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COURTESY OF ISAAC JANG

**MAKERS & SHAKERS**

# Hollywood Star

**Isaac Jang is a gifted luthier on the rise**

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

In 2005, when he was 18 and fresh out of high school, Isaac Jang decided he wanted to make guitars. He approached the luthier Kathy Wingert for an apprenticeship, and she balked. "I asked him about his skills, and he had none," Wingert remembers. "He said what we've all heard so many times: 'I'll sweep the floor; I'll do anything.' I explained that my shop was so small, there simply wasn't room and another body would only slow me down."

Wingert suggested Jang take a guitar-making class and build an instrument, or look for a job in a repair shop. She also scolded him for not being in college. Jang took her suggestions to heart, and by 2007 he had built a jumbo

acoustic and Telecaster-style electric at the Galloup School of Lutherie in Michigan; landed a job in the repair department at Westwood Music in Los Angeles; and enrolled in California State University.

When Jang called Wingert again, she agreed to take him under her wing. Now, more than a decade after the two first met, the young wannabe luthier has come into his own as a bright new presence on the guitar-making scene.

At 28, Jang has made a splash with his brilliant, meticulously crafted flattops: modern dreadnoughts, OMs, 00s, and small jumbos that sound great and play flawlessly.

On a Saturday morning in February, Jang is hanging out at his new digs in Los Angeles. His 200-square-foot shop, housed in a historic, early-20th-century building in Hollywood, is so painstakingly uncluttered it could be part of a design magazine spread on tiny workshops. It radiates warmth, from its open ceiling and exposed beams to its bamboo flooring, which Jang installed himself over the existing concrete. The shop is clean, like Jang's guitar design. Everything is in its right place.

On a wall in front of his workbench, Jang has thoughtfully organized and mounted his tools within easy reach. Another bench has eight cubbyholes, each housing a guitar

soundboard in progress; above those is a whiteboard that details, in tiny writing, his next year's worth of projects. "It takes an active effort to keep the shop organized, and it's still in progress," Jang says. "I believe a clean shop helps me do cleaner work."

I noticed the absence of a spray booth in the shop and ask if Jang French-polishes his guitars. Sometimes, he says, but he prefers the durability of nitrocellulose lacquer. "I'm lucky to be able to spray lacquer right across the street at [Musician's Institute], where I teach in the Guitar Craft Program," Jang says, pointing in the direction of the school.

Since Jang is a skilled guitar tech—authorized by Martin and currently in training with the Santa Cruz Guitar Company—I brought along an archtop made by Erich Solomon and asked Jang to give it a setup while we chat. He takes a moment to scrutinize the instrument, then plays a bit of country-blues fingerpicking. "This guitar has mojo!" he enthuses.

As Jang skillfully tweaks the guitar's truss rod, he tells me his story. He was born in Busan, South Korea in 1987. In the middle of a financial crisis, in 1999, his family moved to Los Angeles for a fresh start. At 14, Jang

extensive structural reconstruction and vintage restoration. Working with different players and a wide range of instruments opened my eyes and ears to subtleties in sound and playability."

As Jang tunes up my freshly restrung Solomon, it occurs to us that he's forgotten to address one of the main reasons for my visit—his instruments! He unlatches a hardshell case on his workbench and shows off a gleaming OM guitar. It has a German spruce soundboard and cocobolo back and sides, a Uchida-style bend-away (a subtle cutaway) and a Manzer Wedge (an ergonomic tapering of the guitar's body). It

looks flawless, feels luxurious, and is deeply resonant when I strum a few chords. "I finished it just last night at 11," Jang says, sipping a tall iced coffee.

I ask him to play the guitar for me, and he obliges with a note-perfect performance of Tommy Emmanuel's arrangement of "Amazing Grace." He pauses for a moment before putting the instrument back in its case. His youthful face takes on a wistful expression as he tells me the guitar has already been spoken for by his dealer in his native country.

"I'm always sad to see them go."

AG

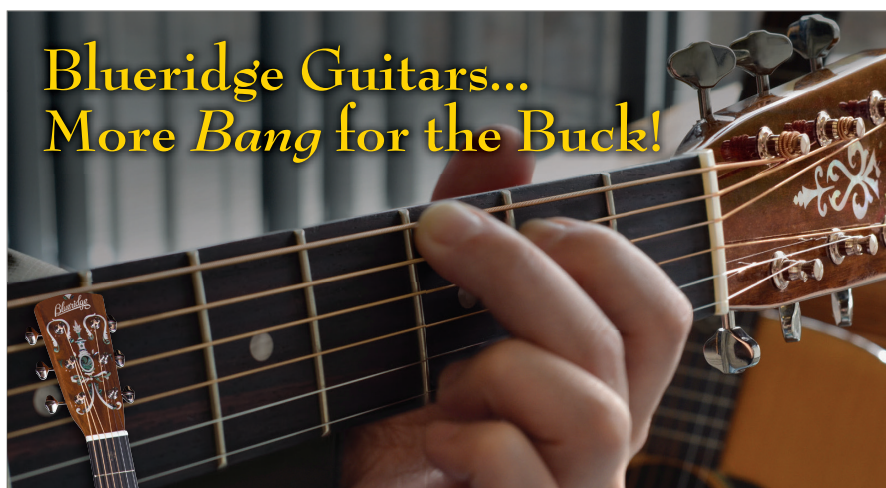
## His 200-square-foot shop is so painstakingly uncluttered it could be part of a design magazine spread on tiny workshops.

started playing guitar at his local church. He got seriously into guitars and guitar-making in 2000 when he saw a Tommy Emmanuel video. "I immediately became a big fan of Tommy, and later did some tech work for him during his shows in SoCal," Jang says.

The mid- to late-'00s marked a time of intense professional development for Jang. He studied business management at California State University, while also becoming a guitar repair and restoration expert at Westwood Music and apprenticing with Wingert—a combination that helped him understand guitar construction and set him up with the tools to open his own business. "I averaged three to four hours of sleep a night, but it was well worth it," he remembers.

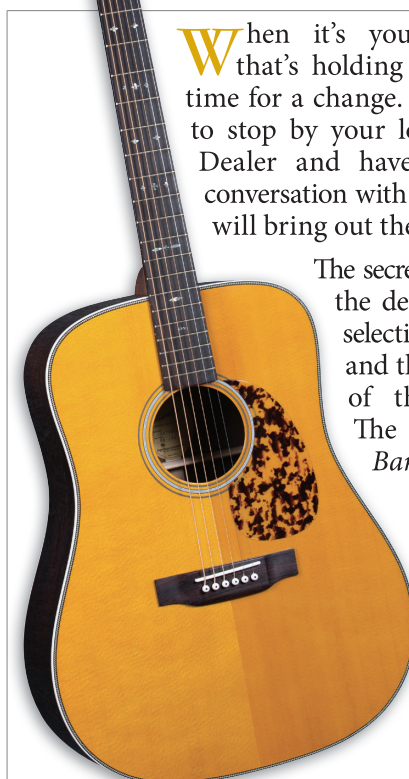
"Kathy is a wonderful builder, admirable role model, and unmatched mentor," Jang says. "During my apprenticeship, I learned skills ranging from basic construction to fine-tuning every element of guitars. At the same time, under the guidance of my beloved friend and mentor Fred Walecki at Westwood, I did everything from simple restrings and setups to

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