



# ATKIN GUITARS

This month, we head to Canterbury and the workshops of one of the UK's fastest growing acoustic guitar builders...

Words David Mead Photography Joseph Branston

**M**any acoustic players worldwide will agree that the acknowledged golden era of guitar building was from the pre-war period. But the cost of these instruments is infamously prohibitive and so how does a contemporary player access those celebrated sounds of yore without breaking the bank? Enter Alister Atkin whose instruments acknowledge the building traditions of yesteryear and look, feel and sound like they could have been built more than 70 years ago. Subtle ageing processes complete the illusion and the Atkin guitars we've reviewed in the past have always scored highly for their classic tones and played-in, lap-friendly appeal.

The workshop boasts a six-man team that combines years of hands-on building skill with up-to-date technology, which includes a CNC machine for shaping necks, a vacuum press for setting bracing and laser engineering to cut the tops. But at every stage it's good old-fashioned hands-on finesse – along with a special formula nitrocellulose finish – that combine to ensure each instrument leaving the workshop is something really special.

"I wanted to be a rock star, like most people, and then realised that probably wasn't going to happen," Alister laughs

after guiding us around the facility. Thus defeated in his quest for a stadium-filling rockstar life, Alister took the alternative path of guitar building – and we were surprised to discover that his enthusiasm for manufacturing his own brand of acoustics actually began with a love of taking other instruments apart.

"Whenever I bought guitars, I would strip them down," he tells us. "You get a Strat and you're like, 'Brilliant, how does this go together?' We had craft, design and technology at school and I did a project building an electric guitar, loved it and then found out the London School Of Furniture had a course."

After a couple of years attending the LSE, Alister left in 1994 and went to work with Andy Crockett, builder of archtops, and, taking over a bench in the workshop, began building acoustic guitars.

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"I was constantly making dreadnoughts at the beginning. I probably made three guitars for the first year. I made a few more dreadnoughts, then got the plans for the OM and started making OMs. Eventually, I got my first order: it's an exciting moment, but also a bit daunting. I just kept building really and I've been at it ever since."

Alister found further inspiration in the songwriting coming out of LA in the late 60s – one album in particular, in fact.

"I can cite one picture that explains what my career is about, I would say," he says. "It's the *Crosby, Stills & Nash* album cover. Sitting on the porch and Stills has a dreadnought in his hand. That's it, isn't it? For me, that encapsulates everything good about music. It's always been about songwriting and our strapline is, 'The songwriter's choice.' I'm much more into the song than I am the guitar, almost. It's the power of the guitar, in the right hands. It's that Woody Guthrie thing, isn't it? Travel around the country spreading the word. It's just a powerful image in my head."

Atkin's range of guitars sticks closely to the traditional at present, and he initially took inspiration from pre-war Martin and Gibson instruments.

"There's no getting away from it; that's what we're doing. In the same way that



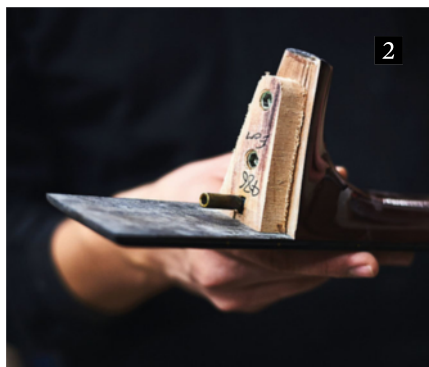
The Atkins Team (l-r):  
Andrew Cunningham,  
Ciaran McNally, Laurence  
Lock, Alister Atkin, Danny  
Martin and Adam Whitaker





1. Adam cuts out a back strip in order to fit the back braces

2. A neck awaits fitting to a body: the fingerboard will be glued to the top, while the mortise and tenon joint will be screwed to the body. Also visible is the double-action truss rod



3. The vacuum press is used for gluing in the top and back braces on all Atkin models



Santa Cruz, Collings and Bourgeois are doing those things. I think what we're really doing is paying homage to the early instruments. When you pick up a pre-war dreadnought – a D-28 or D-18 – a good one sounds incredible to me. I guess the music that's attached to that sound is what drives me. The shape of guitar, obviously; I love the shapes of the guitars we make. It's the sound inside and the feeling that if you can get that sound out of the instrument it can really inspire. That's why I choose these vintage instruments.

"To make a good dreadnought isn't easy. Dreadnoughts that really play and sound the way they should is a very difficult place to get to, something authentic. What works for me is learning how to make something special that you know works. Then you can diversify from that and start tweaking it. That's how our range came about. There are still so many guitars to explore."

Of Atkin's current range of guitars, the J-43 – modelled after the Gibson J-45 – is the runaway best-seller.

"I didn't even like J-45s when I started making guitars, I found them horrible," Alister confesses. "One year – I can't remember which year it was – Steve Earle and Springsteen both released promotional videos for their albums. They were both playing old banner J-45s. It was just like,

'Look at those, they're gorgeous.' That got me. It's important to keep doing the stuff that works and get better at it.

"Although we're a small maker from England, we now get interest from all over the world. It's the usual suspects that we get asked about: the dreadnoughts, the J-45s and the OMs. Those are the guitars that keep selling. If you make great examples of those, you can really establish a company."

Over the years, Alister has refined the woods he uses down to Sitka spruce, rosewood and mahogany, in the main.

"I used to make guitars with a lot of other different woods. Invariably, you'd make a batch of guitars and you'd think, 'I'm going to try some of this cocobolo. I'm going to try some flame something-or-other.' Then you'll try some walnut. The guitars that always sell are mahogany and rosewood, they're just the biggest sellers. I guess it will always be like that until it runs out. They're

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the two woods that everyone measures everything against. That's not to say I haven't got plans... The koa we can get now is lovely, so I'm very interested in using that, and flamed maple."

Another feature of the Atkin range is the finishes. Essential to the feel and performance of the instruments he makes, a thin nitrocellulose finish is the best tonal accessory according to Alister.

"I think people are much more educated about how a little finish is better for a guitar than thick polyester finishes. I think people are ready for it as well."

Despite a great deal of the construction process being done at the workbench, Alister doesn't shy away from automation. On our visit we watched a neck being shaped via a CNC machine, for instance.

"You reach this point where, from every area around you, you're noticing, 'He's got a CNC machine. He's got this, he's got that.' You're thinking, 'What's all that about?' Gradually, it dawns on you, in this day and age, depending on what sort of company you want to be, it's probably the route to go down. A CNC machine is in no way a surefire way of making something better than you can do by hand. It's all down to what lengths you go to in order to programme it and where you stop. Some people stop and go, 'That's the shape of a





Laurence sets the neck angle before fretting on an Atkin Essential 000





4. A laser is used to cut out the guitar tops and backs, as well as various braces. Here, it's beginning its run on the top of an Atkin LG47
5. Laurence attends to the final setup on an Atkin WOJ model
6. A CNC machine cuts the back of an Atkin D37 headstock
7. Danny installs ivoroid binding into a thicknessing jig

neck, that will do.' When you look at the beautiful guitars that we all know and love, the curves within a neck heel are just fantastic. There are certain parts of that I think a lot of people get wrong with a CNC machine. It's the same wood, it's just turning it into something that's special. My feeling was you'd only crossover from hand to CNC once the CNC was doing as good or a better job than you were doing by hand. That's been the ethos through the whole thing. There are loads of tricks that people do. There are loads of ways to cut time, but if it doesn't make a better guitar we can't use it. It was all about making as good or better a guitar than we were making before."

We witnessed another recent innovation in the Atkin workshop, as a guitar top and braces were being cut out by laser.

"The laser, again, enables you to make the same thing over and over again," Alister affirms. "Put the bracing in exactly the same place over and over again... All of those bracing patterns were tried and tested for years before we went anywhere near them with a laser. It's mostly about production methods, because you can then drop location points in exactly the right place, so it fits onto the guitar always in the right way. There's not a very big percentage of error. It takes away a lot of the potential to go

wrong. It's knowing that all this machinery is good if you use it in the right way without compromising the instrument."

The Atkin workshop is destined to double in size early in the new year as the company is set to occupy the unit next door.

"We're in this situation now where feasibly we've got enough interest to make between 700 and 1,000 guitars [per year]. I'm pretty sure we could sell them tomorrow if we had them. It's trying to find the sweet spot. But there has to be a point to all of this: just making them because you've got the orders isn't necessarily a good enough reason to do it. We're growing this company, working with people and having a great team of people. You're getting people from different backgrounds coming in who know stuff that perhaps isn't from a guitar-making background. You start to get this lovely wealth of information in the building and that's exciting. It does mean my job

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changes a little bit; I'm not on the bench as much as I was. Overseeing this whole operation with Ciaran [McNally], who's the production manager, it means we can see how to expand. It's a bit like playing a game of chess, really – it becomes interesting and fun rather than daunting."

With the business set to expand amid a growing customer base, it looks like 2019 might see more innovation and a few additions to the range in the coming months. Certainly the buzz about his guitars seems to be spreading.

"We're in this perfect stage now where we can establish ourselves, certainly in Europe, but America is knocking on the door as well now. I think as long as the guitars stay at the right level and keep getting better, that's what I'm interested in.

"I don't think I could live with 'we're making 10,000, but they're not quite as good as they used to be...'," Alister concludes. "I don't really like that whole scenario. You never get that feeling with the great companies that perhaps have been around for the past 40 years. There are some great examples of guitar companies who've done what we're about to do. I think those are the places I'm interested in going. Ultimately, the whole thing has to be fun because that's why we got into it, I guess."

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