



## THE MUSIC MAKER

**M**aybe it's that I always manage to get lost in a maze of white, uniform buildings that have maddeningly similar addresses, but I've always considered industrial business parks to be the last places on earth where any sort of creativity takes place. I've been proven wrong before, of course, but still, I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I was surprised to be cursing my way through a nondescript lot in a business park somewhere in San Clemente, looking for Mónica Esparza's guitar workshop. Even when I did find it, hidden in the neatly labeled Suite B, music and guitar equipment weren't scattered about. A sign that read "Aguas Frescas Festival" was stuck to the door.

The pieces of the puzzle would soon come together, but for now, Esparza was leading me past empty juice containers and up a flight of stairs. On a table under a window rested a weathered string bass, which Esparza explained she had recently "autopsied" and patched up. She acts as a de-facto "doctor" for various string instruments, though repairing them is not what she's trained to do. She's a *guitarrrera*, one of the very few women in the world who specialize in the art of building classical Spanish guitars.

Born in Mexico, Esparza immigrated to the U.S. with her family in the late 1960s, when her father transferred to Southern California with his employer, Nestle. With a background



Mónica Esparza

RALPH PALUMBO

in beverages and marketing, it didn't take long for him to take his skills and join in on the American Dream, founding a business called Aguas Frescas Festival, a maker of traditional Latin American beverages. "We started off dirt poor," says Esparza, recalling the business's infancy, the days when her mother worked in a sweatshop and the family refrigerator was filled with baby jars of experimental juice concentrates. The young Esparza's comfort, between going to school and perfecting her English via "Sesame Street," was the guitar.

It's cold in Esparza's upstairs guitar workshop 30 years later, and down below, the hum of Aguas Frescas Festival's daily business carries on. "... So I had found out about a maestro that was teaching back in Spain, and I wanted him to pick me for his workshop," Esparza was saying, as I emerged from a state of hypnosis induced by the intricate rosette detailing on her classic and flamenco guitars. José Romanillos, she continued, a master Spanish builder, held a seminar once a year for 20 students from around the world who wanted to learn the craft of classical guitar making, and Esparza was determined to be on the roster. "I kept bothering his son Liam, who lived in England," she says, "And then one day, I got an e-mail."

The summer of 2004 found Esparza lugging her instruments, tools and wood to a monastery in Sigüenza, Spain for an intensive three-week training course with Romanillos. She was invited back in 2005 and 2006 to hone her skills, finding that, like most traditional crafts, guitar making is a lifelong education. "It's not just building a box with an egg," she says. Asked once by a talented guitar player and teacher what her goal is – "Do you want to be famous?" he inquired – she was taken aback. "No," she said. "I just want to be able to make a good guitar, to put it in the hands of people who can appreciate the quality of the work. There's nothing more satisfying than to have a finished instrument in the hands of someone who knows how to play. That's when it comes alive."

It's also when Esparza comes alive. As she describes the art of painstakingly constructing one-of-a-kind rosettes rimming the guitar's opening from near-microscopic pieces of leftover Brazilian rosewood, quilted maple and other exotic woods, it's hard to imagine her doing anything else.

*For more information, call (949) 842-1439 or visit [monicasguitars.com](http://monicasguitars.com) –JESSICA FORSYTH*