

A TRIBUTE GUITAR TO MONTANA *Rivers*

THE GREATEST OF WATERS

WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY JEFF MOORE

A **AMONG AMERICA'S MOST RENOWNED LUTHIERS,** Montanan Ren Ferguson has made custom guitars for The Beatles, The Stones, Tom Petty, and Emmylou Harris, just to name a few. But recently, he's used his hands to craft a heralded instrument dedicated to the stars of the trout fishing world: the Gallatin, Madison, Rosebud, Jefferson, and Yellowstone. *Montana Rivers* — a limited-edition jumbo guitar model born of eastern hard-rock curly maple, ebony fretboard, and intricate green abalone trout-fly inlays — may top the list of musical treasures from the Treasure State.

For many, the *Montana Rivers*' abalone and mother of pearl-inlaid headstock depicting a fisherman battling a nice rainbow is a work of art in and of itself.



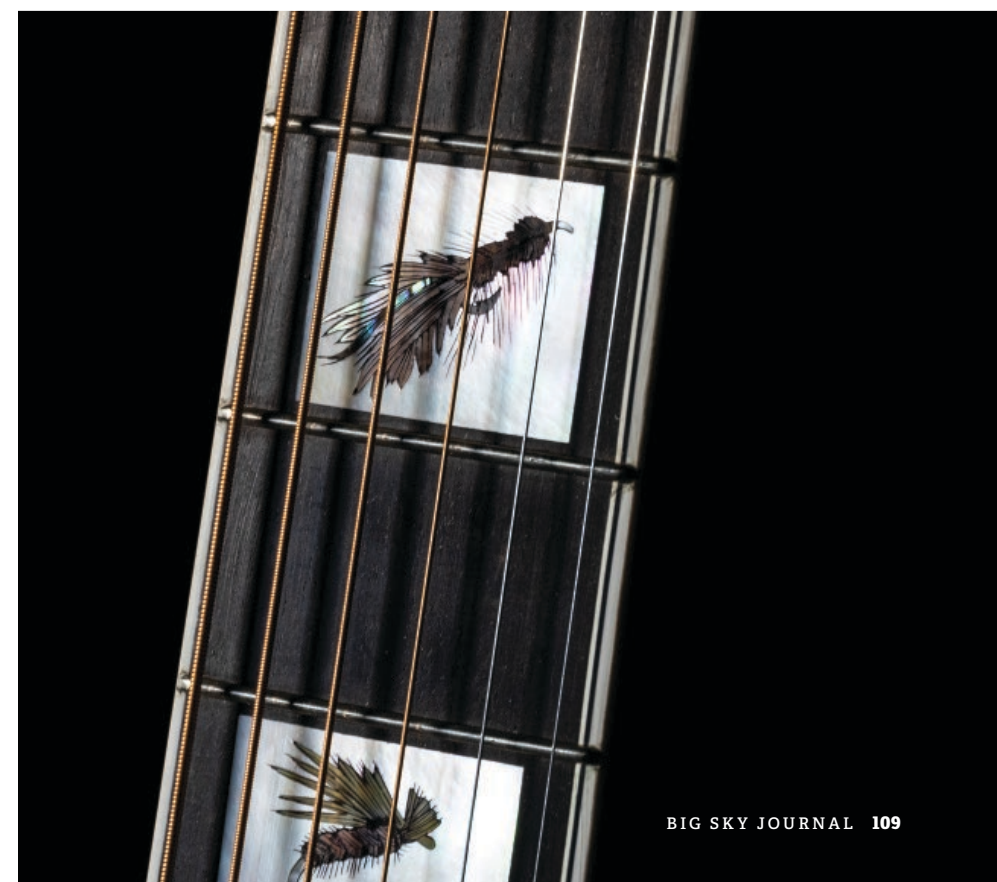


“The area that I live in is so heavily connected to great fishing, and I wanted to honor and participate in it,” says Ferguson, a hunter and angler who routinely integrates outdoor themes into his guitar designs. “I’ve done a lot of fishing — and we’ll leave it there. We won’t talk about catching,” he adds with humility. “Man, there would be times when I was fly casting in Big Timber when I would beat the water to a good foam.”

Ferguson’s love of the outdoors remains secondary to his love for his craft. To Ferguson and his two adult children, Timothy and Virginia, who carry on the family artistry with their father in his Belgrade, Montana workshop, it’s the sound of the instrument that is paramount. “My first priority has always been to make a guitar sound as good as the wood will allow,” Ferguson says. “Decoration doesn’t detract or improve the sound.”

“Overall, the sound of *Montana Rivers* is bright, but the woods I use keep it well-rounded, balanced,” says Ferguson, who would gladly describe the varying tones of wood, from Brazilian rosewood to spalted maple, given the opportunity.

While greatly focused on quality sound, Ferguson adds beautiful accents to his works — the kind of details that demand the same careful attention as the eye loop of a No. 22 Crystal Midge. Ferguson free-hands each ornamental detail. Then, Timothy simplifies them on the computer, and



FROM TOP + OPPOSITE: Inside the body, the guitar is personally signed, dated, and numbered. • Nine different fly inlays, from Woolly Bugger and Elk Hair Caddis (shown) to Zebra Midge — all carefully selected to represent the most important flies in Montana’s major rivers — decorate the fretboard. • Whether it graces a fishing lodge or a concert stage, this guitar reflects Montana’s pristine waters and the angler’s unquenchable thirst to fish them.



they both cut and fit pieces with jeweler's saws and steady hands.

An angler fighting a sizable rainbow trout comes alive in a flurry of colors on the spruce headstock of one *Montana Rivers* guitar. Nine different flies, from Zebra Midge to Griffith's Gnat — all carefully selected to represent the most important year-round flies in the state's great rivers — dominate the fretboard. A cane creel, fly rod, fly boxes, and net elevate abalone art on the pickguard, and two reels decorate the bridge. All in all, this one-of-a-kind instrument took almost 400 hours to construct, engrave, polish, and finish — yet it is the product of so much more than the period of time Ferguson dedicated to its construction. *Montana Rivers* is the latest result of Ferguson's long, storied career.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The pickguard shows the minute detail of hand-cut abalone, mother of pearl, koa wood, and bamboo, from creel to fly box. • All in all, over 400 man hours went into making this custom guitar. • The exotic curly maple wood construction was chosen to give the guitar a well-rounded sound and premium finish.

ESSENTIALS: FISHING SONGS THESE GUITARS WERE MADE TO PLAY

"FISH AND WHISTLE"

— John Prine

"IT'S MY LAZY DAY"

— Merle Haggard/Willie Nelson

"I'M GONNA MISS HER"

— Brad Paisley

"THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND"

— Woody Guthrie

Ferguson started making guitars in 1971. With little money, yet possessing a wealth of worldly experience from his time as a U.S. Navy electrician in Southeast Asia, Ferguson began exploring his interest in assembling instruments with choice tonewoods from around the globe.

His skill eventually led him to Gibson Guitars' custom shop in Bozeman, where he built the team that would create his era's standout guitar jewels, including *Bed In* for John Lennon, the ornate *Pirates of the Caribbean* for Johnny Depp, an elaborate pheasant-themed guitar that was auctioned to raise \$90,000 for Pheasants Forever, and an African-themed guitar auctioned for \$100,000 for the Dallas Safari Club.

Throughout his endeavors, however, Ferguson's connection to the wild has remained true and deeply rooted in Montana. "Getting to do what I love to do outdoors and getting to do what I love to do indoors, in a place that's magical, there just isn't anything better," he says.

Paul Decker, owner of the guitar-heavy Music Villa instrument shop in Bozeman, has known Ferguson for 30 years and calls him a local legend. "He's really well known for his inlay work and fancy custom guitars, so it's great seeing him building his own brand," Decker says.

The first *Montana Rivers* guitar was recently purchased by a private collector, and Ferguson plans to make at least four more by the end of 2024. Not bad news, whether you're playing a guitar or a trout on the end of your line.▲



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