

# THE WORK OF ART

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Don Graves carves dulcimer head. Photo by Rita Reed.

One of the most integral art forms central to musical expression is the visual and aural art of luthiery—a term which refers to the intricate craft, repair and restoration of stringed instruments. In May 2007, the Missouri Arts Council in partnership with the Missouri Folk Arts Program opens a traveling exhibition entitled *Work is Art and Art is Work: The Art of Hand-crafted Instruments*, an *American Masterpieces* project funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. *American Masterpieces* is the Endowment's coordinated effort to present "acknowledged masterpieces selected from a wide variety of art forms" in all fifty states. With assistance from *ExhibitsUSA*, seven venues in rural Missouri will host the exhibition and coordinate illuminating performances and school programs. The West Plains Council on the Arts will kick off the exhibit tour on May 11, 2007, as a central feature of its 13th Annual Old Time Music and Ozark Heritage Festival.

In the exhibit, we celebrate the work of six Missouri luthiers, all of whom have participated in Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program: Bernard Allen, Naylor, Mo. (fiddle); Don Graves, Lebanon, Mo. ("walking cane" dulcimer); Luther Medley, Poplar Bluff, Mo. ("doghouse" bass); Geoffrey Seitz, St. Louis, Mo. (violin); Gregory Krone, New Haven, Mo. (viola); and John Wynn, Ozark, Mo. (mandolin). All are accomplished musicians, passionate about their music and the painstaking work of building stringed instruments. We were honored that each artist graciously loaned an instrument for the exhibit, as well as his time and skills to the project, demonstrating for hours for our photographer Rita Reed. Thus, the exhibit will not only focus on the beauty of the individual instruments but also reveal the artistic process in twenty-four high quality candid photographs.

Our title *Work is Art and Art is Work* is borrowed from a business card (discovered in our archives as we researched the project) of long-time, but now-deceased, luthier Cope Ashlock who operated The Violin Shop on Broadway in downtown Columbia. His motto, "where work is art and art is work," aptly describes the dominant theme of the exhibit—building instruments by hand is an art, and creating art requires skill, precision and lots of hard work. Mandolin maker John Wynn told me "putting together a mandolin from a kit is not instrument making; it's assembly. I make every part and decorative feature of my mandolins from beginning to end. I take pride in the quality of my work."

Each of our luthiers learned through a combination of methods, from formal instruction and apprenticeship, to books and good old-fashioned trial and error. Most had at least some woodworking or "tinkering" skills in their backgrounds. All begin their work with carefully chosen pieces of wood to create a functional piece of art. Through cutting, measuring, shaving, shaping, bending, tuning, smoothing and finishing work, these artists turn simple wooden boards into intricate instruments that are pleasing to the eye—and to the ear, for a truly fine instrument must also produce beautiful sounds.

## **The Work**

Luthiery techniques are almost as diverse as the people who make them. Violin luthiers Geoff Seitz, Greg Krone and Bernard Allen build their instruments almost entirely with hand tools, utilizing chisels, gouges, planes, finger planes, knives, saws and scrapers. It is not unusual for American violinmakers today, whether creating instruments for classical or traditional musicians, to use European patterns of old masters like Stradivarius and Guarneri. These patterns are widely available in books. For Krone, trained both by Seitz and at the Violin Making School of America in Salt Lake City, the methods of the German classical tradition require precision at every step of creation. Like a sculptor, Krone uses numerous specialized tools to shape and thin the wood. Meticulous measurements are carefully made and followed with exactness. Still, he notes that "every piece of wood is different," so Krone makes minute adjustments with his tools to address the variations in the wood. He is also precise in materials, selecting particular species of maple and spruce native to Europe. Similarly, Bernard Allen is a connoisseur of hand tools. After apprenticing with James Price, a master in traditional Ozark joinery, Allen later applied his love of hand methods to create his fiddles and mandolins. A collector of antique luthiery tools, he also uses his metalworking skills to make tools. And while he adheres to the maple and spruce wood tradition, he chooses species native to the United States such as red, birdseye or fiddleback maples that produce high quality sound and aesthetically pleasing variations in appearance.

Mandolin maker John Wynn's techniques have evolved over a period of forty years. He combines fine handwork with creative uses of woodworking machinery. Early on, he worked by hand. At that time, no special instrument-making tools or supplies were available. Over time, he gradually incorporated more equipment. Like many luthiers today, he utilizes a band saw to cut out the top and bottom of the mandolin's body. To shape the body, instead of hand planes and chisels, Wynn uses an ordinary table saw to shave off layers of wood to create the arching of the instrument which he then perfects. Wynn also differs in his philosophy about measurement. He certainly measures but instead of following precise measurements, he taps with his finger and listens to the wood's tone while shaping the body and the arch, in order to tune the top to a particular pitch. As he "tap tunes," he carefully adjusts the shape and depth of the arch. When the top is tuned to exactly the right note, his arch is complete.

## **The Art**

Working within tradition, luthiers also introduce artistic innovations into their work, setting themselves apart from their peers. Geoff Seitz now creates his own violin patterns and develops his own varnish recipes to finish his instruments. Seitz and John Wynn customize their instruments by adding fine abalone shell inlays or complex carvings. Wynn further distinguishes himself by diverging from maple and spruce woods, the standards set in the 1920s by Gibson mandolins. He often chooses hard woods native to the Ozarks, such as black walnut, and recently started building mandolin tops out of Douglas fir, a wood with striking grain patterns. He has even made a mandolin using sassafras—inspired by a tale he often heard growing up—that sassafras made for the best sounding fiddles.

Luthiers may also vary style to adapt to function. "Luke" Medley started as a fiddle maker but is best known today for his ¾ size doghouse basses. A devoted bluegrass musician, he set out to engineer an affordable bass designed especially for quick finger-picking bluegrass. The body of the bass is made of Baltic birch, known for its high sound output and frequently used in speaker cabinetry. Medley's biggest innovation, however, is the addition of a treble bar, which produces an equal amount of sound across all the strings. Medley's goal is to generate a bigger and acoustically even sound for "thumpin'" the bass.

Style may also express a commitment to tradition and cultural preservation. Don Graves retains a family art of building a dulcimer known in his family as the "walking cane," a tradition that he learned from his father Bill and extends back to Don's great grandfather, John Mowhee. Graves retains the teardrop form of their dulcimers, the fretting pattern, three strings and playing styles intimately connected to an older repertoire of tunes still sung and played in his family. Like his father and great-grandfather before him, Graves uses woods like wild cherry, maples and poplar that are abundant in his area of the Ozarks. His front porch is his workshop; he makes his frets from baling wire; and his most important tool is a simple pocketknife, though he recently introduced an old scroll saw to cut out basic pieces. Still, the same old pocket knife whittles the neck, pegboard and scroll.



Greg Krone examines his work. Photo by Rita Reed.

## **The Art of Work**

As a young woman, Columbian Naoma Powell (now 81 years old) accompanied her father to Cope Ashlock's violin shop on Broadway, bringing along an old, badly battered and broken Italian violin. "My father said that Mr. Ashlock was the only person who could repair it." In the weeks that followed, she returned to the shop and watched as he rebuilt the violin. "It was so hot in his shop, but, oh, he was a real artist." As a poet and ceramicist herself, Powell recognized the creative transformation of simple materials happening before her eyes.

As we watched our own luthiers engage in the "art of work," we too, observed this amazing transformation. We close with a passage from Powell's book of poems and drawings, *The Singing Tree*. She artfully captures the creative spirit that permeates each of the luthiers in our exhibition.

*"Oh, what wood. And what you will soon be!  
He took his chisels, saws, and glue  
And cut and gouged until his task was through.  
The man had shaped a singing violin.  
He trimmed and sanded till the wood was thin,  
And by its careful shaping gave it space for sound;  
There was no finer tone the world around . . ."*