

## HENDRICKS BANJOS FOUNDERS MONTE AND ALLEN RETIRE

By The Bluegrass Breakdown

After well over 50 years of building banjos, the Hendricks brothers are officially retiring from the banjo business.

"The last festival was the first that I haven't been at and presented at for well over 40 years," said Hendricks Banjos co-founder, Monte Hendricks.

"For years, since the pavilion began, CBA and the festival (1979 was my first) gave us a great opportunity; we were always out in the dirt. Michael Lewis got CBA to open up part of a building on the fairgrounds. He managed and coordinated who would present. That became the Luthiers Pavilion about 12 years ago. I always wrote the article for the Breakdown on who would be there. Then, six or seven years ago, when Michael retired, I took that over, as well as the photos," Monte recalled. "One of the unique things about the pavilion was its focus on the small shops and individual builders."

When asked what he was most proud of over that time, he said: "Great banjos and excellent workmanship and a nice artistic touch. I think what made Hendricks' banjos stand out was always the inlay work that I did."

Inspired by Earl Scruggs, Monte and his brother Allen started playing banjo in the early 60s. "Back then you'd get your Earl record and slow it down to half speed and try to figure out: How did he make those sounds?"

Monte, Allen, and his siblings started a family band before the oldest would start to move on with his life; Allen was stationed in Sacramento after serving in the Air Force during the Vietnam War. During those years he discovered other banjo players in the world! Learned from others and discovered



Long-time CBA stalwarts Monte (L) and Allen (R) Hendricks. Photo courtesy of Monte Hendricks.

the four-string tenor banjo. "The tenor was big with Shakey's Pizza and banjo bands then. There were two banjo makers catering to them: Henry Lee and Larry Lou. Lou was also involved in five-string and owned a shop in old Sacramento. Allen got interested in banjo building, and started helping out in their shops."

Still in high school, Monte went up to Sacramento from the family home in Southern California to visit his big brother. "He took me to the Freight & Salvage to expose me to live music, and took me to the builders he was working with. That just fascinated the hell out of me. From then on, I was like a little kid again. If you asked 'What are you going to be when you

*cont'd on page 2 →*



Detail of a Hendricks Model II banjo, including inlaid fingerboard, carved heel, and worked gold rim.



## A LEGACY OF CRAFTSMANSHIP

By Pete Ludé, CBA Chair

Many bluegrass fans are also musicians who love picking and singing with friends, and most pickers get rather emotionally connected to the instruments they play. There is something magical about acoustic stringed instruments, and the connection to the artists that play them. This month's edition of the Bluegrass Breakdown is dedicated to California luthiers – the skilled craftspeople who build and maintain the instruments that we depend on.

The word luthier comes from the French word "luth," which means lute. The art of making and repairing instruments is a centuries-old tradition, dating from the middle ages. All genres of music seem to have a legacy – or sometimes a cult following – surrounding luthiers. Classical violinists consider Antonio Stradivari to have built the best violins starting in the 1680's. Jazz guitarists revered the first archtop guitars developed in 1898 by Orville Gibson, who borrowed from the carved top of violin construction – a novel idea for guitars at the time. In the 1930's the Selmer guitar company teamed with Mario Maccaferri to build the distinctive guitar favored by Django Reinhardt.



### A NOTE FROM THE CHAIR

*cont'd on page 3 →*



Gary Vessel's got a secret that he wants to tell!

Find out his tips for great sound on page 14!

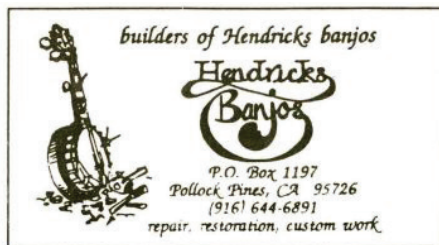
grow up.' I'd say: 'I'm going to be a banjo maker!'"

After a little detour as a Lutheran minister, Monte found himself working for C.C. Richelieu in Oregon, Wisc. Richelieu was a builder and a buyer and seller of vintage instruments and parts. "I was his first employee, helped him get his models on the road ... and I was learning to be a banjo builder," Monte recalled.

"But my teacher was all of the vintage instruments. Old C.C. was often on the road as a performer. As soon as his big Chrysler New Yorker was headed down the road, I was taking these things apart. There are so many kinds of tone rings, rods, and tail-pieces. I was so incredibly lucky that I had the opportunity to see all these different ideas about how all these banjos could be put together," Monte said. "And all the artwork! For some reason people love to dress-up banjos."

Monte said the banjo he most admired from those days was the Bacon & Day Silver Bell No.6 Ne Plus Ultra. "The craftsmanship was just incredible. Those banjos sold for \$900 back in the early 1900s, which was a tremendous amount of money," he said.

After some time, playing second fiddle in C.C.'s shop was wearing on Monte, who now was running a team of builders innovating on Richelieu's models, but with C.C. getting the credit. "I knew I wanted to build banjos, and I always wanted to live in the Sierras. Allen was well engrossed in the scene as part of the South Loomis Quickstep, who played the first CBA festival. They were a really big thing for many years. Allen was doing a lot of studio work and managing



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Tiny Moore's (long-time fiddler for Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, and Merle Haggard) music store in Sacramento at the time," Monte said.

Merle wanted to work on his fiddle playing with Tiny and Allen, and so they'd all go to a small bar around Sacramento and just play. Monte chuckled and said: "Imagine: you're relaxing in a local bar and here comes Merle saying 'I'm here to play fiddle with a couple of friends.'"

Monte said he's looking forward to catching up with friends, spending time outside with his wife, Julie; and, he was very clear that he'll still be around for repairs on Hendricks banjos "because it can't be any other way."

"Having been in the world for so long, I have a very deep and wide collection of people who have become very dear friends. I am retiring, and that means taking on no new projects. There will be no new Hendricks banjos, though I have some things on the books to complete. I do a lot of backcountry travel. My wife and I are still avid hikers and backcountry skiers," he said.

"And once no one needs any more repair work done, we'll just disappear," Monte concluded.



## BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

July 2023 · Luthier Edition

The Bluegrass Breakdown is the monthly publication of the California Bluegrass Association since April 1975, keeping CBA members and the world of bluegrass up-to-date with coverage of CBA events, musicians, promotions, and volunteer opportunities. Each issue is published as both a printed and a digital newsletter and distributed to more than 7,500 readers around the world.

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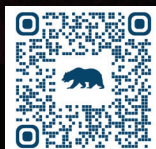
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## NOTE FROM THE CHAIR

cont'd from front page

In our world of bluegrass, we have the legacy of Lloyd Loar who, 100 years ago at Gibson, developed the revolutionary F-5 mandolin made famous as Bill Monroe's preferred instrument. An original Loar F-5 (of which only about 200 still exist) is now considered by many as the definitive standard for bluegrass instruments, and might cost you more than a Lamborghini in today's market. Another holy grail in the musical instrument world is known simply as 58957 – the serial number of the 1935 Martin D-28 dreadnought once owned by Clarence White, and later made famous as the distinctively-modified guitar played by Tony Rice. Just a few months ago, videos of Billy Strings playing 58957 went viral, introducing a new generation of fans to this decades-long legacy.

But most bluegrass musicians don't get too distracted by these few legendary and rare instruments. They understand that today, there are hundreds of highly-skilled craftspeople creating stringed instruments of remarkable quality and beauty. Even without the name-recognition of Stradivari, Gibson, or

Loar, these dedicated luthiers are crafting superb stringed instruments that will elevate talented musicians for generations. And not surprisingly, many of these skilled artisans are right here in California.

Creating such instruments requires a rare combination of craftsmanship, technical knowledge and artistry. A luthier must understand subtle behaviors of tonewoods, woodworking techniques, finishing, acoustical principles – and much more that I can't pretend to understand. We hope you enjoy hearing a few of their stories in this month's edition of the Breakdown.

And one more thing, on the topic of playing music: Don't forget to attend our Founder's Celebration in Fairfield on July 22. This is a celebration honoring Carl Pagter, CBA founder and member #1, who passed away earlier this year. We'll be jamming all afternoon, and then enjoying an evening concert full of the music that Carl would have loved. See you there!



## GOLDEN OLD-TIME CAMPOUT SITE: A RUSSIAN RIVER GEM

By Karen Celia Heil, CBA Board Member and Old-Time Director

With great facilities and an idyllic location in the redwoods along Sonoma County's scenic Russian River, you're not going to want to miss this year's CBA Golden Old-Time Campout from noon on Thursday, Aug. 24, to Sunday, Aug. 27, at Camp Russian River in Guerneville. Join us for three days and three nights of jamming with friends old and new!

Camp in your tent, car, or RV under the stars in a meadow, along the river, or nestled in the redwood grove. And if you need electricity, be sure to request an RV site when you register. There are also wifi, bathrooms with showers, and porta-potties for your comfort and convenience.

You can also enjoy access to the beautiful Russian River, and the great dining and shopping at the heart of Sonoma's wine country in downtown Guerneville is just a 10-to-15 minute walk away.

For more details and tickets, visit the event page – we're looking forward to a great weekend!

Visit the CBA website's Golden Old Time page for more detailed information and tickets.



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# MASTER OF INLAY

## HARVEY LEACH ON 50 YEARS OF BUILDING



by Jason Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Managing Editor. Photos courtesy of Harvey Leach.

*Luthier Harvey Leach started building banjos in 1970, and started work on his first guitar in 1982. Since then he's built hundreds of guitars, and become renowned for his inlay work. His inlay has ornamented instruments for Gibson, Paul Reed Smith, Santa Cruz, Collings, and more. Perhaps most notably, his work is featured on Martin Guitars millionth and 1.5 millionth guitars. Our managing editor Jason Dilg had a chance to catch up with Harvey and talk shop.*

**It might almost seem trite by now, but I can't help but be curious about how the pandemic affected luthiers. I can imagine there may have been both challenges and silver-lining opportunities. What was it like from early 2020 until things started opening up?**

The start of the pandemic was stressful to say the least. I had a big project with Martin Guitar (The Lotus Flower) that was put on hold; obviously there were a lot of questions that really had no immediate answers since it was largely uncharted territory. I remember feeling some comfort watching an interview with Chris Martin where he said that this was Martin's third pandemic, and that in the previous two musical instrument sales jumped. He was of course correct! The odd thing initially for me was that for the first time in my life I was well-prepared for something! I was well stocked with masks, and I was accustomed to wearing them; my job didn't require me to leave the house; and in my spray booth, I had a complete hazmat suit – and even a powerful UV light!

Financially, I had the good fortune of having one customer order remakes of several of the "one-of-kind" Martin projects, as well as orders for two of my custom guitars. I believe, in an odd pandemic twist, that his business took a huge jump from renting warehouse space to the government for PPE storage.

As we move forward, I have a feeling that a lot of people who maybe played instruments in their early days, before becoming

corporate CEO's and business owners, rediscovered the world of lutherie and the incredible advances the craft has made over the past 20 or 30 years. I can only imagine what it might be like to have bought your last guitar in 1970 and then suddenly experience what is available now and to have the disposable income to fully enjoy it.

**How has life changed since things started opening back up, if at all?**

For me, there has been little change. The Covid years as well as "post-Covid" have been my best years ever. I went to the NAMM [National Association of Music Merchants] show in April, and it was strange being in a large space filled with thousands of unmasked people. Even if you wore a mask, you had to take it off if you wanted to communicate with anyone. It's probably even stranger for people like me, who can go months without being around more than one or two people at any given time.

**Any big plans for the summer?**

Most of my summer will be working on orders for my 50th Anniversary guitars. It's fun to reflect on the past years and what got you where you are. A couple of the most significant are actually connected to the CBA and the Grass Valley bluegrass festivals. I attended my first CBA festival the year I moved here from Vermont, in 1984. My catalyst for becoming a luthier was always tied to bluegrass. Early on, watching Flatt and Scruggs and Roy Clark on the Beverly Hillbillies and the Darlin' Boys on the Andy Griffith Show led me towards the banjo. For Christmas one year I got the book by Scruggs and, despite my feeble attempts to learn anything in there, a chapter in the back on building your own banjo launched what has been my main source of income for most of my life. In that chapter was a small section on inlays; what I'm most famous for came from those four pages! Even more ironic,



Leach's Mona Lisa on the "Da Vinci" guitar, Martin Guitar's 1.5 millionth.



Leach's recreation of "The Last Supper" for the Martin "Da Vinci" guitar.

I suppose, was that my very first endorser was Rodney Dillard, whom I had met at a Grass Valley festival! Rodney, being good friends with Roy Clark, led to my second endorser; it's funny how things go sometimes! Another interesting tidbit about the CBA is that I actually sold my first guitar that wasn't a pre-order at the festival in 1992.

*How did your partnership with Martin come about? What are your inspirations for the guitars in that line?*

I had been doing some inlay work for Martin, mostly custom scale length snowflake patterns. At a chance meeting at the NAMM show I was introduced to Chris Martin ... the rest, as they say, is history. My first project for Martin was the "Custom Cowboy," which was in the Martin NAMM booth next to their millionth guitar. I think about half of the ideas come from Martin and the other half I come up with. Sometimes there is a theme that makes sense, for instance, I knew my first project would be sharing the booth with the landmark millionth Martin, so I created a theme telling the story of the times of the very first Martin. When the opportunity presented itself to do the one-and-a-half millionth, it seemed like a great time to try and recreate the work of da Vinci – something my friend, scrimshaw master Bob Hergert, and I had discussed for years.

**The Homestead orchestra-model guitar on your webpage that sold recently is gorgeous. Is there a difference in tonal qualities that you're going for between, say a dreadnought, an archtop, a parlor guitar, or an orchestra model?**

My goal has always been to try and maximize the potential of each combination of woods I'm using, rather than try and make the wood recreate a specific sound. Certain woods lend themselves to tonal areas that are a good starting point for making a guitar sound the way a potential customer wants. Body sizes are a huge factor as well. All the best wood combos in the world won't make an archtop sound like a dreadnought! I primarily build dreadnoughts and OM's, and an occasional parlor. I have been blessed with a good supply of Brazilian and mahogany from "The Tree" – probably enough to spend the rest of my life building with just those two back and side woods. I feel fortunate because I consider them to be the best-looking and best-sounding woods out there. I do enjoy, at times, messing around with new bracing ideas, but I generally stick pretty close to the classic Martin X-brace.



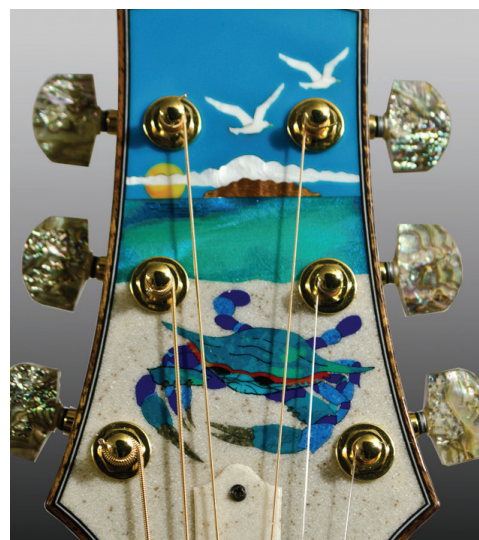
*Tiger and bamboo inlay on the Gibson "Jungle Tiger" guitar.*



*Crane, lily pads, and koi on the Martin "Lotus Flower" guitar.*



*The master at work: Harvey Leach at his bench.*



*Nautical headstock from Leach's "Tropical Sea" guitar.*



# THE SANTA CRUZ GUITAR COMPANY

## BUILDING NEW AMERICAN TRADITIONS IN STEEL-STRING GUITARS



*Headstock plates in progress.*



*Shaping a neck in the Santa Cruz workshop.*



*Santa Cruz's 35th Anniversary Cowgirl Guitar.*

By Jason Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Managing Editor. Photos courtesy of Santa Cruz Guitar Company.

When Richard Hoover started building guitars, he said, “people didn’t make guitars. Big companies did.”

And, boy, could they knock them out. In 1970 – a few years after Richard first started tinkering with guitars, but six years before the official birth of the Santa Cruz Guitar Company in 1976 – the Martin Guitar Company built more than 22,000 guitars. Richard has dedicated his career to building instruments that will make you “want to run out into the streets and fall in love or fight for a cause” and sharing what he’s learned all along the way. Today, SGGC not only builds guitars consistently meeting this epic standard, but has also created a shared body of knowledge from nearly 50 years of experience and new generations of builders inspired by Richard, well-equipped to fill our world with dazzling tone for years and years to come.

On Santa Cruz’s website homepage is a video from 2021; in it, Richard’s narrative voice is a riffle of pride points noting some of the company’s broad accomplishments to date: bringing violin-building traditions

to the steel-string guitar; overcoming existential threats ranging from wildfires to pandemic shutdowns; creating an open-source, science-based, wood-and-guitar knowledge base; and assuming responsibility for the long-term sustainability of prized tonewoods and the ecosystems that yield them for harvest.

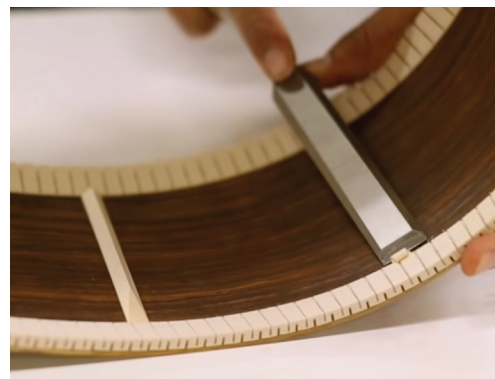
Each phrase flows by so effortlessly that it might be easy to miss the depth of Richard’s commitment to excellence, resilience, community, and sustainability that has made Santa Cruz Guitar Company an industry leader from the beginning.

### THE SECRETS OF THE OLD MASTERS

Richard gives his mother credit for turning him on to violin building techniques early in his career. There wasn’t much information that he could find about the construction of steel-string guitars in 1966, “but my mom was a rock-star reference librarian, and decided to help me find the information – but it turns out there were only books on violin and nylon-string guitar building,” Richard recalled.



*The dovetail joint is a crucial element in SGGC design.*



*Chiseling a beveled edge on a brace.*

"I read everything I could on the violin: anecdotal stories, techniques, everything. It didn't give away the secrets of the 'School of Amati,' so to speak. The whole history of lutherie is fraught with secrecy. I noticed that every few years they would come up with a new answer to The Big Secret: that it was the wood they used came from The Ice Age, or that they used the white part of the chicken poop in the finish to make the instrument sound good," he continued.

"Violins were made to have super high-fidelity, and to be able to project all the way to the back of a concert hall – acoustically – and it's a tiny little thing! The idea [of lutherie] is to be able to produce this kind of fidelity, consistently."

The definition of fidelity, according to Merriam Webster, relates to the accurate reproduction of details; high-fidelity in audio refers to the faithful reproduction of sonic details. The builder's quest, then, is to create a tool, an instrument, used to generate tone with sustained resonance. Violin builders have faithfully built instruments based on the dimensions of exemplary instruments from the likes of Amati or Stradivari most fully-expressing this capacity of wood in a singular instrument.

"If you take random frequencies and those vibrational wavelengths conflict, then there will be no sustain or overtones," Richard notes. He explains that if you were to take five random notes on a piano, "it's kind of a crap shoot. If you throw rocks at a piano you'll hit a chord every once in a while. Resonance and sustain are quantities, not qualities, of wood. We've taken all the poking, prying, scratching, and intuition about what happens when we pay attention to coordinated frequencies, and the result is harmony: sustain and a rich complexity of overtones that develop."

"If you build repeatedly with the same designs, you think you would get the same tone with consistency," but it doesn't quite work out that way, Richard said. "Here's the real secret of those masters: wood isn't metal; it's not homogeneous. So when you make 10 pieces out of the same board, they are each going to ring at different frequencies. Yet something like 98 percent of all guitars are made on a dimensional formula," he continued. "When you built violins, you tuned them. By doing so we can make a guitar sound excellent every time."

He makes it sound simple, but this process is thick in scientific, intuitive, and hands-on expertise. Machines tap each piece of wood five times and record the average of the frequencies these tap-tests produce. The pieces are also weighed and photographed for further analysis. "This shows us how to work the wood – how to dimension it to please a particular player, or fit a style, consistently," Richard explained.

## DISASTER AT THE DOOR

As if this kind of guitar building isn't challenging enough, Mother Nature hasn't made it easier for the SGCG crew. "Both my business and where I live have been in federal disaster areas dozens of times. This year we've had three shutdowns because of flooding. We went through mandated Covid shutdowns. Last year we had forest-fire evacuations. The earthquake shutdowns are my favorite – you don't know they are coming. Everything else gives you time to see it coming" Richard chuckled.

"So, we are in practice. We have a serious safety program," Richard continued. "We have a monthly safety meeting for all staff. We are periodically providing crisis response education about things like 'how to use a fire extinguisher' or 'what to do when the lights go out,' not only here, but in our homes and communities, too – because it's about pulling together."

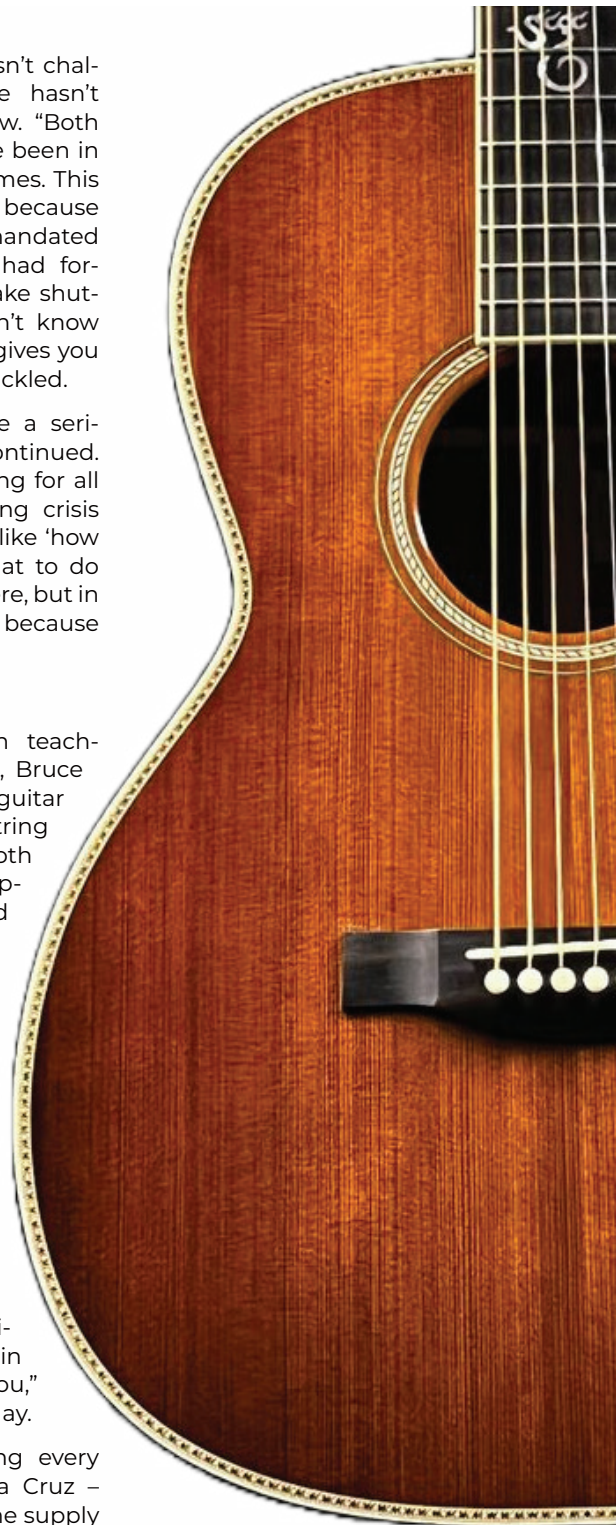
## PULLING TOGETHER

Richard says he had two main teachers when he was getting started, Bruce McGuire, an amateur classical guitar builder, and Jim McGuire, a steel-string builder in the Martin tradition. "Both Bruce and Jim were extremely helpful when I was starting out," Richard said. He told Fretboard Journal in December 2008 that "Bruce introduced me to the basic techniques of guitar building, and Jim showed me how to refine what I was doing and helped me learn to do things like make dovetail neck joints. I owe both men a lot and I'm extremely grateful they took the time to show me what they did."

"When I asked my two most important mentors what I could do to give back, they both said variations of: you can give it to others in the same spirit that I gave it to you," Richard told the Breakdown this May.

This ethos is the lens influencing every stage of guitar building at Santa Cruz – and extending all the way down the supply chain. In the early days of Santa Cruz, Richard went himself to the exotic places where woods like koa, ebony, and rosewood grow, in search of wood that could be used responsibly. "We had to develop the network, and that's a place we've influenced the industry," he said.

Now, Richard is dealing with third-generation families who understand the various ways great wood can be harvested. In some cases these families are working windfalls, lightning strikes, or dead standing trees. They might be reclaiming wood from underwater, or old, neglected inventories, like the Brazilian rosewood he recently



*A custom 000 with reclaimed Redwood beams that once supported Southern Pacific Railroad tunnels in Oregon.*

scored from an outbuilding behind an old Pennsylvania cathedral. Old stumps have been supplying his shop with excellent wood lately, as well. "Before chainsaws, when you could take a tree down all the way to the ground, they were cut down by a team of two people on either end of a saw, so the huge stumps they left behind are 4 to 4 1/2 feet tall. That can be reclaimed, most importantly, without financing the bad guys behind poaching and deforestation," Richard said.

*cont'd on page 18 →*

# A GROWING FAMILY

## THE INDEPENDENT LUTHIERS FROM SANTA CRUZ GUITARS

As part of the Santa Cruz Guitar Company's commitment to elevating the craft of steel-string guitar building, several builders today once had a workbench in Richard Hoover's shop, with an agreement that the day would come when they would strike out on their own. Here are some of the luthiers from this Santa Cruz lineage.



### DAN ROBERTS, DANIEL ROBERTS STRINGWORKS

Before he started building musical instruments, Dan was a tree faller, timber scaler, and molder planer in the timber industry, which gave him valuable experience in every aspect of woodworking – from felling trees, scaling timber, doing millwork, and drying wood. After helping the Flatiron Mandolin and Banjo Company go from a small business to the big time, he made the jump to Santa Cruz. Some 17 years later, he struck out on his own in Montana as Daniel Roberts Stringworks.



### MICHAEL HORNICK, SHANTI GUITARS

Michael, now retired, was Santa Cruz's first employee. He picked up the craft of lutherie quickly, and went on to found Shanti Guitars in Avery a few years later. He built unique guitars by himself, one at a time. He liked to think of his work as "functional art." For a quarter century, his guitars were the grand prize of the Telluride Bluegrass Festival troubadour contest. He also for many years hosted instrument building classes for attendees of the RockyGrass Academy, a week-long summer music camp hosted by Planet Bluegrass in Lyons, Colo., where for many years he was joined by Dan Roberts.



### JEFF TRAUGOTT, TRAUGOTT GUITARS

In his 2011 TEDxSantaCruz talk Jeff said, "I see my craft as a journey though time ... My craft takes me into vibration, through sound, and explores the intimacy of culture." Jeff practices his trade as a one-man shop in an old industrial building in Santa Cruz. Since he first opened his doors in 1991, he's been crafting guitars one at a time, which allows him "to give his full attention to the guitar and to the musician for whom he is building." While building about 12 guitars a year, he's also built a devoted following.



### BILL HARDIN, BEAR CREEK GUITARS

Bill was turned-on at an early age to the Weisenborn guitar by Don Young, the co-founder of National Resophonic Guitars. He learned the craft of guitar building, however, at OMI Dobro and SCGC. Bill told music journalist Andy Volk in 2007 that his time at Santa Cruz was akin to earning a master's in guitar building. "I was there five years and saw a really interesting time at SCGC. When I started there, there were five of us building guitars. The theory was for each person to try to build one guitar a week." He took what he learned at Santa Cruz and founded Bear Creek Guitars in 1995 in Hilo, Hawaii, before moving the company to California.



### ROY MCALISTER, MCALISTER GUITARS

Roy's bench at SCGC came to the shop in the early 1990s from his previous gig at a nearby woodworking business; when he left to start McAllister Guitars in Watsonville, the bench went with him. Since then, his guitars have built a global reputation, but that didn't change his practical approach to building. The same simple bench went with him when he moved his shop to Washington state, complete with the same "ridiculous piece of pipe some plumber in Santa Cruz had on the back of his truck" that he'd been bending sides on since his Santa Cruz days. "That's just kind of how my mentality works," Roy told Jason Verlinde for Fretboard Journal in 2012. Roy has posted to Instagram in recent months that he is battling kidney cancer and resorting to selling his personal guitar inventory to help cover medical costs.



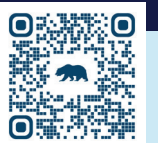
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*Photos: Gazebo jamming, by Robin Frenette (L), Concert at the Windmill, by David Cupp (R)*

# FROM NASHVILLE TO THE MISSION

## Q&A WITH LUTHIER BRANDON GODMAN

By Dave Berry for The Bluegrass Breakdown

*When the topic of Bluegrass fiddles in California comes up in conversation, you're likely to hear the name Brandon Godman within the first two minutes. Brandon, a transplant from Kentucky to San Francisco, is not only a sought-after musician, but also the proprietor of two distinguished music stores focused on violins and fiddles. We asked Dave Berry to learn more.*

**Hi Brandon. Let's start by telling us what qualities make for a good luthier.**

First and foremost would be a genuine interest in instruments and bows. Beyond that would be a discerning eye, good coordination, and a desire to constantly be improving. Lastly, I should add empathy. You have to be able to listen to the player and listen to the instrument to understand them, and know how to best be of service.

**You own both The Violin Shop in Nashville and The Fiddle Mercantile in San Francisco. How did that come about?**

My predicament is that I moved to San Francisco to expand my career in the violin trade and wound up finding the city that I love to call home, so I started a business here. Then, around 6 years after I'd left The Violin Shop in Nashville, the opportunity arose for me to acquire it. I love The Violin Shop and believe in it very strongly. It's a fiddle institution and has been a trusted resource for players all over the country for over 35 years now. So I am making it work, and am finding that the two locations work quite well with each other, as the markets are quite different.

**What are some of the most dramatic repair jobs you have encountered?**

I've encountered instruments in some pretty incredible states of disrepair – everything from having holes in them, being smashed by cars, being stuck in floods, being exposed to extreme heat, etc. Essentially, anything can be restored if it's worth it. It's pretty incredible to see what some of these instruments



have been through over the last 100, 200, 300, and 400 years.

**What are the top-three go-to tools of your trade?**

My ears, my eyes, and good lighting.

**What are some first tasks a trainee might take on in your shop?**

Generally, if you're training to work on instruments or bows, it's basic tool skills. Often, those tool skills start with learning how to sharpen, but it really all depends on the avenue of training one is taking. Schools are very organized with their training and have a structured way of teaching. If you're doing an official apprenticeship then there is probably also some organization to this. If you're just starting to work at a shop and learning through the various jobs that are thrown your way, then sometimes training can be fairly unorganized. It requires a lot of self-motivation to fill in the holes of your knowledge and seek the skills needed wherever you can find them.

**Is it easier or harder to make a living as a luthier than a musician?**

I guess it depends on the kind of living you want to do. Both require equal amounts of work, hustle, and talent, and both have the potential for great rewards. From my perspective, a large portion of my compensation is being able to do what I love each and every day. I honestly don't know what else I would do in life. Luckily I'm able to make enough to eat and keep a roof over my head.

**Do you ever plan on building instruments?**

I would love to make an instrument and bow someday, primarily to better understand the approaches to making. Understanding this lends a great hand when trying to identify who made an instrument, where, when, and how.

**What should one look for in their first or trade-up second instrument?**

Setup, setup, setup! Playability and proper setup are absolutely paramount at any level, but especially when starting off. You don't want your instrument to hold you back, right? Get your instrument from someone who knows how to set up and maintain it, and will stand behind the instrument to keep it performing at its best. From there, use your personal taste in tone and playability to guide you as you become more familiar with what you want. If you don't feel you know the answer to this, then rely on someone who you trust like a teacher, mentor, or musician friend for guidance. Did I say "setup?"

**What do you tell people when they ask the difference between a violin and a fiddle?**

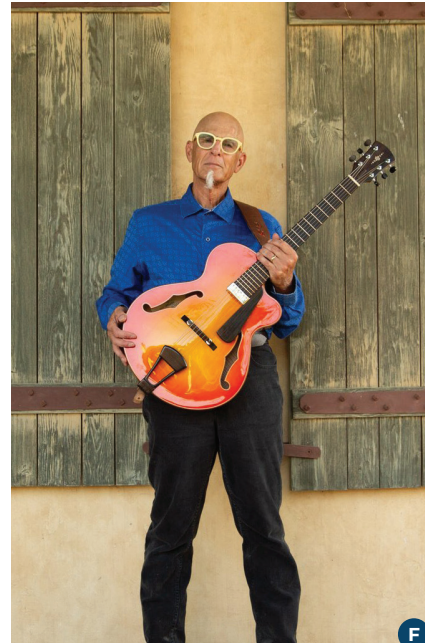
My childhood answer was "same as a nickel and five cents." My mentor's answer was "\$50/hour." Years ago we did a Facebook poll at The Violin Shop to get people's best answers. My favorite response from that was simply "Charlie Daniels."

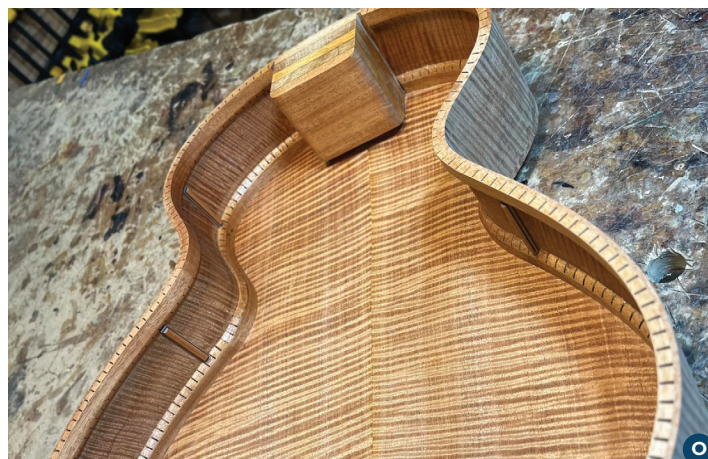


Brandon Godman with Laurie Lewis and The Right Hands at The Otter Opry. Photo by Robin Frenette.



Brandon examines a fiddle at 2022 Fathers Day Festival. Photo by Patrick Campbell.





## A Few of Our Favorite Things

Right page: **A)** Brandon Godman with two 1924 Guarneri-model violins by E.H. Roth. Photo courtesy of Brandon Godman. **B)** Bruce Sexauer's pernambuco on pernambuco guitar. Photo courtesy of Bruce Sexauer. **C)** Detail of Deering's Sierra five-string resonator banjo. Photo courtesy of Deering Banjo Company. **D)** Gary Vessels' homage to the early Gibson A3. Photo courtesy of Gary Vessel. **E)** Gary Lewandowski's River F Series mandolin back. Photo courtesy of Gary Lewandowski. **F)** Artist Dorian Michael with his archtop guitar from Maegan Wells. Photo courtesy of Dorian Michael. **G)** Andrew Carruthers' "Turtle Fiddle." Photo courtesy of Andrew Carruthers. **H)** Michael Lewis' "Wingfeather" mandolin. Photo courtesy of Michael Lewis. **I)** Colin Vance open-back banjo with turned dowel. Photo courtesy of Colin Vance. **J)** and **K)** Mother and daughter team Kathy and Jimmi Wingert; headstock and fretboard inlay by Jimmi, and build with smooth beveled edge by Kathy. Photos courtesy of Kathy Wengert. **L)** David Dart's custom Honduras rosewood/Sitka spruce OM guitar. Photo courtesy of David Dart.

Left page: **M)** Lewandowski mandolin headstocks and a lot of clamps. Photo courtesy of Gary Lewandowski. **N)** David Dart at work on an octave mandolin. Photo courtesy of David Dart. **O)** Detail of flame maple inside a Maegan Wells archtop guitar on the workbench. Photo courtesy of Maegan Wells. **P)** Ben Wilborn's "Lionface" guitar. Photo courtesy of Ben Wilborn. **Q)** Ben Wilborn's take on a "dreadnot" guitar, the "Warhorse." Photo courtesy of Ben Wilborn. **R)** A young banjo builder at the Black Banjo Reclamation Project's 2022 Chicago build. Photo courtesy of Black Banjo Reclamation Project. **S)** A finger plane rests on the inside of a fiddle top plate during a bass-bar restoration at Brandon Godman's bench. Photo courtesy of Brandon Godman.



# DEERING BANJO COMPANY

A CALIFORNIA SUCCESS STORY OF CRAFTSMANSHIP AND ACCESSIBILITY

By Derek Halsey for The Bluegrass Breakdown. Photos courtesy of Deering Banjo Company.

The 48-year history of the Deering Banjo Company is an excellent example of American entrepreneurship combined with a love of music.

Greg and Janet Deering started their banjo family-named business in 1975, one year after they married; the company continued growing after its successful launch. The popular combination of quality instrument making – and the desire to work with select musicians contributing their own ideas about design – led to the business moving into an 18,000 square foot manufacturing facility in 2001. Now, almost a half of a century later, the Deering Banjo Company employs more than 45 people building 90-plus products.

A young Greg Deering came to love the banjo during the folk-music boom of the early 1960s. It was the music of the Kingston Trio that made Deering fall in love with the instrument, and he had acquired a used banjo by the time he was 13.

Deering also was fascinated by his father's hobby of building model airplanes by hand, and, by the age of three, was given a set of woodworking tools as a gift.

The future Janet Deering learned to sew at an early age, and brought that talent

to the table along with a desire to build a business. Considering that Greg and Janet started their new enterprise just one year after their nuptials suggests that they were ready to give it a try as a team, an important mindset for young entrepreneurs.

My career as a music journalist began in 2001 with an article about the death of the great musician John Hartford. The Deerings loved John Hartford as well, which drew me to them to discuss our shared experiences with the legendary musician. They got to work closely with him when creating the landmark John Hartford Deering Banjo model. Other than being known for its great sound, with its grenadilla tone ring and other features, the Hartford model is also known for its wonderful “riverboat style scrolls inlaid in the neck.”

Over the years, the Deering Banjo Company has been affiliated with upwards of 50 musicians who have chosen the brand on an official basis. As for their Artist Series banjos, those have come about by working closely with artists such as Tony Trischka, Jens Kruger, Winston Marshall, David Holt, Terry Baucom, and the aforementioned John Hartford. The brand also builds six-string banjos, four-string banjos, banjo ukes, tenor banjos, and several open-backed

banjo models incorporating various kinds of tone rings, including the “clawgrass” and tubaphone banjos, and more.

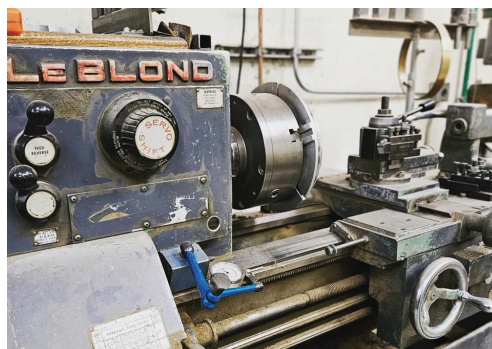
In 2014, the Deering Banjo Company was given the prestigious International Bluegrass Music Association's Distinguished Achievement Award. In 2019, an important event happened at the Deering Banjo Company when Greg and Janet's daughter Jamie took the helm as the new CEO.

While growing up in the middle of a family business, Jamie was given jobs to do within the company so she could learn about the banjo building process and, as well, learn about the many aspects of running an organization. Apparently, though, there was no hard pressure for her to take over the reins of the company. In what may have been a smart move, looking back, Jamie pursued life in the arts, acting and directing in the theater world. A few years into it, however, she turned her eyes back home.

“I started working full time at the factory, and I took courses in management and communication skills, but I learned mostly from actually doing the work, as there are a lot of things that you will never learn in college unless you get out there and do it,” said Jamie. “During most of my life,



The young Deering family in the shop.



Deering's 1960s LeBlond lathe.



Janet, Jamie, and Greg Deering.



Goodtime banjo headstocks awaiting next steps.



Rolled, shaped, and prepped banjo tension hoops and tone rings.

I'd help the company by going to festivals and doing sales, I'd work on the production side during the summer, and all of that added up to a foundation for me after I got out of school. Around 2019 or so, it came around to where a lot of my acquired skill sets were needed in the person serving as CEO. And, my mom was ready to not have to deal with all of those stresses, so it was a great time to make the shift."

Becoming the CEO of Deering Banjo Company in 2019 meant a sudden trial by fire as the pandemic and its resultant lockdown would hit in early 2020. At one point, the company had to lay off virtually all of its employees. But, one of the few positive things to come out of the pandemic was folks around the country and the world either returning to playing music, or using their forced downtime to learn how to play a new instrument. Within six weeks of the layoffs, Deering had brought back all of its employees.

Aware that companies created and built by families often go out of business by the time the second or third generation takes over, Jamie Deering set out to make a corporate decision of her own to prove her mettle.

"That happened when we bought the ProPik finger-pick brand," Jamie said. "The gentleman who was always selling ProPik finger picks was David Guptill, but eventually he got to retirement age and wasn't answering communications anymore. By 2019, word got out in the banjo world that the sale of their finger picks was going to end. Everyone thought Guptill was the owner of the company, but actually it was Jim and Diane Mapson who were the

founders and makers of ProPik here in Orange County."

"After an article was written about the picks, Jim got a hold of us," Jamie continued. "Jim runs Mapson Engineering and the making of finger picks on the side was a passion project for him after taking banjo lessons in the early 1980s. We went to visit Jim and Diane, and we hit it off great, as the way we run our companies is so similar, hands-on and not automated. So, by March of 2020, we finalized buying the ProPik brand."

Trends come and go for businesses like the Deering Banjo Company, and right now the open-back banjos are far outselling the resonator banjos used in the bluegrass world.

"Our current internal focus is efficiency, especially as technology keeps improving, because a lot of our tooling has been steady and strong for 20 years – yet it's time to step it up a little bit," Jamie said. "Externally, we are focusing on making the banjo accessible for everybody. The idea to create the Goodtime banjo in the first place goes back to when my Dad was 13 and couldn't afford a good, playable banjo. So, he wanted to make something that would be a great instrument for everyone to learn on. And, we have taken that concept even further by creating educational material that will have you playing a song pretty quickly. Sometimes, just being able to strum a banjo and hum a tune on the front porch is just the magic that someone is looking for."



Deering "Calico" Five-String Banjo.



Deering's Charles "Chuck" Neitzel, a master of detail.



Finishing off a banjo bridge.

*Sometimes, just being able to strum a banjo and hum a tune on the front porch is just the magic that someone is looking for.*

*– Jamie Deering*



# GARY VESSEL'S TIPS TO HELP YOU PULL OPTIMAL TONE FROM YOUR FIDDLE



Gary Vessel. Photo by Patrick Campbell.

By The Bluegrass Breakdown

One instrument in the stringband where luthier Gary Vessel sees players making bigger demands of them is the fiddle. "It used to be that fiddlers took pride in digging an old fiddle out of the garbage and making it playable. But now, they are starting to understand that 'maybe I should spend more money getting something that is truly giving back to me,'" Gary said.

Gary also said that being both a musician and a sought-after luthier has given him the chance to do a lot of listening and bring that to his bench. "Being around great players from classical and jazz – there is so much more color to what they're doing. You want something that gives you those qualities," he said.

But once you've got the instrument, don't stop there, Gary advises. "Setup and string choice is incredibly important." When noted that fiddlers may have unorthodox

setups, like a flatter-than-normal bridge, Gary cringes. "That's a great way to destroy your articulation," he says.

The quality of strings available to fiddlers today also gives them more control of their sound. "It used to be that fiddlers used Red Labels, then Preludes came out. They still aren't very giving," he said. "Helicore are fabulous – I have several classical players that use Helicore G strings because they are so luscious. You have to change [these kinds of strings] more frequently, and they are more expensive," Gary continued, "but the tonal palette is huge."

To understand what's possible, Gary recommends visiting a high-end violin shop. "Go play some \$10 million fiddles and get an idea why people spend their entire lives trying to own one," he said. "Until you have one under your chin, you have no idea."



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# ANDREW CARRUTHERS IS MAKING WAVES

By The Bluegrass Breakdown. Photos courtesy of Andrew Carruthers.

Violin builder Andrew Carruthers once said that carving the backs and tops of violins is an especially demanding, both physically demanding and mentally.

Any builder is seeking to balance three elements, he told Strings magazine in 2019: the structural integrity, tonal aspirations, and aesthetic appeal of an instrument. "Carving the plates is a puzzle

to solve and, since there is no single right answer, it is an endlessly engaging problem," he wrote on his website.

Now in the "mature" stage of his career, he's raising the bar on the aesthetic appeal of his instruments – with some inspiration from nature.

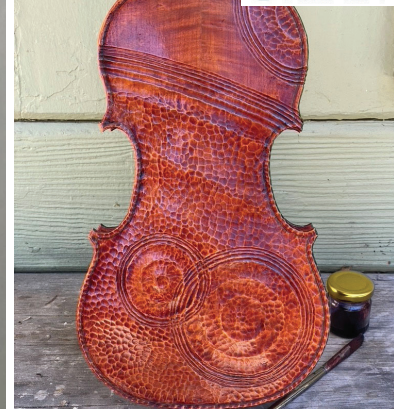
"The Ripple Fiddle" is a prototype to explore with the incorporation of waves into the form

of the fiddle, in addition to waves that ripple through the instrument when it's played.

Andrew decided to incorporate surface waves in the wood – like we see in water, and similar to radiating sound waves in air. The wooden ripples can actually be used to create percussive sounds on the instrument.



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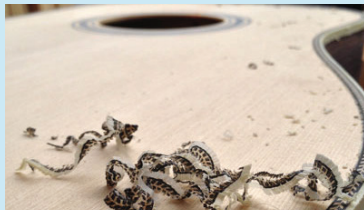
If you're inspired to grab a chisel and wood and start making your own instrument, you'll be glad to know that there are several places in California where you can get started.

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Scenes from classes at Woodcraft. Photos by SIMSCal

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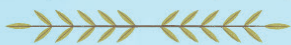
Learn more about the CBA Kids Instrument Lending Library!



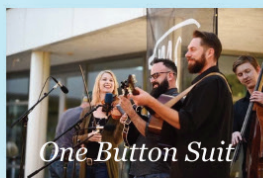
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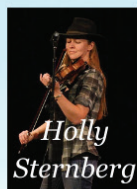
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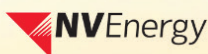
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Kenny Feinstein leads a tune at Miraleste Intermediate School. Photo by Donna Hargis.

## BLUEGRASS IN SOCIAL SCHOOLS LOCAL GRASSERS VISIT MIRALESTE BLUEGRASS CLUB

By Donna Hargis, CBA Regional Director, L.A. and Orange County

On Wednesday, April 19, Kenny Feinstein and Tommy Drinkard from the band Water Tower visited Miraleste Intermediate School to visit Ms. Donna Hargis and The Miraleste Bluegrass Club.

After playing a few songs to Ms. Hargis's science students, the bell rang. Science students ran out, and the kids from the bluegrass club started filing in, along with another teacher, Mr. Ihde, and his mandolin. The kids, Oliver, Doviell, Matthew, Reagan, Joel, and Allie, practiced jamming with the adults, then took their circle out to the lawn at lunchtime. This was not a "concert," as much a chance to see a jam – and the reception was very positive. The group played "Boil the Cabbage Down" and "The Crawdad Song," as well as Water Tower originals such as "AM PM."

Many of the kids had never heard bluegrass before, but a few said the music reminded them of Frontierland at Disneyland. When the bell rang, calling for a return to class, the two men and the bluegrass club had a pizza party and an introductory lesson

about bluegrass. Then Kenny Feinstein taught a fiddle workshop and Tommy taught a banjo workshop.

Water Tower shared some stickers with the young pickers, and everyone was happy to make some new connections. The kids were looking forward to seeing these familiar friendly faces at the Topanga Banjo Fiddle Contest and Folk Festival in late May.

The instruments the students were playing were supplied by the CBA Kids Instrument Lending Library. The funds to pay the musicians to teach the workshops came from an IBMA grant awarded to Donna Hargis for this purpose.

It was a beautiful day of bluegrass inspiration!



Water Tower at Bluegrass Club.



Lunchtime on the lawn with Water Tower and the Miraleste Bluegrass Club (left), Tommy Drinkard and banjo students (bottom left). Photos courtesy of Donna Hargis.

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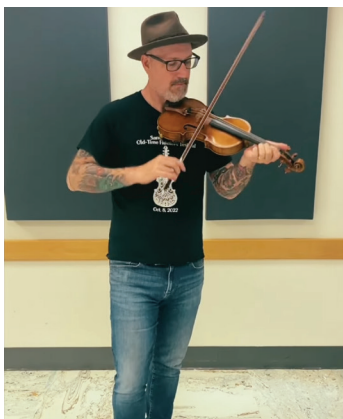
# BIG HOEDOWN

## OLD-TIME FIDDLER TESTS A STRADIVARIUS

By Gina Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Art Director

As one of the many endeavors of Los Angeles musician, recording engineer, and community organizer, David Bragger teaches ethnomusicology and directs the old-time stringband ensemble at UCLA's Herb Alpert School of Music. Recently, he was comparing fiddle bows with one of his students who asked if he would like to try the violin that went with it. When David accepted and tried out the instrument, he said he immediately noticed that the bridge was more arched than he prefers, and politely returned the instrument. His student then told him this particular instrument was the 1732 "Duke of Alcantara" Stradivarius, believed to have been owned by Napoleon Bonaparte. Orchestra students at UCLA go through rigorous auditions to have the great privilege of taking care of and performing on the instrument. Of course, David's first response was to ask if he could play on it again, playing Edden Hammons' "Big Hoedown."

The story reminded us of the time that North Carolina



David Bragger plays the 1732 "Duke of Alcantara" Stradivarius violin.

old-time fiddler Tommy Jarrell visited the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., with filmmaker Les Blank, and was handed a Stradivarius built in 1699. He played a bit of "Cotton Eyed Joe," and quickly gave it back. He wouldn't trade his fiddle for it: "I gave \$10 for that fiddle in 1915, and I wouldn't take \$10,000 for it. I'm used to it and play on it better than anybody else's," Most everyone who knew Tommy and his fiddle remembers that it was very difficult to play, but he could certainly wrestle out a great sound from it.



Check out David Bragger's "Big Hoedown" on the "Duke of Alcantara" →

## SANTA CRUZ

cont'd from page 7

### INFLUENCE BY ATTRACTION

When asked how he makes the company's knowledge and expertise available to other builders in the guitar community, Richard put it simply: "I practice the law of attraction." He told Fretboard Journal back in December 2008 that "my ultimate legacy will be the builders who came through my shop, learned to build guitars under my direction, and have gone on to carry on the tradition." At that time, there were already four builders learning their craft in the Santa Cruz tradition. The deep knowledge base they've developed over nearly five decades is available to anyone willing to use it. More have followed Richard's path, in spite of its inherent challenges.

"It's not efficient, and it's time consuming. That's why we don't have to keep it a secret – because it's really hard to make a living at it! I like to talk about it because I'd like to see guitars as a whole improve," Richard said.

There was perhaps no better sign of the Santa Cruz Guitar Company's influence on steel-string guitar building than a lunch conversation later retold between Chris Martin, the Martin Guitar Company's chairman, and a friend of Richard's. Richard said that when asked what the "biggest threat" to his business was – Imports? Upstarts? – Mr. Martin said unequivocally: "No, it's the Santa Cruz Guitar Company. They have players making demands of us they never have before."

Thanks to the vision and dedication of Richard, his team at Santa Cruz, and the luthiers practicing what one might think of as a "new tradition of steel-string guitar building," born right here in California, there will be guitars to meet those demands for generations of players ready to fall in love with music over, and over, and over.



Inspecting the finish on a guitar in progress.

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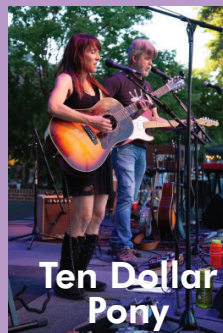
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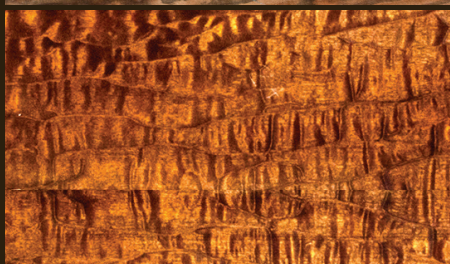
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Wood from the collections of California luthiers.  
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Black & White Ebony - Kathy Wingert  
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Quilted "The Tree" Mahogany - Harvey Leach  
Pernambuco - Bruce Sexauer

## Luthier Issue

BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN  
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## Monthly Trivia Quiz

By Bert Daniel, Breakdown Contributor

In May, we asked for the name of the California bluegrass musician who recorded background music on his chief instrument for a popular long running TV series, but did not record the theme song.

Richard Brooks, Dennis Fetchet, Dave Gooding, past-winner Jim Lappin, Mikki Larrick, Jackie Lester, Dave Megram, Paul Shelasky, and Del Williams all identified our answer: **Don Parmley, the banjo player perhaps best-known for his work with the Bluegrass Cardinals. Earl Scruggs played the theme song for "The Beverly Hillbillies" – the referenced long-running television series.** Dave Megram added: "As I recall, Don had a day job as a bus driver for Continental Trailways, and did recording session work on his days off. He lived in L.A. at the time. I was acquainted with Don when I lived in Southern California. He was one heck of a good banjo player, and a very nice fellow."

We generated a random number by dividing the measures in Bill Monroe's tune "Jerusalem Ridge" by the current CBA membership total to determine **Dennis Fetchet is the CBA member who wins this month's prize of a Paige banjo or guitar capo.**

But wait, there's more! **Louis Kaplin** threw us this ringer: "Dennis Caplinger, who contributed music to the long running TV show, "The Simpsons," and did not play on the theme song." We had to research this, but sure enough, Dennis Caplinger was a grammy-winning bluegrass virtuoso multi-instrumentalist from Vista. And indeed, we confirmed that Dennis contributed banjo tracks to the Simpsons – which certainly qualifies as a long-running TV series, as well as the soundtrack album "The Simpsons: Testify." So, we decided that Louis is also a winner of a Paige capo this month.

## JULY TRIVIA CHALLENGE

In observance of our luthier issue, our question for July is: "Who recorded with Bill Monroe and made Sonny Osborne's banjo?"

Send answers to:  
[trivia@californiabluegrass.net](mailto:trivia@californiabluegrass.net)  
no later than July 31.

This month's prize is a shiny new set of D'Addario strings. Only CBA members are eligible to win; if there is more than one correct response, the prize winner will be selected by random drawing. The winner will be announced in the September Bluegrass Breakdown.