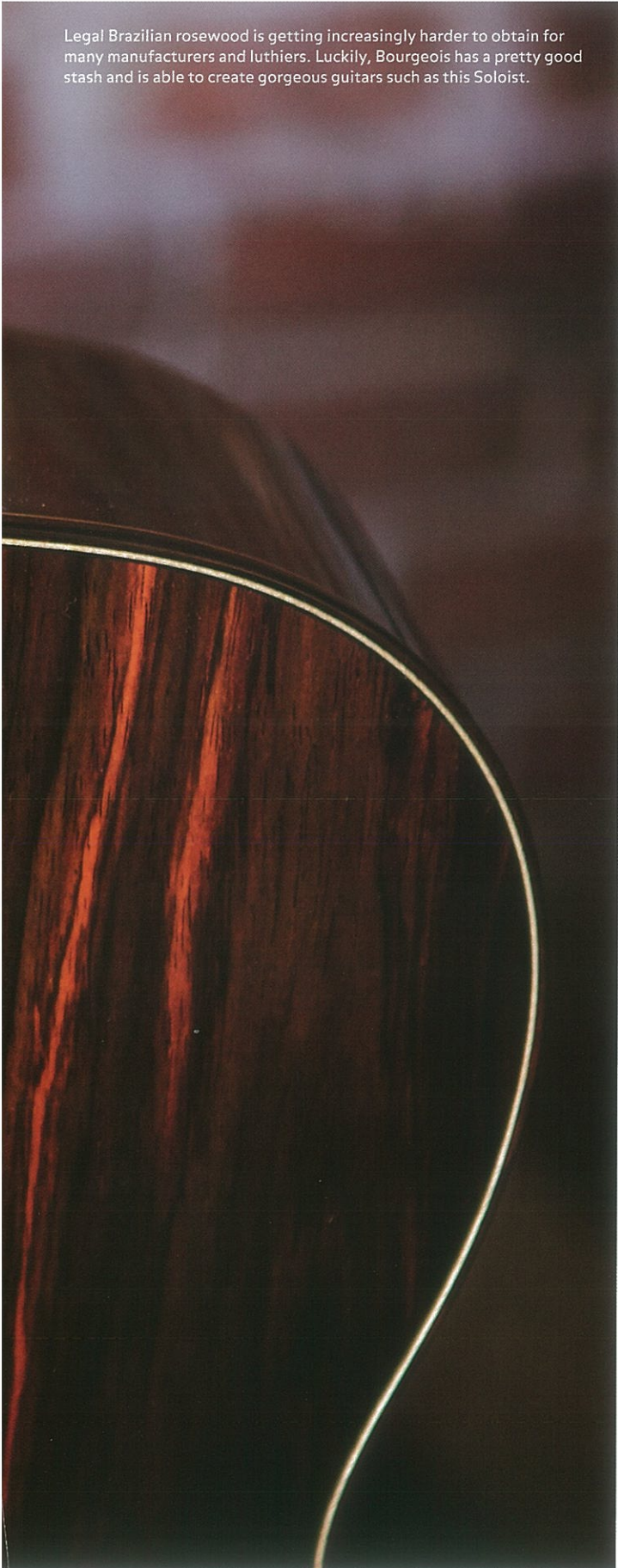
first full day in Lewiston, Dana let me borrow, for the evening, an AT-series dreadnought with a Madagascar rosewood body, which proved to be a delightfully responsive instrument. While no one—least of all Dana—would suggest that the AT guitars are the equivalent of their vintage counterparts, the dread I borrowed was more timbrally rich than I would ever expect from a guitar that had been made just weeks ago. The same was even more true of an Aged Tone mahogany OM guitar that I played the next morning, which combined that same unexpected richness with a really startling sense of projection. I have vowed, after seeing the word used too many times on too many inane chat sites, never to use the word *cannon* in public. But that was what crossed my mind.

I asked Dana: Once those resins are evacuated from a piece of Adirondack spruce, is there a difference in the weight of the wood? “Yes, the wood shrinks a little bit, so you have to start with oversized stock. People have said, ‘Hey, can you tell me who does the processing? I want to send a couple of tops.’ Well, first of all, it’s a large process: You have to process a lot of tops at once. Second, they’ve got to be oversized, because there’s the shrinkage factor.” For those reasons and more, Bourgeois hopes to eventually bring the process in-house.

“We have this done by a company in Canada. The kilns are big: major, tractor-trailer-container size. We heard that there’s a *research* kiln, made by the company in Finland that makes the kilns: a small kiln that has been passed from company to company. We’re going to go up and take a look at it; I think it’s not available to acquire, but we’d like to build our own. That way we can use our own material and have more control over the process.” Dana adds that he has also experimented with using Aged Tone wood for braces, although it’s too early to introduce that to the market.

Dana still sprays the sunburst on each Bourgeois himself. The results, as you can see in this guitar eventually headed to dealer Redwood Acoustics, are some of the best in the business.





Legal Brazilian rosewood is getting increasingly harder to obtain for many manufacturers and luthiers. Luckily, Bourgeois has a pretty good stash and is able to create gorgeous guitars such as this Soloist.

Our conversation paused a number of times so Dana could see to the tasks that wanted seeing to: a few phone calls and requests to sign this or that, but mostly frets that needed dressing, tops that needed examining, and a body in the process of being finished that needed its masking removed and its binding cleaned up. Dana still does all the sunburst finishes himself, too. He also assigned a couple of repair jobs to other luthiers in the shop, having taken on the last big job himself—for flatpicker and Bourgeois endorser Courtney Hartmann of the band Della Mae. “She had seven parallel cracks on the side [of her dreadnought]. She hit just on the flat of the side—fortunately. So she calls me up: ‘Gee, I’m here in Maine, and I’ve got this problem. I know you’re on vacation, but...’” And Dana, who had been vacationing on his boat, trails off with a good-natured laugh.

“I had been planning on coming ashore that day anyhow, so I came and I glued all seven; they were all, like, misaligned, so I put one of those scissors jacks in and I opened up the top and back and aligned everything, and I glued ‘em all, all at once, with hide glue—just smeared it on—and then I glued ‘em up with spool clamps. And then there were three side braces that were a little loose, so I took them all out, and I literally glued them back in with my fingers, just holding them, for five minutes, till they set. That’s really the only way to put ‘em back in. I just glopped the glue in there and said, ‘Don’t look inside! Here’s your guitar! As you’re leaving for Colorado the next day! On a tour!’” More laughs.

The subject of young pickers such as Ms. Hartmann soon turns to the subject of young luthiers: “It’s an interesting scene,” he says. “I was asked to be a speaker at the ASIA convention this spring; I was to speak one night, Chris Martin the other night. And I thought, *Wow*, I can’t turn this down! But there were a lot of gray hairs in the audience. I expected to see, like, a new generation of wild-eyed hippies—and they’re not there!

“There’s a lot of people going to the schools, I guess. And these guitar schools do a great job! I mean, people come out of guitar schools with more skill than I had in 10 years—more technical skill. They don’t have experience, but they have the technical skill.

“Who knows? It’s been an interesting time. It’s been a *great* time, with so much happening. I feel I’m just really lucky, career-wise.” **FJ**