

For many of us, having a guitar made to our exact specifications would be a dream come true. However, faced with a completely blank sheet of paper, the number of options on offer can be extremely daunting. To guide us through the process, we sent *Eckie* – *Guitar Buyer's* long-serving photographer and an accomplished singer-songwriter – to see acclaimed acoustic guitar builder Alister Atkin. Here he gives his account of how his dream became a reality...

Until now, my experience of buying guitars has always been relatively straightforward. Gut instinct tells you whether you feel a connection with an instrument, your wallet tells you whether you can afford it and, hey presto, you're poor but happy! However, on and off over the last four or five years, I've been talking to Alister Atkin of Atkin Guitars about getting him to build me my ultimate acoustic. This is a different matter entirely.

There are many questions surrounding this kind of once in a lifetime commission that demand careful consideration. Am I going to use it for recording, gigging or both? How will it be different from my other steel-strung wooden boxes? How do I want it to sound? And will it look good when I'm playing the opening slot in front of virtually no one at yet another beer-soaked, rat-riddled, will-to-live-stealing hellhole on my way to seemingly inevitable musical obscurity?

ACOUSTIC ROUTES

Over the years, I've used various guitars for both gigging and recording but ultimately I've ended up with two acoustics that I use to cover both bases – a 1965 Gibson J-50 for recording and my faithful Takamine EN25C for dealing with the live side. Ideally I'm looking for a bit of an all-rounder that can not only do the do live but will give me something I haven't already got for recording. It also occurs to me that I've a Martin-shaped hole in the collection...

I arrive at Alister Atkin's workshop in Canterbury with my Gibson and Takamine in tow, and am surprised to find a much more airy, modern space than I would associate with the luthiery trade.

Alister explains that his recent move to these new premises is all about progress.

"The old workshop was on a farm and we had limited space there," he explains. "We were there for six or seven years, but as I started to make more and more guitars it really started to feel like the place was getting smaller and smaller, so I decided to bite the bullet and get the bigger space knowing that I would eventually grow into it. This building lends itself to producing a lot more guitars."



GUIDED BY TOP LUTHIER ALISTER ATKIN, WE LOOK AT THE QUESTIONS YOU NEED TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING YOUR OWN CUSTOM-BUILT ACOUSTIC GUITAR

DREAM MACHINE

Reassuringly, Alister isn't at all phased by my lack of conviction when it comes to what type of guitar I'm actually after – "This'll be all the more interesting," he says – and we head up to the second floor of Atkin towers to start finding the path to my new acoustic nirvana. Looking around at the tool-laden workbenches and the many varied pieces of wood, moulds, jigs and machines, the options seem endless.

"Usually people have a clear idea of what they want," says Alister of his typical customer, "and it's usually player led – they've seen Eric Clapton or someone, liked their playing and thought, 'I love the sound of his guitar'. Often they have a certain size of guitar in mind and they want something that feels comfortable to play. With you, I'd start with what you can rule out."

BODY SHAPES

My two current acoustic mainstays are a good starting point, as I don't need a duplicate of these. First out is the Takamine and Alister isn't looking too impressed. I try to explain the merits of using such a workhorse (of which I'm convinced there are many) in getting a half-decent sound out of 20-year-old crappy PAs, but he's not swayed. I quickly move on to the Gibson J-50, which is greeted a lot more warmly.

"It's just the perfect singer-songwriter guitar in so many ways," says Alister of Gibson's slope-shoulder dreadnought shape. "It's a big body but it's compact as well so you can get around it. The 24.9-inch scale length is a little bit shorter than a Martin dreadnought's 25.4-inch scale, and for some reason that scale length on this body size just makes them



■ Alister measures the neck of Eckie's Tele, the blueprint for the custom OM's neck profile



■ Size matters: (l to r) Alister Atkin's 00, OM and Jumbo shapes

"THIS GUITAR FEELS MORE 'MINE' THAN ANY OTHER I OWN"

sing in a different way." For me, it's the evenness of tone of the J-50, especially when recording – no string rings out over any other. The Gibson J-200 jumbo was famous for this too, but I think the J-45 and J-50 have a bit more personality.

Alister offers his take on both of these shapes (the J-45 and Jumbo) as well as six other body sizes – the Martin-inspired O, 00, OM and Dreadnought, the Small Jumbo and the AA or 'Atkin Auditorium', which combines characteristics of the Small Jumbo and OM.

I'm looking for a good strummer that will also suit picking – basically, I need something to bridge the gap between the Tak and the Gibson, a real keeper that takes the best bits of both the guitars that I've already got, will record well and sound great live, as well as looking stunning. Is that too much to ask?

"My two immediate ideas would be the 00 and the OM. I feel the OM is underestimated sometimes – it's thought of as a finger-picking and light strumming guitar but it can deliver so much more. It's great for what you're after, as well as finger-picking and flat-picking. It's my most popular guitar – 50 percent of the guitars I make are OM's."

At this point Mr A pulls out three stock guitars for me to try: a 00, an OM and a Jumbo. The 00 is very tight-sounding, perfect for the light picking we discussed, though, for my tastes, it starts to trip over itself a little when I dig in with a pick. "Going for the 00, you're getting a smaller body and a more compact sound," says Alister. "The 00 has quite a traditional sound and it can do a hell

of a lot, but if you're worried it's going to be lacking a bit in certain areas, the OM might be a better option."

This feels much more like being at home – beautifully balanced tone with open chords, responsive to finger-picking and with hard strumming it really comes to life. This will take some beating. The Jumbo, it has to be said, is my least favourite of the three shapes here – there's nothing wrong with it, it's just not my cup of tea. I've played a few by other makers over the years and never warmed to any.

So if I want an all-rounder, it looks like the OM is the one. If I was going for a guitar purely for recording, I'd be leaning towards the 00 just because you know its compact sound would record great. But the OM will also complement the J-50 in the studio very nicely. "I think it bridges the gap, which is exactly what you're after," says Alister. Now the body shape is decided, it's on to the question of wood.

WOOD MATTERS

The choice of timber is probably the most crucial decision I have to make, and the one I feel I know least about. My initial discussions with folk in the know have steered me towards a spruce top and mahogany body, but what about the alternative spruce and rosewood combination?

"To my ears, you get a much fuller-bodied sound with more delivery with a spruce top and rosewood body. That's not to say I've anything against mahogany, it's just my preference. We have made some all-mahogany guitars, which can give a very vibrant sound. →



■ The starting point: Eckie's Gibson J-50 and Takamine EN25C



■ The guinea pig: Eckie inspects a spruce/rosewood Atkin OM



“I CAN'T WAIT TO SEE HOW IT SOUNDS IN 20 YEARS' TIME”

You'd think it would sound dull, but it actually sparkles very nicely.

“We can also offer a cedar top, something that's fairly popular in folk circles,” Alister continues.

“Cedar-topped guitars haven't got such a strident sound and don't project in the same way as spruce tops. With Sitka spruce you get more of those piano-like tones. Maple is another option for the body – we've made a lot of Small Jumbo and Jumbo guitars with flame maple bodies, which looks amazing and can sound brilliant. But in my opinion, a spruce top and rosewood body combination is almost perfection for acoustic guitars.”

With Alister's endorsement, and on the evidence of the examples I'm able to try, I decide that a Sitka spruce top and Indian rosewood body is the way forward for my OM.

NECK AND NECK

Apart from my two acoustics, I've also brought along my ever-reliable Fender '52 Reissue Telecaster, as I wanted to show Alister the kind of neck I feel at home with. Alister reassures me that the personalising of necks isn't uncommon for him, so match it to the Tele he will.

Also on the neck front, I had to decide whether the neck should meet the body at the 12th or 14th fret. Over the years I've heard much

talk of the tonal benefits of the 12th fret route and, as if by magic, a 12-fret OO is placed in my hands. This is a full-sounding guitar, given its size. “It doesn't sound small when you're sitting next to it does it?” says Alister, and he's right.

The only snag is that this does make playing beyond the 12th fret more difficult, and being a heavy user of the capo I do find myself up at the dusty end more than most. It's for this reason that I ultimately plump for a 14-fret neck.

PICK ME UP

As a regular gigger, there is also the crucial decision of the electronics. What type of pickup does Alister recommend? “The most popular system to date is the Fishman Matrix, which is an undersaddle transducer with a preamp built into the end pin jack. I've fitted that to 90 percent of my guitars. I've fitted Rare Earth pickups [Fishman's magnetic soundhole pickup] and people have brought the guitars back and had the Matrix put in. It's very discreet and one of the cheapest systems at £150 fitted.

“I've also just started fitting the L.R. Baggs Element Active system,” Alister continues. “It has a little volume wheel fitted to the inside of the soundhole, which is all you need. The sound should be sorted by the sound guy before or during the gig. It's really discreet and it's got loads of power.” I've heard this pickup perform very well in a friend's guitar, so this is the option I choose.

FINISHING TOUCHES

One thing I've been sure of throughout is that I want an old-school sunburst finish, very black at the edge moving into a honeyed brown. This will of course cost extra, but as this guitar will probably be a once in a lifetime investment, I think it's worth it. “We always use a nitro-cellulose finish,” Alister explains. “I think it's the best sounding finish – it's thin and it doesn't just coat the guitar – and it ages very nicely as well.”

The other decision already made is that I want Waverly tuners. I saw these old-fashioned open-gear machineheads on a rather lovely Collings acoustic last year and had lusted after the guitar for the tuners alone! “I would normally put a butterbean-style Grover tuner on,” Alister says, “nickel for the standard



■ Extras like these retro Waverly tuners add to the cost, but don't they look great?

and gold for the deluxe”. This is a further additional cost, but Waverlys it's just got to be!

So that's it – all the decisions are made and discussions discussed. As I get back in my car and head for the Dartford Tunnel, all that's left for me to do is wait...

THE RESULTS

Heading back down to Canterbury to pick up my finished guitar, I can't help but feel a little nervous – I'm not only collecting the guitar but also gigging it tonight at a show Alister has booked me for. I hope I like it! The ever-beaming Alister opens the door and as I reach the top of the stairs I see a case sitting alone in the middle of the workshop. One by one, the latches are un-latched and the lid opened...

I've been photographing guitars for around 15 years and have played virtually every single one, and odd as it might sound, the thing that always hits me first about a fine, nitro-finished acoustic is the smell, and this one smells mighty fine! The sunburst looks amazing – exactly as I'd hoped – likewise the tuners, which really do balance the look of the guitar. But more importantly, how does it sound?

In a word, great! It has all the crispness and punch that I liked in the OM I played on my first visit, yet with the neck shape and other custom features I asked for, it really feels right to me straight away. As for the gig, I'm pleased to say that from the first nervous strum of the sound check to the last ringing chord of the evening, it feels as though, guided expertly by Alister, I've got the guitar I hoped for.

This guitar feels more 'mine' than any other I own – I can't wait to see how it sounds in 20 years' time. **GB**



■ The finished article, complete with Sitka spruce top and sunburst nitro-cellulose finish