



Les McMasters of Hermiston uses a carving chisel to shape the braces on the back a guitar at his shop Friday, Nov. 30, 2018, in Hermiston.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

The master craftsman

Hermiston man hand-makes string instruments in backyard shop

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East Oregonian

Les McMasters picks up his guitar and strums. Surrounded by bandsaws, tools and hundreds of wooden boards, he begins to sing in a smooth tenor, picking away at the guitar he built in that same room.

In the past 35 years, Les McMasters has honed a musical hobby and some woodworking knowledge into an art form.

In a shop a few feet from his Hermiston home, McMasters spends thousands of hours a year building guitars, dulcimers and mandolins.

The craftsman behind McMasters Guitars has long been interested in music, and has played the guitar since 1958, when he was high school. Around the same time, he began taking all the woodshop classes his high school offered, and parlayed those skills into a career in pattern-making in the U.S. Navy.

Though he did small repairs on his own instruments, the two interests didn't really converge until about 20 years later, when he started trying to teach himself how to build his own instruments.

"I had no previous knowledge," he said. "So I started doing research."

He began designing and building his own instruments, and now makes about four a year to sell to customers.

McMasters spends at least 300 to 400 hours on each guitar he makes, with some of his most challenging projects approaching 2,000 hours.

That time doesn't come cheap.

"My prices start at \$4,000," McMasters said, guessing he spends at least \$1,800 on parts for each instrument. That doesn't include labor, he said.

For McMasters, the time is worth the end result.

"The whole guitar, every part of it, is very tight work," he said. "If you start slacking on anything, the quality is going to slip. To me, that's pretty much unacceptable."

In the back room of his shop, McMasters has a shelf filled with thin pieces of wood, which come from as far away as the rainforests of Brazil and India, and as near as the Blue Mountains. He uses spruce, black



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Guitar maker Les McMasters likes to use a wide variety of woods in the creation of his guitars. The instrument on the left is a Gibson jumbo style guitar with Bolivian rosewood on the back and Sitka spruce on the top. The guitar on the right is a twelve-string lady's fancy guitar in what McMasters has dubbed his "Oregon guitar" with a redwood top from southern Oregon and a back using black walnut from Baker City.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Most guitar manufacturers will put a paper logo inside the body of the guitar in the sound hole. McMasters has always chosen to put his logo on an engraved brass placard.

walnut, bigleaf maples and tamaracks from Oregon and Washington.

"We have some nice trees here in this country," he said. "They're good tone woods, and sound very pretty."

But some of his most striking pieces use woods that have become increasingly difficult to get — a fact McMasters laments. Many of the woods he uses, like Honduran Mahogany and Brazilian Rosewood, are listed in the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) appendix, a list of species that are vulnerable or endangered, and use of them is limited. Others are on the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List, another database of species and their status.

"They're being very specific with what's being shipped out of the country, who's logging and how," he said. "It's OK to protect our resources, but it can get a little overbearing."

Because he's been collecting woods for more than 30 years, McMasters said most of his pieces that are now on those lists did not qualify when he purchased them.

To create the instrument, McMasters puts the piece of wood through a bandsaw, and bookmatches the boards — one by one, the boards will fall off the saw, and he opens them up like a book, so they mirror each other. He then uses hand tools to work on smaller details. He finishes the instrument with tuners and strings that he gets from a few small suppliers around the U.S.

McMasters is currently working on a guitar that he will keep for himself. The instrument, still not quite finished, has a deep brown back, made of Macassar ebony, and a spruce board for the front. A thin border of iridescent abalone seashell surrounds the edge of the guitar, as well as the sound hole. In a nearby tray, there are several abalone letters that McMasters has carefully cut out, which spell out his name.

"When I retire (my old) guitar, I'll start playing that pretty one," he said.

McMasters said while they don't have to be performers, any guitar maker has to have a working knowledge of how to play the instrument.

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