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Martin Guitar

The Story of a Guitar – Part 1

Dave Porter tells the story of the most famous guitar in bluegrass

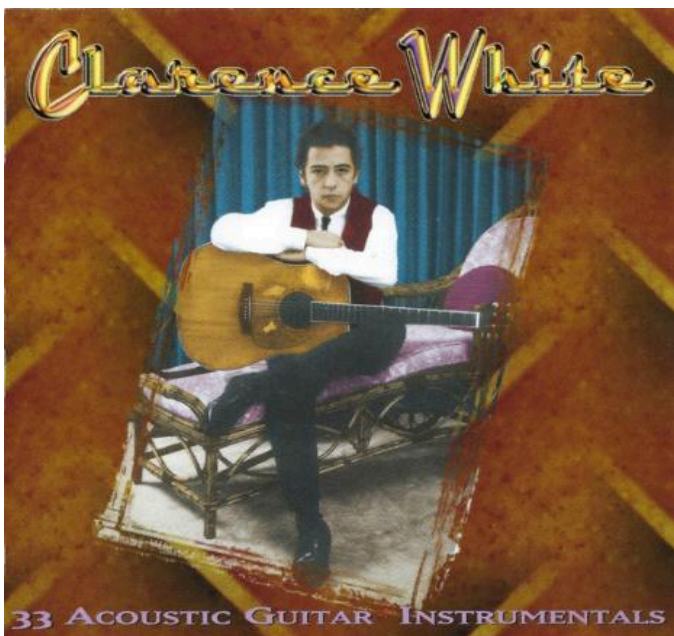
(Based on material from: "Still Inside: The Tony Rice Story"; Tim Stafford & Caroline Wright; Word of Mouth Press, 2010 and on a personal conversation with Roland White and other sources.)

By Dave Porter

This article was published before COVID in "Grass Clippings"- the newsletter of the Ottawa Valley Bluegrass Music Association and was based on the generally accepted story of Tony Rice's guitar, as told in his biography. Some time later I received a call out of the blue, from Diane Bouska, Roland White's wife. She simply told me Roland had somehow seen my article and would call me the following Sunday at noon. I worried for several days that I had committed some serious faux pas. But it turned out that all he wanted to do was provide more information and to correct errors in the biography. His paraphrased comments, added to the original article, appear in italics.

D.P.

Sometime in 1959, a UCLA college student traded in her beat up Martin D-28 guitar and bought a new one at McCabe's Guitar Shop in Los Angeles. A year later, 16-year old Clarence White, his brother Roland, and their friend Billy Ray Latham, pooled their money and bought the guitar for \$35. The White's dad gave them hell.



Roland adds: *"Clarence had owned a D-18 but didn't like it and had sold it to John Cowan of the New Lost City Ramblers. This old D-28 was actually purchased at Huey Apfell's Pawn Shop on Broadway Street in L.A. where they found it "standing on its peg head in a corner" after they had visited about 20 pawn shops and music stores as they did every week.*

It had a finger board with it but someone had removed it and had cut it off at the second fret to try to repair it. When Clarence bought the guitar, the finger board was taped on with masking tape. Their father, who did some work on musical instruments said, "You don't expect me to work on that thing, do you?"

The White brothers found a guy who had a Gretsch fingerboard so new it had no inlays and no frets. They had it fretted and installed it but it has no inlays to this day.

Roland adds: *"The guy who supplied the fingerboard was legendary guitar repairman, Milt Owens, who had a little shop in the same area of Los Angeles.*

"(Other sources indicate the repair shop may have been located very near the Musicians Union Office on Vine Street, quite close to the pawn shop.)

Roland said that the Gretsch fingerboard "had some radius on it," so Owens offered to sand it down to flatten it out like a Martin fret board. "He offered to add dot inlays but Clarence said, 'No, we don't need the dots.' We picked it up two weeks later and paid \$20 to \$25 for the repair. We had a total of about \$65 invested in it by now."



Someone had also increased the size of the sound hole about a quarter inch (past the first set of decorative rings) all the way around, probably to repair damage, and the fret board was too long anyway, so it projected one full fret out over the sound hole.

“Serial No. 58957, Martin D-28 Herringbone. Built in 1935. Once owned by Clarence White. Over-long fretboard, enlarged sound hole, many marks and scratches. Brazilian Rosewood. Known as the ‘Holy Grail’, no doubt the most valuable acoustic guitar there is but not yet for sale.”

Roland adds: *“Someone had also tried to clean up the top by sanding it down, so the top was very thin. Milt Owens had put light gauge strings on it and told Clarence that’s all it could handle. Heavier strings would make the top bulge up. Clarence couldn’t use lights so he tried medium gauge. The top bulged up and stayed that way.”*

A short time later, 9-year old Tony Rice got a chance to play a song on “TheTown Hall Party” radio show in Compton, CA where the 16-year old Clarence and his brother were regulars. Tony met Clarence and saw the guitar for the first time. Clarence used the guitar while he played bluegrass with the ‘Kentucky Colonels’.

Roland adds: *“Clarence played all of his lead parts on the D-18 he bought in 1964 at a Burbank music shop, not the one he sold to John Cowan, another D-18”. The D-28 was used mostly for rhythm because the action was too high for lead. ” He also says that the ‘Kentucky Colonels’ (or ‘The Country Boys’ as they were first called)” went back east in 1964 to play at the Newport Folk Festival.*

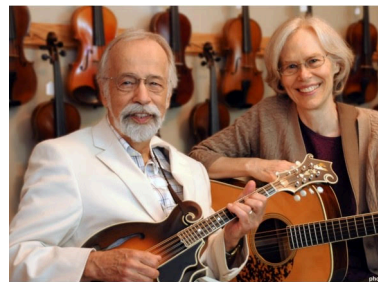
On their way to play in Michigan after Newport, along with Pete Seeger, they stopped at the Martin factory in Pennsylvania. There Clarence was told that the way to fix the guitar was to replace the top which he didn’t want to do.

In 1966 (there is disagreement on the date) Clarence pawned the D-28 to Joe Miller of Miller Liquors in Pasadena for \$600 or \$700. Whether he needed cash to finance an eastern tour for the Colonels, to pay for a honeymoon and equip a new apartment with his new wife Suzie, or to finance the purchase of a Telecaster and an amp to play with Ricky Nelson, is not clear. All three stories have their believers. But, he did not need the D-28 to play with Nelson, so it sat under Joe Miller’s bed for nine years.

There is a story that Clarence tried to get it back after he’d made a lot of money with the Byrds, but Joe Miller wouldn’t give it to him either because he had been insulted by one of the Colonels, wanted too much money, or was angry at Clarence for ignoring him after he made it big. So it sat under his bed un-played until the strings turned green.

Roland said: *“the true story is that Clarence only used the guitar for rhythm because of the high action and needed the money to get married. So he sold it to Joe Miller. Miller was a former UCLA football player who worked at the family liquor store which he and his sister eventually took over. He was heavily into folk music (bands like the ‘Kingston Trio’ and the ‘Brothers Four’) and was a big fan of the ‘Country Boys/Kentucky Colonels’. Roland says as far as he knows there was no animosity between Clarence and Joe Miller and Clarence never tried to get the guitar back. He didn’t need it.*

Part 2 of this article dealing with Clarence White’s death and Tony Rice’s acquisition of the guitar will appear in the next issue of Bluegrass Canada



Roland White and Diane Bouska