



# The Big Gun: Martin Dreadnought Celebrates 100 Years

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By Greg Cahill

It's 1916—Britannia rules the waves. The United Kingdom, buffered from war-torn Europe by the narrow English Channel, is fighting for survival against the Central Powers. German submarines, known as U-boats, prowl the Atlantic in deadly wolf packs eager to sever England's vital supply line from the United States. The Royal Navy, perhaps best symbolized by the H.M.S. Dreadnought, the biggest battleship ever built, stands between the wolf packs and possible annihilation—the previous year, the Dreadnought had sunk the U-29, making it the only battleship known to have rammed a submarine, becoming the stuff of legend.



*H.M.S. Dreadnought*

Three thousand miles away, across the Atlantic, C.F. Martin & Co. is creating the biggest six-string guitar ever built, a guitar with such a strong bass response that it would be sold as a bass guitar.

That designation would soon change.

“My grandfather was an amateur historian,” says Chris Martin IV, CEO of the company that bears his family's name. He's a bit of a historian himself and confesses to being “obsessed” with the *H.M.S. Dreadnought's* story, able to rattle off minute details about its structure. “He said, ‘This is the biggest guitar ever made. Let's name it in honor of the biggest British battleship ever made. This was in the middle of World War I, when people were wondering, are we going to keep our freedom or not?’”

“The *Dreadnought*,” Martin adds, “was considered the first all big-gun ship. That's why I love to call our dreadnought ‘a big gun.’”

In an homage to that first “big gun,” created a century ago, Martin Guitars is issuing the D-222 100th Anniversary Dreadnought Edition, inspired by one of the first dreads. To coincide with its release, the company has opened a new exhibit at its museum in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, dedicated to the history of the influential instrument. At press time, the exhibit was scheduled to run from January 2016 through January 2017.



*The D-222 100th Anniversary Dreadnought Edition*

## **Talking-Machine Music Ready**

These days, a dreadnought model can be found in the catalog of nearly every major guitar manufacturer. That ubiquity, and the popularity of small-bodied acoustics, makes it easy to forget why the dreadnought is so revolutionary. “Compared to all the guitars that preceded it, the dreadnought had more volume and more bottom end,” says Martin’s in-house historian Dick Boak, during a call from his office at Martin Guitars. “In terms of tone, and the hundreds of words that are used to describe tone, in the worst-case scenario, too much bottom end is called ‘mud,’” he adds with a chuckle. “The other extreme is ‘tinny-ness.’”

“The initial Martin dreadnoughts were very powerful in the bass response, but they weren’t muddy,” Boak continues. “I think muddiness comes from overbuilding a guitar, so Martin was building very light guitars that still had considerable balance between bass and treble but had great power and great bottom end. Bottom end was an attractive thing for any player—it’s a more pleasant sound than a tinny tone.”

But recapturing the sound of the 222 proved challenging. The original dreadnought came in three models: the 111 was quite plain, the 222 a little fancier, and the 333 was the fanciest. “All of them were pretty austere by today’s standards,” Boak says. “The 222 had an extra inlay around the lip of the soundhole. But basically they were all the same.”

Martin could not find any original 222s, so the D-222 100th Anniversary Dreadnought Edition is based, in part, on a surviving 111, first built by Martin for the New York and Boston-based department store Charles H. Ditson & Co. Martin’s contemporary luthiers relied on that 111 from its extensive guitar collection. They also looked at a concert-sized 22 model from that era, and a 2 model, which is a baby-sized version of the dreadnought.

The first dreadnought made was a Model 222 shipped to Ditson in August of 1916, Boak says. After Ditson went out of business in the early 1930s, Martin introduced the D-1 and D-2 dreadnoughts for standard playing style—they would soon become Martin’s iconic D-18 and D-28 models. Limited to no more than 100 special instruments, the centennial D-222 is a 12-fret, slotted-head commemoration of the 1916 original, crafted with a torrefied Sitka spruce top, scalloped Martin X-bracing, premium mahogany back and sides, grained ivoroid bindings, a Ditson-style single-ring rosette, and a black ebony fingerboard and bridge. “Restrained in its appointments like the original, there is no restraint in tone,” Boak says. “The combination of the 12-fret dreadnought’s sheer size combined with the clarity and brilliance of mahogany yields a remarkably lightweight instrument with exquisite tone and power.”

The creation of the D-222 is unlike other similar reproduction projects in Martin's past. "The only challenge we have had with this model is that it's an homage to a guitar that we have not seen in person," Chris Martin says. "[The 222s] are that rare. We had to look at images, we had to talk to vintage dealers. So, it's not a reproduction, it's in honor of, though we did talk to one dealer who said, 'Yeah, back in the '70s, I sold one, but I don't remember who I sold it to.'

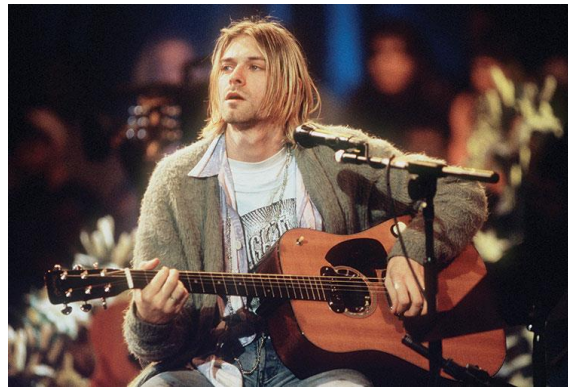
"Usually if we create a historical reproduction, we get one and go over it with a fine tooth comb. In this case it was more anecdotal."

But not entirely.

"This whole thing is a moving target for me," Boak says of the project, "because during our research we have scoured our archives and read close to a million documents. The research has included having letters translated from the old German into the new German, so they can be translated into English. And we are constantly learning new things [about the development of the dreadnought]."



*Dolly Dimples, center, with her D-18*



*Kurt Cobain performing for MTV Unplugged*

Among the vast treasure trove of archival material is a news clipping that shows how the music trades recognized Martin was on to something big in the then-burgeoning phonograph industry: The August 19, 1916 edition of *Music Trade Review* noted the innovative instrument had been "found to be excellent for [the] making of talking-machine records. . . . It is also said to be an excellent instrument for use in auditoriums and large halls."

Since then, the Martin dreadnought has played a singularly unique role in the shaping of popular music. Country, folk, bluegrass, rock, and pop artists, from Gene Autry and Hank Williams to Doc Watson and Peter Rowan, from Johnny Cash and Jerry Garcia to John Lennon and Kurt Cobain, from Bob Dylan and Beck to Joni Mitchell and Keb' Mo', have included the Martin dreadnought in their arsenal. Rowan, a one-time member of Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys, owns a Martin D-18 Golden Era and a second Authentic model. Folk icon Ramblin' Jack Elliot plays a D-28 hand-painted with a now-headless bull rider (the result of an unfortunate encounter with a spilled shot of tequila, he says). The early rockabilly artists embraced dreads: Elvis played a Martin D-28 (depicted on his eponymous 1956 debut album). The Beatles and the Stones often employed Martin dreadnoughts: Paul McCartney and John Lennon used their Martin D-28s to write 42 songs that would become *The White Album*, *Let It Be*, and *Abbey Road*, and Keith Richards played a D-45 on the band's

1972 *Exile on Main Street* tour, which included performances of the acoustic classic “Sweet Virginia” (see music on pg. 60).

The rise of the singer-songwriter and soft-rock eras in the early 1970s found Martin dreadnoughts in the hands of Loggins & Messina, and Seals & Crofts. Axeslinger Peter Frampton used a D-45 to write and record songs on his transitional *Frampton’s Camel* album (the guitar was stolen on tour in 1973). Jimi Hendrix reportedly used his 1968 Martin D-45 on the writing and recording of his last album, *Cry of Love*.

In synth-and-electric-guitar-sated 1970s prog-rock, the Martin dreadnought added sonic texture to Pink Floyd, one of rock’s most experimental bands: The Martin D-28 became guitarist David Gilmour’s go-to acoustic—you can hear it on the iconic opening chords of “Welcome to the Machine” and throughout “Wish You Were Here.”

Michael Hedges showed the model’s versatility by playing his intricate fingerstyle on a Martin D-28.

Other rockers partial to Martin dreadnoughts include Jimmy Page, Nancy Wilson of Heart, David Crosby, and Stephen Stills. Neil Young owns Hank Williams’ 1941 D-28, the guitar that inspired Young’s nostalgic tribute “This Old Guitar.”

Such new-gen folk artists as Mumford & Sons play Martin dreadnoughts, as do the Avetts, Shawn Colvin, and Neko Case.



*Joni Mitchell*

### **The Hawaiian Connection**

But, at first, the dreadnought proved less than popular. “I remember my grandfather saying that it was not an overnight sensation,” Chris Martin says when asked about the role the dreadnought has played in the success of the company. “You think back to the original dreadnought, introduced in 1916, and it was a 12-fretter, fan-braced; it had a slot head and wide, flat fingerboard, and it was made specifically for Hawaiian musicians to play with a slide. And it was big! Relative to the small-body guitars that people at the time were used to, it was maybe even awkward. It really came into its own when we put the 14-fret neck on it [and switched to X bracing]. That’s when people said, ‘OK, *now* I get it.’”

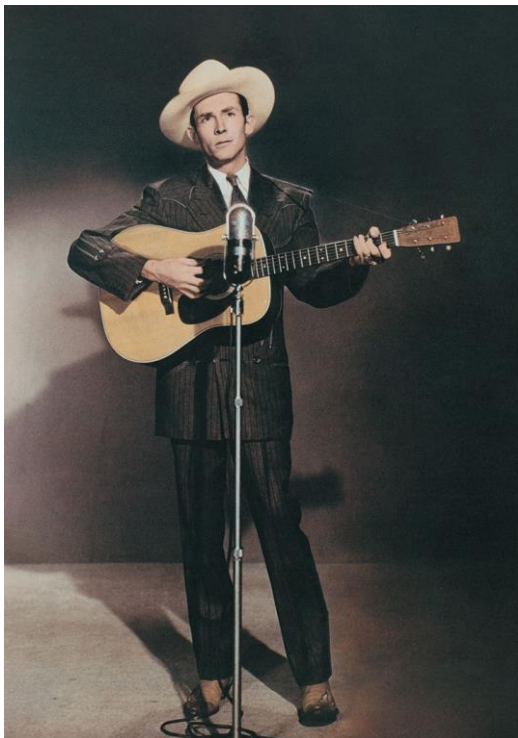
The 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco laid the foundation for the dreadnought. That sprawling event, along with the advent of steel strings, introduced ukuleles and Hawaiian music to a mainstream American audience. One of the acts featured at the palatial Hawaiian expo was the Royal Hawaiian Band led by guitarist Major Kealakai. He played a steel-strung Hawaiian slide guitar set up with the strings high off the neck. “It was a big band and it played Hawaiian music unlike anything Americans had ever heard before,”

Boak says. “For some reason, it caught hold with the American public and Hawaiian music spread like wildfire.”

After the expo, the Royal Hawaiian Band toured cities throughout the mainland. “Major Kealakai was disappointed by the amount of volume he was getting out of the guitars he was playing, so he ordered a Martin,” Boak says. “He got one that was tinier than he wanted, though it was a big improvement. Then he came back and asked, ‘Can you make one that’s *really* big?’ And they did. The band placed the order through Ditson, and Martin made one that was quite large for him. It was dreadnought-sized, but with a tight waist.

“I consider it the first dreadnought, even though it’s not the exact dreadnought shape,” Boak says. “Still, it had the exact width of a dreadnought at the shoulders and on the lower bout, and it had the exact height of a dreadnought from the 12th fret down to the bottom of the guitar. It’s just that the waist cuts in, kind of like a triple-0 does.

Within six months, the staff at Ditson and the makers at Martin “put their heads together and came up with the dreadnought shape that we know today—the pear shape in the 12-fret format,” Boak says. “Ditson started ordering those from Martin and offering them for sale. They weren’t tremendously popular, though they were offered in a couple of different configurations. But *that* was the beginning. They were mostly all made for the Hawaiian style of playing.”



Hank Williams and his Martin D-28

### The Real Deal

The Ditson era did not see tremendous success with the dreadnought size. Indeed, it wasn’t until the mid-’30s that sales of the instrument started to pick up. The reasons for that newfound popularity were many. The recording industry was booming. The use of electronic microphones and amplification was taking off. And acoustic guitarists onstage were discovering that they needed more volume. “The dreadnought guitars, especially the 14-fret versions as they were converted over in the 1930s, provided the perfect solution for performing groups in the Hayrides and the Grand Old Opry and similar settings,” Boak says.

During the Depression era, country-music artists embraced the dreadnought. “Good times, bad times, people find music to be inspiring or soothing. But it was after World War II, when the economy picked up, that you found music evolving and getting more exposure,” Martin adds. “Not only is the dreadnought a workhorse, not only is it a powerful guitar, it has a visual presence. If you’re a lead guitar player and you’re holding one of those dreadnoughts up there, people pay attention. It not only *sounded* good, it *looked* damn good! It was unlike anything we had ever built and it really found a home in a combo.”

On the then-nascent bluegrass scene, the Martin dreadnought showed that it could hold its own against the loud banjos and fiddles—it became common to see a group of acoustic players, including a guitarist with a Martin dreadnought in hand, huddled around a single mic playing old-timey music. “Bluegrassers are pretty pure about amplification, and back in the day they didn’t even have good microphones,” Boak says. “So they needed something that could push to the back of the house.”

Indeed, the Martin dreadnought soon took its place alongside such iconic bluegrass instruments as the fiddle, the Mastertone banjo, and the Gibson F-5 mandolin.

But it was the 1960s folk boom that really spurred dreadnought sales and prompted the first widespread copies. By the end of that decade, a wave of custom builders—including such early hippie luthiers as Stu Mossman—had begun making copies of the Martin dreadnought. The next wave of artisan luthiers built high-end production lines around the dreadnought model. Those include Bill Collings, Richard Hoover of Santa Cruz Guitars, John Larrivé, and Bob Taylor, who helped to industrialize American guitar manufacturing.

Production of Martin dreadnoughts hit its stride in the 1970s. According to company records, in 1961, Martin made 507 D-28s; in 1971 the total was 5,466 (at the time, the company offered five different dreadnought models). Production peaked between 1974 and ’75—more than 30,000 were produced in this two-year period. (1974: 3,811 D-18s; 5,077 D-28s; 6,184 D-35s; 506 D-41s; 157 D-45s. 1975: 3,069 D-18s; 4,996 D-28s; 6,260 D-35s; 452 D-41s; and 192 D-45s.)

“I remember my grandfather saying, ‘It’s our bread and butter. That’s what pays the mortgage,’” Martin says. “Day in and day out, we make more dreadnoughts than anything else. There is a resurgence of interest in small-bodied guitars, which is wonderful because we still make them, but we make a *lot* of dreadnoughts, as do many other companies. Brian Majeski of *Music Trades* said to me years ago, ‘You know, Chris, the dreadnought is the most copied guitar on earth.’ And it is.

“We still make a ton of D-28s,” he adds. “You know, it’s not the fanciest guitar. It doesn’t even have scalloped bracing, but for some people, they say, ‘Hey, this is my first Nazareth Martin—and it’s the real deal.’”