

THE LUTHIER OF RUSSELL LANE

Local cabinetmaker turns his skills to crafting instruments

He will present at Brown Bag lunch on Feb. 13

By Steve Tool
Wallowa County Chieftain

Brian Oliver of Russell Lane in Joseph is arguably the last full-time cabinet maker in Wallowa County. However, the last few years, Oliver has been exploring a new avenue of woodworking: Lutherie. That is, constructing musical instruments. Guitars in this case.

Oliver and his guitars will be the guest performer at the Brown Bag lunch at the Joseph Center at noon Feb. 13. Oliver said that he's a long-time friend of the center's library director, Rich Wandschneider. After attending a Brown Bag that featured local musician Lauren Guthrie's presentation on making her own reeds for her oboes, he heard the center's personnel talk about doing a music related Brown Bag every month.

"Afterward, I went up to Rich and said, 'You know, I could bring a bunch of props and talk about guitar building, and he said, 'Yeah, sure.'"

Oliver, a native of Kansas, moved to the Wallowa Valley 40 years ago after attending graduate school at Oregon State University. He started to play guitar in college, but didn't develop an interest in building an instrument until the last 10 years or so.

He started by building a mandolin from a kit about five years ago. An electric guitar kit followed before Oliver took the plunge into an acoustic. He thought about starting with an acoustic kit but decided to take the full-build route after thorough research.

"The more I thought about it, I realized that I had a lot of woodworking skills, they just weren't guitar specific." He added that lutherie involves much more hand work than cabinetmaking. "It's been a good learning process for me, for example, learning to sharpen chisels and wield them properly."

Oliver said that the first guitar's design is loosely based on an instrument featured in Acoustic Guitar magazine. He said no particular luthier inspired him to start building.

"It's more probably an outgrowth of woodworking and guitar playing experience and getting fascinated by the process," he said.

Oliver wanted to try out his own ideas, particularly not using traditional woods, many of which are tropical hardwoods and severely regulated — and expensive.

"One thing I'm trying to do in my building is use domestic woods rather than tropical," he said.

He noted that the guitar he built has back, sides and neck made from walnut. The top is from vertical grain Douglas fir, an unusual choice, as most guitar tops are made from

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— Brian Oliver

either cedar or spruce.

The instrument has a vintage look along with good note definition and tone. Oliver said the guitar has flaws, but it is the only acoustic he owns. He sold the Martin.

Research and Oliver's own building experience prove that a good guitar can be built from nearly any kind of wood. He buys wood on eBay or at online lutherie-specific sites. He also has several rounds of locally grown Engelmann spruce waiting to dry.

His enjoyment of the first building experience led him to continue the work. Pointing to the semi-completed bodies of two of his latest soon-to-be creations, also from domestic woods, Oliver explained the thinking behind them.

"So far, I've kind of been making my own shapes. 'This time around I'm going to try building two at the same time -- with repeating the processes I can absorb the sequence of events better in my head.'"

The cabinet maker isn't hanging his hat on becoming a full-time luthier when he retires, although he plans to build enough that local organizations may benefit.

"There's a limit to how many guitars I need to have," he said. "I've been thinking about giving some of the guitars I build to local organizations to auction off for charity purposes."

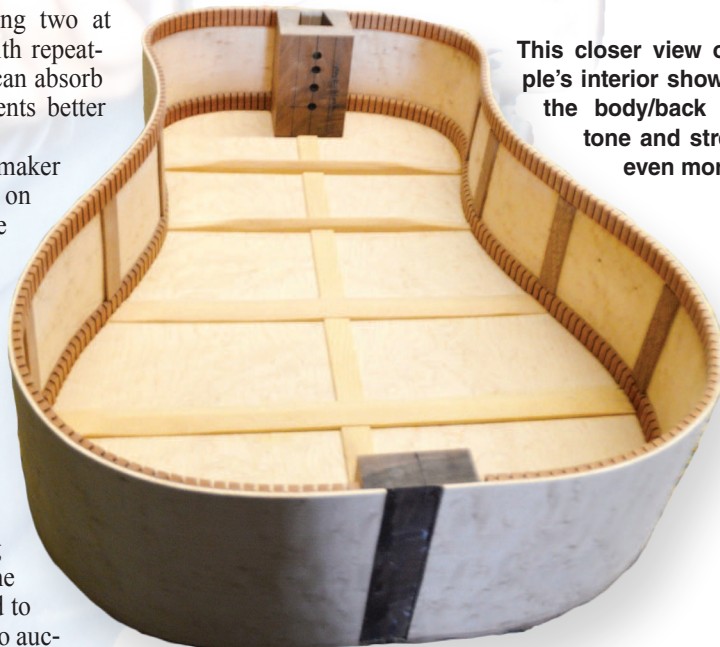
Asked about his future as a professional luthier building custom instruments, Oliver left that open.

"Right now, it's a hobby I'm trying to learn something more about," he said. "It partly depends on whether I get good enough at it. Right now, if somebody wanted me to build them a guitar, I'd have to think about it."



Photos by Steve Tool/Chieftain

Local cabinetmaker and musician Brian Oliver with his newest woodworking creation, an acoustic guitar he made in his workshop. He enjoyed the experience so much, he has plans for at least two more. Oliver is slated to talk about his lutherie experience at the Feb. 13 Brown Bag at the Joseph Center.



This closer view of the bird's eye maple's interior shows how Oliver shaped the body/back bracing to enhance tone and strength. Top bracing is even more complex.

IF YOU GO

Who: Brian Oliver, performing on guitars he made

What: Brown Bag lunch event

Where: Joseph Center

When: Tuesday, Feb. 13, at noon

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Second Quarter 2017-18

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