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THING

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At Last, A Thang

Woody to Elvis to Rod to Mariah,
to yuppies to retro hippies:
all hail the acoustic guitar.



Eric Clapton played acoustic guitar on "Unplugged."

MTV

WHAT: It has one neck, one head, shoulders and a waist. No arms, no legs, but it does get around. It has accompanied everyone from yodeling cowpokes to Tommy Smothers. Woody Guthrie contended that his could kill a Fascist. Bluesmen like Robert Johnson swore their licks came straight from the Devil, by all accounts one mean axman. Even Elvis, the King himself, wiggled and warbled with a leather-encased Martin dreadnought slung at his side. The pearl-inlaid Martin, in fact, vintage or new, is the ne plus ultra of acoustic guitarism — vintage models can set you back almost six figures.

THIS IS NEW? What's new is that last year, the acoustic guitar actually outsold its aggressive electric offspring by \$16 million, after the electric, and the 80's synthesizer explosion, had virtually placed it on the endangered species list. And Eric Clapton's penchant for self-effacement finally panned out on his "Unplugged" album, which snagged him the Grammys that had eluded him through nearly three decades of megawatt rock stardom.

FROM THE 'WE'VE CREATED A MONSTER' DEPARTMENT: Mr. Clapton's is only one of many "Unplugged" concerts aired regularly on MTV featuring Rod Stewart to Aerosmith to Mariah Carey, coloratura soul princess with songbird hands aflutter.

IS IT A YUPPIE THING? Well, partly. Boomers who craved pearl-inlaid Martins in their teens, but couldn't afford them, now can. And they're buying them.

IS THIS A RETRO THING?

That's also part of it. Music stores report teen customers in bell-bottoms and full hippie regalia. They haven't rejected their parents' music, they've embraced it, and the acoustic guitar is a big part of it. But it's not just a matter of nostalgia. Bands like Guns 'n' Roses, Extreme and Mr. Big have all featured the acoustic guitar in hit MTV videos.

IS IT A THANG? Yep, it's that, too. The huge crossover success of country artists like Garth Brooks and Wynonna Judd has a new crop of pickers taking up the six-string. And seasoned amateurs are upgrading their instruments to something slicker.

I THOUGHT THIS WAS THE DIGITAL

AGE: The key here is the "finger" sense of the word. The synthesizer can't touch the tactile satisfaction of playing the acoustic guitar. Keyboard sales, which include synthesizers, were very strong in the early 80's but have dropped steadily now that the bloom of novelty has faded. Matt Umanov, a New York dealer in guitars since the 60's, recalls wisdom passed on to him years ago by a wholesaler. "There's a part of the human physiology that needs to beat on something and make a sound," he said. "The feel of a guitar vibrating against your body fulfills that need big time."

WILL MADONNA DO A BOOK ON IT? Not likely. But it's a safe bet that long after her chest cones have come to rest in a museum display case, people will be picking and strumming — unplugged.

