

Recycled rock and roll

Winthrop woodworker's instruments are throwbacks to earliest country music

BY NATALIE JOHNSON

Johnny Cash called it a Tennessee flat-top box. At its heart, an acoustic guitar is just some strings and a box to resonate their sound.

Drawing on a tradition dating back to the first American country music, Winthrop resident Mel Cooke has spent the past year learning how to make guitars out of real cigar boxes.

He was inspired to begin crafting the unique instruments after learning about them in a Ken Burns documentary about country music.

"People in Appalachia had no money, and they could find old boxes. Some of these are made out of tin cans," he said. "There was no rules on it, it was whatever they could come up with."

That's still true today, Cooke said.

First he started with a kit and Google. He found help and hardware from resources like cigar-boxnation.com — a website bringing together many people with interests similar to Cooke's.

Now he has his own templates and designs each instrument himself. He buys some of the boxes from websites like Etsy, and sources others straight from cigar shops.

The design of the unique instrument starts with the cigar box as inspiration.

"And I'll sit around and just

play with them, with where would I want to put the sound holes, or what type of neck would I want to put with it," he said. "... Some of these boxes are solid wood, some of them are made out of pressed cardboard."

All of Cooke's guitars have three strings, and unlike traditional guitars, have no frets — like a violin, or stand-up bass. They're also tuned to an open G chord and the strings are placed high above the neck, making it ideal to play with glass or metal slide.

Open tunings allow a person to play any major chord the same way — with a single finger depressing, or barring, all six strings between two frets on a standard guitar, or all three strings on Cooke's guitars.

"It's a really good guitar for non-guitar players, which is me," he said. Since learning to make the guitars, he's also learned to play them, he said.

Standard tuning for a six and 12-string guitars is E-A-D-G-B-E, or the key of E.

"If you know how to play guitar, you would pick it up really easily," he said.

The strings are attached to each end of the wooden neck, extending the full length of the guitar at each end of the box.

Cooke said he has dabbled in woodworking for decades, and doesn't consider himself a fine instrument maker. His cigar box



Photo by Natalie Johnson

Mel Cooke, of Winthrop, makes these three-string guitars out of old cigar boxes.

guitars are mostly functional crafts or art pieces. Of the 16 he's finished and put up for sale at Methow Valley Goods in Twisp, some have been bought by musicians and others by people looking for a unique piece of local art for their home.

"It doesn't require a lot of specialty tools; it's mostly hand tools to put them together," he said.

Cooke's finished products are for sale at Valley Goods in Twisp. For more information, go to methowvalleygoods.com/



Photo by Natalie Johnson
The design of the guitars is partly based on the style of the cigar boxes.

ARTS BRIEFS

CASCADIA MUSIC PLANS VIRTUAL HOLIDAY CONCERT

Instrumental and vocal ensembles are polishing their performances of festive music for Cascadia Music's annual holiday concert.

To keep musicians and the community safe, Cascadia has decided to present a virtual concert again this year. The video will be released on Dec. 20 and links will be available on Cascadia's website at www.cascadiamusic.org. The concert will also be broadcast on KTRT, 97.5 FM, "the Root."

Details about the music selections and radio broadcast will be available in early December.

OVOC CHRISTMAS CONCERT ON SATURDAY

The Okanogan Valley Orchestra and Chorus (OVOC) offer their annual Christmas Concert in a live performance at the Omak Performing Arts Center on Saturday (Dec. 11) at 2 p.m. Doors will open at 1:30 p.m.

The orchestra, directed by Matt Brown, will play "A Christmas Festival" and "Sleigh Ride" by Leroy Anderson, and "An Outdoor Overture" by Aaron Copland.

Students from Paschal Sherman will sing "The Okanogan Song." The Waterfall Immersion school students will sing "The Little Drummer Boy" in their

native Salish language.

"Because it's Christmas," arranged by Ed Lojeski, and "Bells of Joy," arranged by Larry Clark and Rae Moses, will be sung by the OVOC chorus. A Gaelic folk song, "Einini," and "Hine Ma Tov," a Hebrew folk song, will also be sung by the OVOC chorus. The chorus is directed by Derek Pulsifer.

Cost at the door is \$12 for adults and \$10 for seniors. Youth 15 years and younger attend free. COVID protocols will be in place. The concert will also be live-streamed. For more information, call (509) 846-4773.

The Omak Twilight Parade will follow at 4:30 p.m. in downtown Omak.

'MIDDLETOWN' AT THE MERC

The Liberty Bell Drama Company (LBDC) production of "Middletown," by playwright Will Eno, opens Wednesday (Dec. 8) with additional performances on Thursday (Dec. 9), Saturday (Dec. 11) and Sunday (Dec. 12) at The Merc Playhouse in Twisp.

"Middletown" explores a small American town, according to a Merc press release: "As a friendship develops between longtime resident John Dodge and new arrival Mary Swanson, the lives of the inhabitants of Middletown intersect in strange and poignant ways in a journey that takes them from the local library to outer space and points

between."

The LBDC is comprised of students from Liberty Bell High School and the Independent Learning Center. Three of the principal roles are filled by seniors: Alex Eslava, who plays John Dodge; Hazel Culp Smith, who plays Mary Swanson; and Sophia Newton, who plays "Librarian," a source of knowledge about the workings of Middletown both past and present.

"Middletown" runs at 7 p.m. on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, and at 2 p.m. on Sunday. Doors open 30 minutes before show time. Tickets are \$5/ students and \$15/adults. Masks required for audience members.

The Winthrop Chamber of Commerce

We would like to thank the following individuals and businesses for their generous donations, making this year's fireworks possible.

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And a Very Special Thank You To This Year's Corporate Sponsor:

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Live music this month

Methow Music Monthly, compiled by local musician George Schneider, is a free compilation of live music events in the valley. Email Schneider at MethowMusicMonthly@gmail.com to be included in the listings. Following are the events listed for December.

- Every Thursday and Friday through Dec. 16, from 6-8 p.m. at the Sun Mountain Lodge dining room, Lynette Westendorf plays solo jazz piano. Dinner reservations required; call 996-2211. Indoor mask requirements in place. No cover charge.
- Every Saturday and Sunday through Dec. 12, from 6-8 p.m. at the Sun Mountain Lodge dining room, Terry Hunt plays solo guitar. Dinner reservations required; call 996-2211. Indoor mask requirements in place. No cover charge.
- Friday, Dec. 10, 7 p.m. at the Twisp River Tap House, local guitarist-singer-songwriter Rich Brisbois performs originals, classic rock and alt-'90s. No cover charge. Indoor mask requirements in effect. www.twisprivertaphouse.com.
- Saturday, Dec. 11, 8 p.m., at the Twisp River Tap House, Rock 'n' Roll Soul performing originals and covers from Blues Travelers to Rusted Roots, Dylan and beyond. No cover charge. Indoor mask requirements in effect. www.twisprivertaphouse.com.

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