

A musical fix that keeps time with the past

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Halifax luthier is a virtuoso at repairing stringed instruments



Halifax Folklore Centre proprietor Tom Dorward restores a parlour guitar in his workshop Friday. (TED PRITCHARD / Staff)

It is a little past 10 on a July morning.

For some men and women in downtown Halifax offices, it means they are calculating the best way to hedge their risk from the European debt crisis.

They are mulling over what the LIBOR scandal means to them.

They are grinding their bicuspid teeth about how to raise money now that Facebook's disastrous debut as a public company has forever altered the IPO market.

Inside a more than 135-year-old Victorian home on Brunswick Street, though, a businessman lacking an email address or cellphone smiles.

Thomas Dorward, who does work that has not really changed since lute-playing minstrels entertained medieval monarchs, is telling the story of the scuffed-up, taped-together guitar sitting on his crowded workbench.

"In the 1940s, people went door to door selling wooden guitars to housewives throughout Nova Scotia," Dorward says. "A guy named Billy Reid sold a lot of them."

I like that image: all these elegant ladies in their crisp dresses strumming the tunes of the day on the strings of wooden guitars lying across their laps.

Just like I like the fact that when someone in Nova Scotia finds one of these old guitars in granny's attic, they often end up at the Halifax Folklore Centre, where new and vintage stringed instruments are bought, sold, fixed and, when the occasion demands it, total rebuilt.

This, as the sign outside says, is where T.H. Dorward, Luthier practises his craft.

His customer list includes a who's who of East Coast stringed instrument virtuosos, including Joel Plaskett, Garrett Mason, Natalie MacMaster and Old Man Luedecke.

But I'm here because, in the strange summer of 2012, it does a person good to know that there exists a man like Dorward.

A man who works with his hands and does things the old way because it feels good to be connected to something that goes back hundreds of years.

Photo



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JOHN DeMONT

A man who also freely admits to a perfect stranger, “I like the idea that I don’t have to own a computer and a computer can’t replace me.”

The Luddite sports a fringe of white hair, wire-rimmed glasses and a D’Aquisto Strings T-shirt. At 65, Dorward tops out at a bit over six feet. He is straight of back with fingers like spikes, the legacy of more than 40 years of working with his hands. (Marla, his wife, runs the business side of the operation.)

“It was worth nothing without a lot of work,” he says of today’s job. “But I don’t have a Hawaiian guitar in the store, so it is good to have.”

I’m perplexed because, gazing around the meticulously organized shop, it’s hard to image that there is anything with a string that makes music that Dorward doesn’t possess.

On the wall, behind the shop’s fully operational 1905 cash register, hangs a classic 1953 Les Paul electric guitar that retails for \$20,000 and a vintage 1938 J-35 Gibson model that fetches \$14,000 from collectors.

Dorward has mini banjos, four-stringed tenor guitars, sitars and Irish harps. There are bouzoukis and dulcimers. He shows me a 192 Gibson F-4 mandolin. Dorward also points out a pair of wall-mounted ukuleles that the Martin and Gibson companies made in 1930.

He runs a finger along a line of guitars that, he says, “offer great value.” The Godin company of Quebec made them.

I can’t think of a better judge.

Luthiers make and repair stringed instruments. Dorward, a rarity among his brethren since he works on fretted and bowed stringed instruments, is mostly self-taught.

But he calls himself living proof of Malcolm Gladwell’s dictum that it takes special circumstances and 10,000 hours doing something before a person actually gets decent at it.

“My dad had a great workshop,” Dorward says of his middle-class home in Denver.

In high school, he got interested in classical guitar music. His parents bought him a guitar. But it was the steel-stringed variety, which was wrong for the kind of tunes he wanted to play.

So he headed for his father’s workshop and made himself a classical guitar. Then he made a few more.

While taking a psychology degree at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Dorward got a job making and repairing guitars at Herb David’s fabled Guitar Studio.

“It was a university town in the 1960s, and the guitar boom was happening,” Dorward says.

All of which meant that he was busy. He worked and learned.

When Dorward and Marla moved to Halifax, he kept building stringed instruments. A year teaching math at Queen Elizabeth High School “convinced me that I should do something else,” he says.

Enter, in 1971, the Folklore Centre. Originally on Spring Garden Road, two years later it relocated a few blocks away to its existing location.

When I ask Dorward how many instruments he has repaired, he pauses for a second and tilts his head.

“Well, let’s see. I do three to four thousand a year and I’ve been doing it for 40 years,” he says, voice trailing off, allowing me to do the math.

Dorward shows me the tools he uses to plane the wood down to the requisite thickness and to bend the sides of a guitar body. He hands me a hooked device he uses on the inside of violins. He reaches underneath the bench and hauls out a homemade apparatus for working on guitar bridges.

“Repairing instruments gives you an advantage when it comes to making them,” he says. “When you repair something, you see it 20

years down the road.”

And then Dorward excuses himself. Deadlines must be met. Even by a man doing work that hasn't changed much in hundreds of years.

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About the Author »



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