

Hermiston man hand-crafts guitars

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Staff Writer

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 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



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.



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 styles 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.

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.

occasionally plays other gigs around town, and the two of them perform at some music festivals throughout the year, including the Sacagawea Bluegrass Festival in the Tri-Cities and a Fourth of July festival in Fossil. They played in a country band for five years in Fossil.

McMasters had many careers before he began making guitars.

"I signed up for the U.S. Navy, and my uncles were diesel mechanics," he said. "That's what I wanted to be."

Because of his experience in woodworking as a high school student, he was instead placed in pattern-making, as a precision woodworker. He would make wooden patterns, which would then be sent to the foundry to make sand molds for molten metal.

A native of Garfield, Washington, he served four years in the Navy, including at the Bay of Pigs Invasion in Cuba.

They were capable of reproducing major pieces of equipment — as large as a 30-foot propeller for a ship. But a smaller item that McMasters still has holds special significance, as well. On a table in his shop, he still has the first thing he cast in the Navy — a small layout knife, with a handle fashioned into the shape of a knight's head.

He managed a Les Schwab in Fossil, and moved to Hermiston for the same job in 1977. He left, drove a truck and worked in concrete for a while, before going back to school to be an electrician. After working for several companies, he retired, and continued to work part-time, until he decided there was only one thing he wanted to do.

"Now, I spend all my time out here," he said.



Les McMasters uses a block plainer to shape the braces on the back of a guitar at his shop in Hermiston.

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.

He and his wife Leanna do perform — he on gui-

tar, she on dulcimer and piano, and both singing. They play at the weekly Fiddler's Nights at Avamere, a local retirement home. They have done music ministry for 45 years, at two Hermiston churches. McMasters

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