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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."

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 andwarbled 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 guitardom — vintage models can set you back almost six figures.

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

FROM THE 'WE'VE CREATED A MONSTER' DEPARTMENT: Mr. Clay-ton's is only one of many "Unplugged" concerts aired regularly on MTV featuring Rod Stewart 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 sea-soned 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. Key-board sales, which in-cude synthesizers, were very strong in the early 80's but have dropped steadily now that the bloom of novelty has fad-ed. 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.