



But what's it like for guitar makers living in Europe, South America, Asia, Africa, or New Zealand? How did they learn their trade? Is it easy to obtain quality materials? Is there a market for their work? To find out, I talked to Toni Müller and Uli Albert of Germany's Albert and Müller, Marc Maingard of South Africa, Laurie Williams of New Zealand, Boaz Elkayam of Israel (now based in Mexico), Roberto Gomes of Brazil, and Kaoru Nakashima of Japan. One theme seems common to all their stories: while their access to materials and training varies widely, each of these makers has demonstrated an amazing level of dedication and ingenuity, allowing them to produce high-quality guitars in some very unlikely places.

## Albert and Müller

Located in the tranquil German village of Aarbergen (about an hour west of Frankfurt), the guitar making company Albert and Müller ([www.albert-mueller.de](http://www.albert-mueller.de)) makes its home in the town's former train station. When luthiers Franz-Ulrich ("Uli") Albert and Antonius ("Toni") Müller started the company in 1984, freight trains still rumbled by on the tracks outside their shop, but today you're more likely to hear the sound of a thickness sander or a freshly strung instrument.

Like many of their American colleagues, both Albert and Müller began their involvement with stringed instruments during the acoustic music boom of the 1970s. In 1977 Albert dropped out of his university studies in social anthropology and African languages to begin an apprenticeship with mandolin and guitar builder Reinhold Seiffert. After receiving the diploma required by German law for craftsmen wishing to go into business he continued to work for Seiffert until 1982.

Müller originally wanted to become a recording engineer, but the prospect of a lengthy period of formal training convinced him to try another approach to shaping sound. "Working with wood was secondary for me," he recalls. "I was more interested in the development of sound." Müller began a traditional apprenticeship with Germany's renowned Hopf Guitars at age 16, receiving his diploma three years later. The instruments that Albert and Müller make today reflect the founders' traditional education.

While Müller acknowledges the large role the German instrument-making tradition has played in forming their guitar-making aesthetic, he adds that "the instruments that we consider to be the most interesting didn't come from here," explaining that elements of Spanish classics, Italian mandolins, and American flattops are found throughout his company's instruments.

Albert and Müller's standard guitar models cover a wide range. Such top-of-the-line instruments as the auditorium-sized S-6 and parlorsized S-4 steelstrings and the CL4 classical compare favorably with high-end guitars manufactured anywhere. The company's entry-level guitars, often built by Albert and Müller's lone employee Agron Llanaj, are also impressive, proving that handmade quality doesn't have to come at a high price. Both the steel-string S-1 and the nylon-string CL have received the German government's award for excellence in musical instruments (Deutscher Musikinstrumentenpreis). I sampled a maple-backed S-1 at a Frankfurt trade show and was impressed with its remarkably mature tone. The company's steel-string flattops have received acclaim from players such as Beppe Gambetta, Claus Boesser-Ferrari, and Woody Mann, and its nylonstrings are favored by Germany's Latinstringed duo Nasser and Schneider. Perhaps the most unusual of Albert and Müller's offerings is its full line of mandolin-family instruments, which has become a major part of the company's business. While American mandolin culture is dominated by Gibsonstyle archtop designs, many European players prefer the flattop variety. Albert and Müller offers both flatback and Italian-style roundback mandolins (one of which is a favorite of Italian mandolinist Carlo Aonzo), and occasionally builds a reproduction of a Renaissance mandolin.

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