The Classic Martin OM
Fingerstylists' Choice

By Eric Schoenberg and Robert Green

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A fine steel-string player, co-author Eric Schoenberg records acoustic guitar solo albums for the Rounder label. His store, The Music Emporium in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was instrumental in encouraging the Martin company to reissue their OM series. Robert Green is a Boston-based acoustic guitarist and freelance writer.

Martin's OM, or "Orchestra Model," holds a special place in guitar history. Its rare combination of features - most important, the joining of a long-scale neck with a small body - makes it an extremely responsive and playable guitar. As a solo or ensemble instrument, the OM is highly sought after by players of diverse styles. Some of the artists using OMs today for performing and recording include John Miller, Roy Bookbinder, Mike Seeger, Stefan Grossman, and Paul Reisler of Trapezoid.

Collectors appreciate OMs, too. The guitars are scarce, having been cataloged only between 1930 and 1933. While 2,000 original herringbone Martin D-28s were made, only 265 OM-28s were made! *[Update—the correct number is 487.]* In many ways, the OMs were the first truly modern flattop guitars. They were the first Martins to have necks with 14 frets clear of the body. Even without these historical distinctions, OMs would enjoy a special status due to the high degree of quality from the Martin company in general, plus the unique features that give the model a legendary status as a player's instrument.

What does an OM sound like? They all sound slightly different. However, healthy instruments that haven't been negatively altered with oversized bridgeplates, thinned tops (due to poor refinishing), and other regretful practices, can be generally characterized in certain ways. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the OM's sound is the clarity of all notes; there is no muting of any frequency range. The bass is quite deep, yet clear and distinct. The treble is also clear. Unlike the dreadnought, both registers are balanced in volume; the bass does not dominate the sound. In fact, the treble notes come through so clearly that there is often a sensation of "fatness" to them. Treble notes high up the neck retain their sweetness and volume. This balance also allows an openness or distance between the frequencies, which lets you listen selectively to different registers and hear the "edges" of notes. These qualities make the OM an excellent recording instrument. John Miller used one on his album Biding My Time: John Miller Plays Gershwin [Rounder, 3034]. [Ed. Note: Eric Schoenberg used a 1930 Martin OM-45 for his latest solo release, Steel Strings, Rounder, 3041.]

OMs also project remarkable well. (Projection refers to the ability of a guitar's sound to carry across distances, especially while other instruments are also being played.) Some guitars sound terrific up close, but if you hear them from across the room, the sound is lost. The OM vigorously pushes out sound

that does not break up as it travels away from the guitar.

Finally, from the player's perspective, all aspects of the OM's sound are easily available. The OM is incredibly responsive: Even a gentle touch causes the instrument to burst into sound. This makes a wide dynamic range possible, and aids some guitarists in playing faster.

The OM's evenness serves it well in ensemble playing, and in fact, early users of the model usually played in groups and used picks. Although OMs are well-suited for plectrum playing, today it is generally the fingerstylists who appreciate them. In fingerstyle guitar, the player often expresses two or more voices at one time. Frequently, a full chord is fingered on the bass strings, and a melody line is played on the treble strings. A changing - or "walking" - bass line is sometimes added. With the OM's balance, both expressions are heard fully and the blend sounds complete. For example, the melody isn't overpowered by the bass. The listener does not perceive an emptiness or lacking at any particular frequency, and the entire sound seems fuller or richer.

The OM's wide neck (1 3/4" as opposed to the dreadnought's 1 11/16") also appeals to fingerstyle players. The string spacing is slightly greater at the bridge than on other guitars, which allows the right hand to stay in a more open, spread-out position. Although not as wide as a classical guitar's, the OM's string spacing comes closer to that than most dreadnoughts or 000s.

The neck shape of old OMs wins over many players, although this is a highly variable feature on old Martins, since each neck was handmade. However, some of the best necks on any guitars can be found on 50-year old OMs. Their wide but thin, V-shaped necks are extremely comfortable. Even a player with small hands can comfortable wrap the thumb around to fret the 6th string. But the wide string spacing still allows plenty of room for fingerstyle chordings that often encompass multiple voices.

Finally, the OM's smaller-size body makes the guitar easier to hold, especially in the seated position preferred by many fingerstylists. The dreadnought is considerably larger - both in body depth and width - and some players find the lower left bout interferes with their right arm. In general, dreadnought players use straps and stand up, so the guitar's size is less of a factor.

Although OMs have recently gained legendary status and command high prices on the market, the full story of their evolution has never been told. To gather this information, we went to C.F.Martin III, chairman of the board of the Martin company. Mr. Martin played a role in the design and introduction of this guitar, and provided much of the information that follows.

Perry Bechtel was a virtuoso plectrum banjo player who came to see C.F.Martin III and his father, F.H.Martin (then head of the company), in the early summer of 1929. He was concerned about the declining role of the banjo in orchestras, as well as with the rising popularity of the guitar. He wanted Martin to make him a guitar to which he could most easily adapt his banjo technique. He requested that it have 15 frets clear of the body and a 27" scale in Martin's largest standard size (which at that time was the 000, with 12 frets clear of the neck). The 27" scale would retain the fret spacing of the plectrum

banjo, and 15 frets clear of the body would more closely resemble the length of a banjo neck.

Bechtel felt that with a guitar of this nature, banjoists could easily transfer over to the guitar, thus making themselves more valuable as professional musicians. Previously, the 4-string banjo served primarily as a rhythm instrument in dance orchestras, an ideal setting for its volume and ability to project. However, its position was being challenged by the guitar. Large arch-tops, such as the Gibson L-5, had enough volume to carry the rhythm chording role. The increasing use of microphones and amplification, which made volume less of a consideration in choosing a band instrument, was also threatening the banjo's dominant role.

Perry Bechtel came to Martin at the right time. The company was experiencing a decline in ukulele sales, and back then they sold more ukuleles than guitars. Martin was looking for new ideas, and they saw a potential market in making instruments for the many banjo players who might soon be switching to guitar. C.F.Martin recalls that Bechtel came to Martin because he wanted a more "velvety sound." Gibson's L-5 was "too harsh" for his taste; he preferred the gentler sound of most Martins. To suit Bechtel's needs, F.H.Martin and his son sat down with factory foreman John Deichman to design an entirely new model.

They began with the plans for a 000-size guitar. This had 12 frets clear of the body, as did most flattops of the time. They rejected the request for a 27" scale, as this would have been impractical; the high string tension would have made the instrument hard to play, and it may have been too much for the guitar's bracing. To accommodate Bechtel's desire for 15 frets, they squared the body's shoulders to add 1 5/16" to the clear part of the fingerboard. This allowed 14 frets clear of the body. Since they felt that the bridge should remain halfway between the center of the soundhole and the endblock, there did not appear to be a way to add the extra fret. However, with the upper bout squared, they felt there wasn't room for the upper brace that runs under the fingerboard, so this feature was left out of the design. For aesthetic reasons, the bottom bout was reshaped slightly to match the new shape of the upper bout. the current 000 body still retains this shape.

To make it more suitable for banjoists, the neck was made narrower and less V-shaped than previous martins. The fingerboard was narrowed from the then-standard 1 7/8" to 1 3/4" at the nut. Although this neck width and 14-fret length made it more like arch-top Gibsons of the time, C.F.Martin says that they were not consciously copying the L-5 neck. The 1 3/4" neck was the standard for a short period, being used on various Martins, Gibsons, Epiphones, and other makes.

To make the OM more attractive to banjo players and to give it a distinctive look, banjo pegs were chosen. To accommodate these, the headstock had to be made solid. Previously, Martin headstocks had been slotted with tuners attached on the side. No single-unit guitar tuners were available then, and banjo pegs were felt to be of superior quality than multiple tuners.

In late 1929, with the plans complete, Martin built a prototype batch of six OM guitars. The very first of these had pyramid bridges. They lacked pickguards, but martin soon realized that with the vigorous

strumming required in a band setting, a pickguard might be required to protect the finish. The pickguard was planned as an optional item, but after the first prototype batch, all OMs were cataloged with a small, teardrop-shaped pickguard. Well-known fingerstylist Roy Bookbinder uses an OM-28 from the 1929 prototype batch.

How were the first OMs received? "Well, they didn't set the world on fire - like any new thing," recalls C.F.Martin, "but they caught on quickly in the band market." The narrower neck made jazz chords and alternative voicing easier to finger. In fact, the popularity of the 14-fret neck seemed to coincide with the growing sophistication of American guitar music. One of the most sophisticated country guitarists at the time was Karl Marx Farr who, with his brother Hugh Farr, was the instrumental backup for the Sons Of The Pioneers, a group that was greatly influenced by guitarist Django Reinhardt. In early photos of the band, you can see Karl Marx Farr playing an early OM-18. You can also see pictures of Roy Rogers (then called Len Slye) holding his OM-45 Deluxe. By 1934, the 14-fret neck rivaled the 12-fret neck as the standard for guitars. And of course, today a steel-string flattop is generally expected to have a neck with 14 frets clear.

In 1934, the OM was dropped in favor of the short-scale (24.9") 14-fret 000. According to C.F.Martin, players were using stiffer picks to strum hard on heavy-gauge strings (all that were then available), and the higher tension of the long scale provided too much resistance to this playing style. The resulting short-scale 000-size Martin guitar has been quite popular over the years and is still produced today. Ironically, with light strings now available, the long-scale of the OM becomes an ideal design for a responsive guitar.

The OM's long scale becomes a major factor in the guitar's tone production. It's easy to see this when you consider that the guitar's top movement is important in producing tone quality. The strings on an OM must be brought to higher tension than strings on a short-scale guitar to be tuned to concert pitch. this extra tension translates into more pull on the top, and provides more than just extra volume. Dana Bourgeois of Topsham, Maine, a luthier and experienced repairman of vintage Martins, has described the OM as having "a string tension-to-surface area ratio which is efficient for fingerstyle playing." The small top's responding well to the strings does two things: First of all, in conjunction with the smaller air cavity size, it contributes to the even balance of bass, midrange and treble frequencies. Second, this ratio gives the OM the responsiveness needed for light playing. A gentle touch causes the top to move enough to produce a good sound. The dreadnought, on the other hand, has the same string length as the OM, but a larger top. It is not surprising that the dreadnought is usually played with a pick, and that, in the opinion of many players, the OM is more suitable for fingerstyle.

Scalloped, delicate braces and a small maple bridgeplate also allow the OM top to vibrate freely. Although this feature is common to other models of the time, on OMs the top flat brace under the fingerboard is missing. This design is unique to OMs, and the top is therefore very lightly braced. This did lead to some problems with cracks in the upper bout along the side of the fingerboard above the neckblock. On the other hand, the lack of this upper brace may play a factor in improving the tone, since the top may be free to move more.

Although original OMs of any style are rare, new OMs are now being made by the Martin company. As the pilot project for the Martin Custom Shop, The Music Emporium of Cambridge, Massachusetts, ordered six OM-45s (marked S-OM-45) in 1977 that were exact replicas of the OM-45s from the 1930s. These met with good response, and Martin eventually added the OM-45 to their standard line, although with the modern style 45 inlays. The success of this pilot project also prompted Martin to open the Custom Shop to all Martin dealers, even for orders of only one guitar. Since then, the other OM models have been successfully revived.

The new OMs are an accurate reincarnation of the unique qualities of the rare Orchestra Model Martins of the 1930s. The balanced sound, fat treble, and amazing responsiveness are all there. Of course, the new OMs do not have the added collector's value that the vintage models do, but for many players, this is a plus: New OM models make the unique qualities of this incredibly responsive guitar available to all players, not just player/collectors. In our opinion, whether old or new, the OM is one of the best guitars available today, even though the style was invented over 50 years ago for banjo players.