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local luthiers
music to our ears from area craftsmen

INSIDE

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"Listen to a song like (Simon and Garfunkel's) 'Mrs. Robinson.' That was a good old '30s guitar. Or the stuff of Crosby, Stills and Nash – they used really good guitars."

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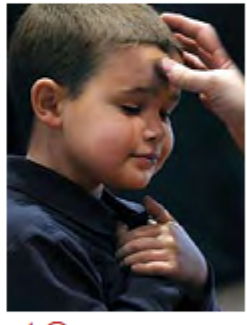

in season

all year long

ABOVE: "I love music. All my friends are musicians. But I have zero talent that way," said Petty Creek Canyon guitar maker John Walker as he strums one of his creations at his workshop near Alberton. RIGHT: For Walker, nothing smells better than a guitar.

Art

OF THE INSTRUMENT

WRITTEN BY ROB CHANEY ■ PHOTOGRAPHED BY MICHAEL GALLACHER

It's an irony of the musical world that unless you listen to a live performer, you'll never hear the qualities players pay thousands of dollars to acquire.

For years, musicians like Neil Young have complained that compact discs fail to capture the sound that vinyl records produced. Reduce that CD to an MP3 file on your iPod, and you've removed even more of the sonic detail. Play it through cheap speakers, and you might assume an instrument that costs more than a kitchen remodel is a fool's purchase.

The subject makes master guitar maker John Walker laugh – he's so far out of radio coverage in Petty Creek Canyon that his workshop only gets music streamed off his computer.

And he doesn't play guitar.

But the guitars he makes in his workshop northwest of Missoula sell for around $6,000.

"I love music," Walker explained. "All my friends are musicians. But I have zero talent that way."

What he has is dedication to fine woodworking. When he worked in a Plum Creek sawmill in Belgrade, other workers kept yelling at him "it's not a piano" when he was excessively considerate of a piece of good wood. His mother sensed his employment frustration, and suggested maybe he should be making pianos.

Instead, he started pestering workers at the Flatiron mandolin shop for a job. After six months, they let him in.

At the time, Flatiron specialized in banjos and mandolins. All the experienced luthiers concentrated on those instruments, with little interest in guitar-making. When Gibson Guitars bought Flatiron in 1987, that changed.

"I was low man on the totem pole, and then I stepped right into being high man on the guitar line," Walker said.

When the ad says "spruce top" on a guitar, Walker wonders what kind. He stocks Engelmann, Sitka, Adirondack red and German spruce, each with its own tonal characteristics.

"I've built the same model with the same wood, and they'll have different voices," Walker said. "It's like snowflakes."

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John Walker

ABOVE: John Walker buys some of the ornate trim material he uses in his guitars from artisans around the country.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP LEFT: Bennett specializes in bluegrass-style five-string banjos, where the fifth string is attached midway on the neck.

TOP RIGHT: Mike Bennett was 14 years old when he decided he wanted to play the banjo. It was years later that the Missoula music teacher decided he could make the instruments.

MIDDLE RIGHT: "I make about four or five banjos a year," Michael Bennett says. "I like to tell people it takes three to four months to make one, but I don't keep track of the hours. I'm kind of afraid to."

BOTTOM RIGHT: Bennett strums a mandolin he made at his Missoula shop. Banjos are Bennett's mainstay, but he has tried his hand at guitar and mandolin making.

The difference may seem meaningless, especially on the printed page. But a visit to Greg Boyd's House of Fine Instruments in Missoula provides a compelling lesson. It's literally a house, where the cheapest guitar in the showroom costs $700 used and prices quickly hit five figures.

Boyd picked up a guitar with a nationally famous brand and strummed a rich chord. It was about seven years old, and wooden instruments gain tonal quality the longer they're played. He plucked some harmonic notes – a curious sound made by lightly touching an already vibrating string. The guitar then plays a combination of the whole string's note, plus the ringing sound of the partial string on either side of his finger. On the famous-name guitar, he easily got harmonic pings from three different frets on the neck.

Then he picked up a custom-made guitar that arrived from the luthier's shop just the day before. And he plucked a harmonic ping from every fret, everywhere he touched.

"That's part of the reason old blues and folk music is so exciting – they were playing on such good instruments," Boyd said. "Listen to a song like (Simon and Garfunkel's) 'Mrs. Robinson.' That was a good old '30s guitar. Or the stuff of Crosby, Stills and Nash – they used really good guitars. The Beatles, they didn't care so much. Paul McCartney's bass? It wasn't because it sounded good. He'd broken his and that Hofner he got was the cheapest bass in Hamburg that was left-handed."

Boyd sells most of his instruments via the Internet, but he considers himself as centrally located to the heart of fine instrument making as he can get.

"This whole region's always been a hotbed," he said. "North Idaho, the Bitterroot, Missoula, Bozeman – there's great luthiers and there's great players, and it sort of feeds on itself. You can find better craftsmen here than you can find in towns of 600,000."

Mike Bennett was 14 when he heard a Kingston Trio album at a friend's house and realized he wanted to play the banjo.

"I couldn't find a good one, and I had no woodworking skills," the Missoula music teacher said. Nevertheless, the passion was strong enough, he began to teach himself the trade.

"I had two music stores, one in Downey, Calif., and one in Redmond, Wash.," he recalled. "To promote selling instruments, I'd have banjo-makers come in and lecture. So my tuition was free."

He also learned to make guitars, but the banjo remained his first love. Its heyday was in the 1920s, when there were dozens of manufacturers. A copy of the 1923 Sears, Roebuck catalogue offers 14 models, costing between $3.45 and $19.95.

"They had all these different ideas about what the best way was to make a banjo," Bennett said. "And since then, we've been trying to copy exactly what someone did 100 years ago."

Bennett specializes in bluegrass-style five-string banjos, where the fifth string is attached midway on the neck. It allows a finger-picker to pluck melodies while thumbing a descant line. A four-string banjo works better for ragtime and Dixieland musicians strumming chords.

He favors a style of wooden rim with a curved inside, which boosts the lower frequencies and gives it a more mellow sound ("not that banjos are real mellow," he observes). He also likes the richness he gets by adding a second, larger back to the instrument called a resonator.

Stringed instruments also have a bracing structure that most owners never see. Bennett learned a technique called "tap tuning" where he could adjust the tone by shaving away bits of the struts until the top gives the desired pitch when tapped. Having the ideal piece of wood makes such adjustments possible.

To figure out a customer's interests, Bennett will requisition three or four of his previous creations from their owners for the new person to sample. His starting price is $900, climbing to an average of $1,500 depending on features.

"I make about four or five banjos a year," Bennett said. "This is No. 45. I like to tell people it takes three to four months to make one, but I don't keep track of the hours. I'm kind of afraid to. They don't leave until they're the very best I can do, and that sometimes takes a bit of time."

As word of his instruments spread, Bennett found himself in contact with more and more instrument makers. At one point, he considered forming some sort of club, but concluded that Montana luthiers "are kind of like me – stuck in the back of the house."

"In the last 30 years, it (luthier work) has just mushroomed," Bennett said. "There was nobody like this in the 1960s. I'd drive halfway across Los Angeles to find anyone who knew what they were doing, and then they'd never tell you how they did it."

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art of the Instrument

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Drive across Missoula, and you'll find Ryan Beck in a woodshop about the size of one of John Walker's table saws. On the younger end of the luthier spectrum, Beck has been making custom electric bass guitars since 2006. A steady line of clients are paying an average of $3,000 for one of his instruments.

"I was born to do this," Beck said. "My father was a shop teacher and my mother taught music."

Beck had been playing bass about 18 years when he started giving music lessons. He also learned to make his own instruments, but didn't give the trade much thought until one student's mom heard about his hobby.

"She showed up at the lesson with a blank check that said 'build a bass' on it," Beck said. "That ended up being a $3,000 instrument."

Several of his customers have brought their own wishes to the project. One really liked juniper wood, and brought in a 1,000-year-old hunk he'd dragged out of an Idaho forest for Beck to form into a guitar. The fact that juniper is not particularly good for instrument-making was a worthy challenge. Beck ended up making decorative strips from the treasured wood without compromising the guitar's strength or tone.

That kind of consideration is common in the instrument-making world. Beck learned on one of his first basses to feel out the buyer's often unconscious needs, like the guy who decided he wanted the control knobs in a different configuration than the traditional placements.

"I want 130 percent satisfaction," Beck said. "I took it back and put in 10 extra hours to place a palm-leaf inlay that covered up the old holes. I had to learn how to do that on the spot."

At the House of Fine Instruments, Greg Boyd believes that dedication is worth every penny.

"It's really a cool thing to have a guitar that's made by one other human being," he said. "You can call him up and have him customize it. Is Mr. Chevy making your truck? No."

"I want 130 percent satisfaction."

Ryan Beck

ABOVE: Beck works on one of his bass guitar orders in his small Missoula shop. Musicians pay an average of $3,000 for a Ryan Beck creation.

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