

MACLEAN'S REVIEWS

APRIL 16, 1966

VOLUME 79 NUMBER 8

OLÉ! FOR CANADA'S REBEL GUITAR-MAKER

ONE OF THE FEW good things Canada salvaged from the crumpled Avro Arrow project was a potential guitar-making industry. This improbable offshoot was fathered by a 51-year-old Irishman named Patt Lister. He came to Canada 10 years ago as an aircraft tool designer to build ejection seats for the Arrow. When the Avro project failed he sold his home, halved his income and stayed to make fine classic guitars in a turkey coop-turned-workshop near Collingwood, Ont.

The workshop is an organized clutter of wood presses, mockups, engineering equipment and guitar carcasses suspended by hooks. There's an evocative tangle of varnish and wood glue. In the middle of it all sits Lister, talking about guitars with tender respect. At times he's a romantic, endowing the instrument with human qualities; at times he's a practical engineer.

"The guitar is a weak sister, so intimate it always has to be excused. I want to design a guitar that can hold its head up in an orchestra and resist the rigors of the Canadian climate." His experiments with design have increased sound projection by about 20 percent. "Now if I can just push that to 50 percent without losing

any of the musical tone . . ."

Patt calls himself "an Irish rebel with colossal impudence" for challenging traditions of guitar-making that have been practised for more than 100 years. Modern instruments are still patterned on the principle developed by Antonio Torres Jurado, a Spanish carpenter who began building guitars in 1850 and developed the now-conventional fan strutting to brace the top. Patt claims his innovation — radial bracing — not only gives more projection but leaves fewer gaps for cracking. "Hit somebody over the head with a Torres guitar and the guitar will break," he says. "Hit somebody over the head with my guitar, the head will break."

It takes about 50 working hours to build a guitar and perform the intricate marriage of its 147 parts. Then it needs to season for six months before it comes alive. The 40 guitars Lister has handcrafted so far have all won the praise of local experts. And now Patt has received what is probably the ultimate compliment: Segovia, the Spanish master now teaching in the U.S., has asked to try out a Lister guitar.

Patt's agent and general sounding-board for guitar theories is Eli Kassner, a teacher at Toronto's Royal Conservatory of Music who has probably done more than any other individual to promote guitar playing in Canada. When Kassner organized the Toronto Guitar Society in 1957 there had been only two guitar concerts, both by Segovia, in the city since World War I. Now celebrated artists like Julian Bream and Presti and Lagoya play three times a year to packed houses. One Toronto music firm now sells 500 classic guitars a year; 15 years ago it didn't even stock them. More than 1,000,000 guitars were sold in the U.S. last year and one American guitar-maker, C. F. Martin and Company, recently announced that the demand for classic guitars was so heavy that it couldn't accept any more orders for an indefinite period.

Canada imports guitars from Japan, Sweden, the U.S. and East and West Germany — usually at 70 to 80 percent above list price because of shipping costs and excise duties. But Lister

is convinced Canada could have its own thriving guitar industry.

"The entire country from the Atlantic to the Pacific is enclosed in wood but none of it is cut and seasoned the right way for guitars," he says.

The "right way" is straight grain, cut on the quarter with at least 10 annular rings to the inch and then seasoned for 10 years. It costs Patt 40 cents on the dollar to import his seasoned wood from New York. He says maple is an ideal tonewood for guitar tops and calls it "an untapped Canadian resource." Homegrown wood that has expanded and contracted with the seasons is best for guitars. "Imported guitars don't like our central heating," says Patt. "They crack in a cold dry climate."

Handmade guitars cost between \$450 and \$1,200. Patt's are considered reasonable at \$300 for the student model and \$550 for the concert model. His increased sound projection means that the student guitars can be used on the concert stage and both models are noted for their evenness and eagerness. As Patt puts it: "Either a guitar responds to you or it doesn't."

He has the engineering skill to mass produce but agrees with Segovia that a guitar must be made with loving hands. He could make more money manufacturing guitar cases, but says: "I want to go on building guitars until they put me in a wooden overcoat. Someone should measure my heartbeats when I hear a guitar speak for the first time."

ROSEMARY ROCHESTER

Bannerman on books TOP CRIME, ITALIAN STYLE

*And even Mussolini's
ominous shadow can't
blot out the humor*

IT IS NEARLY impossible to classify *That Awful Mess On Via Merulana* by Carlo Emilio Gadda. Since the book is concerned with a murder, and the central character is a police detective, it's nominally a crime story; but the murder is almost incidental, and although much of the book is wonderfully funny, it is a serious novel of the very first order, approaching greatness.

The setting is Rome in 1927. Italy is dominated by Mussolini, whom Gadda mocks in bitterly exaggerated caricatures. Fascism itself, which hadn't yet become quite as oppressive as it did later, is presented with minimal distortion — perhaps because it was even more absurd, and thus less in need of caricature to point it up, than its posturing creator. The passage of time has made some of the refer-

ences obscure, even to Italians unless they're over 30, but the translator, William Weaver, has supplied little footnotes to explain them — and he does it well.

His translation is masterly. Much of the dialogue in the original is dialect — Roman, Sicilian, Neapolitan, Genoese — but Weaver wisely hasn't attempted to give differentiated equivalents of this wide variety. Instead he



Harry Boyle looks back with rare understanding to the stern old pioneer days.

has kept an overall effect of dialect by translating what's said into idiomatic and sometimes ribald American English. So the characters are distinguished from each other by the way their minds work and their hearts move them, rather than by the way they speak.

It is the interweaving of their reactions to the murder of Liliana Balducci, a wealthy and beautiful woman, that makes it such an extraordinary book. Maidservants, janitors, bankers, lawyers, priests and noblemen fill the pages so vitally that they radiate a kind of crowded heat.

And watching them all with routine suspicion is Officer Francesco Ingravallo of the homicide squad; stocky, lumpish, vaguely frustrated: a detective who is first and foremost a man, and who puts on and takes off his police duties as he might a hat. He is easily the most memorable figure among the many in this truly memorable novel.

HARRY J. BOYLE'S *With A Pinch Of Sin*, like Gadda's book, is set in a sharply-defined region: the rural part of Huron county in southwestern Ontario, and his book is a series of sketches of life there as he remembers it. He writes unpretentiously and sometimes a bit flatly, but often with arresting and touching simplicity, as in this memorable glimpse of his grandmother:

"There was a ceremonial in the way she put on an apron. It was always starched and frilly along the edges, and

Patt Lister: A self-styled Irish rebel with colossal impudence — plus a rare skill.

