

# Crafting Sound



## Indiana Instrument Builders

Produced by Traditional Arts Indiana

## Crafting Sound: Indiana Instrument Builders

Instrument builders select, cut, carve, scrape, and bend materials to sculpt sounds and tones. From violins and guitars to ocarinas and berimbaus, Indiana boasts a rich heritage of instrument playing and making that reflects the diversity of Hoosiers.

Indiana is internationally recognized as a center of instrument manufacturing, but the state's tradition of independent instrument builders is less well known. Some of the finest handcrafted instruments in the world are made in private workshops throughout Indiana. These include familiar instruments like violins, silver flutes, and guitars that represent a musical heritage common to most of the U.S., while instruments like santours, kannels, and tamburitzas show the cultural variety found in Indiana.

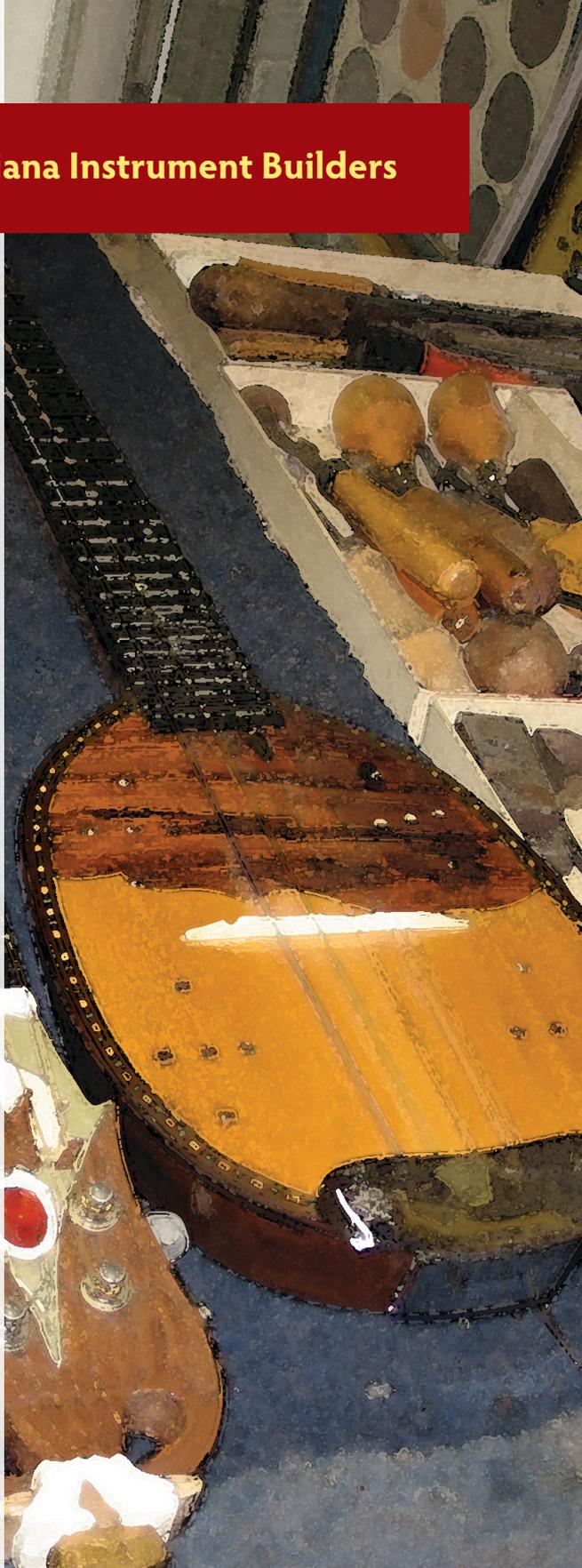


Photo: Greg Whitaker



## Prince Julius Adeniyi Thumb Pianos and Drums

Indianapolis

Prince Julius Adeniyi is a descendant of chiefs and kings of the Yoruba people in Nigeria, where he learned to play drums as a three-year-old. During performances, he sat in his grandfather's lap, placing his hands on his grandfather's hands. As Prince Julius grew older, his grandfather taught him how to make drums and to perfect his playing. He immigrated to the U.S. in the 1960s, settling in Indianapolis in the late 1970s.

Today, Prince Julius performs regularly and teaches about West African music and culture in schools throughout Indiana.

*"You can make music spontaneously at any time. Music has no limit of meaning; it's like electricity."*



Photo: Greg Whitaker

Photo: OC Bear Guitars



## Clint Bear Guitars

Madison

In 1998, Clint Bear married his two hobbies of playing guitar and crafting wood to form OC Bear Guitars in Madison, Indiana. Since then he has crafted thirty-three flat top, steel-string acoustic guitars. His instruments are drawing the acclaim of collectors and players alike.

*"It was an evolved process. I was reading in Acoustic Guitar Magazine about different builders' work, and I thought I had always played guitar and worked with wood. So I gleaned all of the information I could from other builders and their websites. And I started building."*



Photo: OC Bear Guitars



## Bill Berg Dulcimers

Nashville

Possibly Indiana's most prolific builder, Bill Berg has crafted over 6,000 instruments, most of which have been mountain dulcimers. He built his first instrument at the age of thirteen and later apprenticed with a Chicago-based violin maker. He crafted his first dulcimer in 1972 and started building full-time in 1976. Today, he is one of the country's leading builders and is known for crafting innovative instruments. His business, Mountain Made Music, has been his primary outlet for selling instruments. He also sells through the Internet and exhibits at art fairs and other events.

*"Instrument building is an interest I have always had. When I was thirteen, I built what would be an electric banjo, just out of two-by-fours. But when I really started getting serious into it, I was able to go into a violin shop as an apprentice for four years."*



## Butch Click Mandolins

Frankfort

Butch Click grew up around bluegrass music, or as his family called it, front-porch music. He decided that he wanted to learn to play the mandolin, but left-handed F-style mandolins are only available from custom builders. So he decided to build his own. He recently retired from bricklaying and now spends most of his time crafting left- and right-handed bluegrass mandolins.

*"I'm left handed and I always wanted an F-style mandolin and nobody built one, other than custom builders. I contacted a custom builder in North Carolina. His base price was \$5,000. I told my wife, there's no way that I can afford that, so I thought I would try to build one myself."*





## Geoff Davis Ukuleles

Noblesville

A third-generation ukulele player, Geoff Davis has played ukuleles since his childhood, but has only recently started building them in a workshop in his home in Noblesville. Geoff enjoys teaching the next generation to play the ukulele's syncopated rhythms at the Key Learning Community in Indianapolis.

Ukuleles have been made in Indiana since at least the 1910s. Raised in Indiana, Geoff believes that “the Holy Grail of uke building is finding another Hoosier-built uke.”

*“I don’t know if it’s genetic or not, but I’ve always had this really strong need to create. I have to create, I have to learn to make everything I love.”*



## David Gill Ukuleles

Columbus

While David Gill is a relative newcomer to instrument making, he has learned much by helping area luthiers build jigs and molds. With a background in mechanical engineering, he has developed many interesting tools that other builders use, including a small, precise fret saw and a modified router arm for cutting binding channels.

David focuses on small instruments, which include ukuleles, short-scaled dulcimers, and mandolins.

*“I want my instruments to sound right and sound good, but I also want them to be a nice piece of woodwork. Craftsmanship is a big part of it.”*





## Ain Haas Kannels

Indianapolis

Ain Haas was eight years old when he arrived in the United States from the Estonian refugee community of Gothenburg, Sweden. Ain made his first kannel from a birch tree in his parents' yard. Since then, Ain has made more than thirty instruments, many of which he has given away to family and friends.

*"I think people learn more, become more attached to the instrument, communicate more with other instrument makers, get involved in a network, then build a community when there's wide participation in instrument making.... It's hard to describe. When you make it with your own hands, you have a special sense of accomplishment."*



## Larry Hopkins Fiddles, Mandolins, and Guitars

Pekin

Larry Hopkins builds mandolins, fiddles, and guitars outside the small town of Pekin. He repaired instruments for many years before he began to build them and believes that repairing instruments is a type of apprenticeship necessary for anyone wanting to build. Mandolins were the first instruments that Larry built. He still finds them the most exciting because his sound is still evolving and he wonders "what the next one's going to sound like." He continues to push himself and his instruments.

*"One thing led to another. I'd built... twelve, fourteen mandolins and just got to thinking maybe I might be able to build a fiddle.... Now it's been about four years and fifty fiddles later, and that many mandolins. After you get started on something like that, it kind of grows on you."*



Photo: Lynn Hadley



## Eli Jackson Canjos and Hamdolins

Muncie

Originally from rural southeastern Kentucky, Eli Jackson is a self-taught engineer who designs and builds musical instruments as a hobby. Often Eli's instruments are made using whatever materials he has at hand. Eli enjoys passing his knowledge on to others, as he does when he

teaches his canjo workshops.

*"I'd seen a guy play... a soup can. I thought, 'Well I could take that can and put a nail on it and put some frets on it,' so I tried one, and it worked. I just take whatever I've got and figure out what I can do with it, and go from there."*



Photo: Lynn Hadley



## Ehsan Kousari Santours

Muncie

Ehsan Kousari builds santours, a Persian form of hammered dulcimer. Inspired by the instruments he heard and played in Iran, Kousari began building santours for himself as well as for professional players like his friend Kiu Haghighi from Chicago. Ehsan's instruments are unique in that he adjusts sound

posts within the instrument to produce a more perfect sound. While he uses native hardwoods for his boxes, his tapered zither pins and bridges are ordered from overseas.

*"You have to have a heart for this particular music, for this particular instrument, to learn.... You've got to be in love with music. Knowing how to fix it, that's a completely different story."*



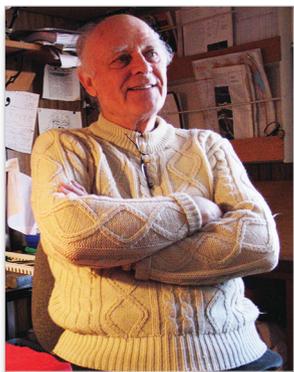


## Milan Opacich Tamburitzas

Schererville

A 2004 National Heritage Fellow, Milan Opacich has exhibited work in the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery and the Roy Acuff Museum. He also crafts tamburitzas for the large Serbo-Croatian community in the Calumet region. While most of the old tambura makers were secretive about their craft, Milan is an avid teacher helping others in his community learn the craft.

*"As a youngster [my parents] bought me three or four ukuleles, which I managed to demolish in a matter of hours.... So my dad, who was quite a craftsman in his own right, fashioned me a prima out of plywood and strung it up with rubber bands. I think somewhere in the back of my mind he created this desire for me to be able to do this."*



## Patrick O'Riordan Whistles

Fort Wayne

Patrick O'Riordan was born in England to Irish parents. He immigrated to Indiana in 1959 to work as a mechanical engineer. He retired from "real work" in 1991 and now faces a backlog of orders for his whistles, which are played by many groups and artists. Today his whistles are considered to be among the best made and are in great demand by professional players.

*"I was at a fiddlers' gathering down near Lafayette, and I saw this young fellow sitting underneath a tree with a crowd of people around him playing just a simple, six-hole traditional tin whistle. And he kept that crowd fascinated for two hours, and I was included. And I bought a whistle and taught myself and started from there."*





## David Roach & M. Chipko Roach Ocarinas

Leavenworth

M.\* and David Roach were intrigued by clay whistles they purchased at a flea market in Kentucky in the 1970s. They experimented to create instruments that play well. For more than thirty years they have crafted beautiful ocarinas for themselves and other musicians. The Roaches invented pocket-pipes, which combine ocarina design and construction with the tonal qualities of bagpipes.

*M: "I looked at pictures, I looked at pieces. I had a whistle from a potter in Kentucky that I looked at that helped me figure out how to make the fipple."*

*David: "That's one way tradition is transmitted, through an artifact.... Each artifact carries with it the technique, the way it was made. As you deconstruct that, you understand the mind of the maker."*



\* In a field dominated by men, M. represents one of the few professional women builders identified by Traditional Arts Indiana.



Photo: Weed Patch Music Company

## Jeff Russell Banjos

Franklin

Jeff Russell started playing banjo after he bought one from Service Merchandise in the 1970s. He began building banjos in 2002 after he took lessons from Kara Barnard, an avid player and teacher. He is now filling custom orders for players who are looking for hand-crafted banjos. This year Kara and he started

Weed Patch Music in Nashville, Indiana, which sells folk and acoustic instruments and displays the work of many custom builders.

*"My first priority is sound! Also, the banjos have to look good to me. However, in my custom work, it has to meet the customer's needs and wants."*





## Iuri Santos Berimbaus

Morgantown

Born in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, Iuri Santos has made Fruitdale, Indiana, his home since 1997. At the age of thirteen, he began studying Capoeira Angola, a music- and dance-based form of martial arts. Today he leads the North Star Capoeira Angola group in Bloomington, which he founded in 2005. As part of this Afro-Brazilian tradition, Iuri and his troupe make and play the berimbau.

*“My life is pretty much Capoeira. I love Capoeira, and I try to develop a method of teaching Capoeira.”*



## Richard Seraphinoff Natural Horns & Baroque Trumpets

Bloomington

Richard Seraphinoff teaches French horn at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music and performs on both natural and modern French horns. He has traveled the world studying old horns and explains that his job is “to recreate what was actually used at a particular time in history.” When he copies an instrument that was made in 1750, his approach is to craft a fine instrument that plays well but stays within the parameters of what was done in that period.

*“I make these reproductions of old horns. The way I got into that was that one of my first horn teachers, whose name was Lowell Greer, was really a pioneer in this country for the resurrecting of the natural horn.”*





## Kurt Simmerman Dulcimers

Leo

Kurt Simmerman was a woodworker looking for a craft that he could make and sell to supplement his income. What he found was a community of dulcimer players that helped him perfect his craft and taught him to build fine mountain dulcimers, which are played by professionals and hobbyists throughout the United States. People often think of dulcimers as simple folk craft, but Kurt's instruments are elegant in shape, exquisite in tone, and built for contemporary dulcimer styles.

*"Part of the community that I became involved in was the people that go from festival to festival to sell dulcimer books, and tapes, and instruments, and dulcimer bags. And you'd meet up every six weeks, eight weeks, at another festival. I don't think what I build today would be anything without that community."*



## Dan Speer Harps

Bloomington

Dan Speer and his friend David Font started building folk harps for historical reenactors in 1987. In 1990, Dan founded Argent Fox Music and expanded his line of instruments. Today, Dan's instruments are sold at various music stores, historical reenactments, and harp conferences. He also manufactures harp hardware for the majority of builders in the United States and Canada.

*"I got started building when my girlfriend wanted a harp. I had a friend that was building harps to work his way through chiropractic school.... I kept developing and learning from and sharing information with other builders. I don't have the girlfriend now, but I bought the harp back."*





## Roy Spight Drums

Indianapolis

Roy Spight, a master drum maker, learned about African drums and music from his older brother, an avid collector and musician. A member of the group Drums of West Africa, Roy is dedicated to the educational- and community-building aspects of his music and instruments. He is a central figure in Indianapolis' active drumming scene and he builds and repairs drums for many of the city's best players. Inspired by the instruments of Africa, his instruments reflect the visual and tonal qualities he values in drums.

*"I put something physical into the drum so that my spirit will be transmitted to it and the final sounds will have more meaning for me in terms of what I can communicate or enjoy in making music for dancers."*



## Bruce Taggart Mandolins and Violins

Nashville

Bruce Taggart started building mandolins in his family's service station in Nashville in the 1970s. He studied a Lloyd Loar Gibson mandolin and worked to emulate its shape and tone. Today, his instruments have evolved to have their own voice and subtle reinterpretation of that classic design. Taggart also makes violins, but chooses not to sell them because he invests so much of himself in their crafting.

*"With the fiddle, after I've carved it with a knife, held it in my lap, and done all this real close work, and know which way each grain of wood is going in it, practically, I feel more attached, like I know it better. You get into that feeling of imparting a little bit of yourself into your work."*





## Ron Volbrecht Guitars

Nashville

Ron Volbrecht has built guitars for over thirty years. In a craft where computer-aided cutting and production jiggging have become the norm, Ron remains one of the few Indiana guitar builders to craft a totally hand-built guitar. Known for building guitars for such celebrities as John Mellencamp and Hoyt

Axton, he has also built for many well-known local musicians, including Pat Webb and Gordon Bonham.

*“If I want to do it right, I can’t just set the guitar up the way I play it and think that it’ll work for the customer... I have to hear how the customer plays live to get an instrument that will do what they need it to do. It’s intimate stuff between me and the player.”*



## Jamon Zeiler Guitars

Rising Sun

Jamon Zeiler builds experimental guitars in his shop in Rising Sun, Indiana. All of his instruments are one of a kind, hand-built from his own designs, molds, and patterns. While he learned some of his techniques from a luthiery school, his instruments reflect his many years of playing and repairing guitars. An

artist at heart, Jamon crafts instruments that are a combination of traditional forms and innovative ideas. From sensual shapes and bold colors to unusual sound hole shapes and placement, his guitars are as distinctive visually as they are acoustically.

*“Innovators, they find something and stick to it, where experimenters just find something and don’t stick to it. They keep going... I’ve never made two guitars alike.”*



## Tradition

Tradition is the process by which knowledge, skill, and aesthetics pass from one generation to the next. Contemporary instrument makers learn from a variety of sources, including old instruments, fellow builders, books, and the Internet.



Photo: Greg Whitaker

## Community

We often think of neighborhoods, towns, and other localities as communities, but people also form communities of choice, groups that are not purely bound by geography, ethnicity, or common heritage. Luthiers may build for local audiences, while also connecting with other builders to share materials, patterns, and tools.



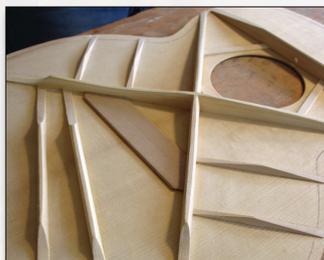
## Process

To view building an instrument merely as the assembly of parts oversimplifies the dynamic process by which handmade objects come into existence. Choices are made and constraints are met throughout each step of creation. Custom builders negotiate the construction process through a maze of personal, financial, social, and cultural forces.



## Aesthetics

*Webster's Dictionary* defines *aesthetics* as “a particular theory or conception of beauty or art: a particular taste for or approach to what is pleasing to the senses.” Instrument builders strike a balance between visual, aural, and tactile aesthetic choices; their work must look good, sound good, and play well. Aesthetics are rooted in personal and community values, which often reflect distinct ethnic or cultural traditions.



## Creativity

Though tradition is an active force in a builder's artistic process, every instrument is invested with subtle expressions of the builder's personal style. These variations within tradition result from the individual's creative impulses. While some builders' work might appear to be repetitive, even the most conservative leave their distinctive mark on each piece: their unique way of shaping guitar braces, hand carving flute head joints, or adjusting sound posts in a santour result from their personal interpretation of tradition.



# Traditional Arts Indiana: Creativity, Community, Continuity

*A Partnership of Indiana University and the  
Indiana Arts Commission*

**Traditional Arts Indiana**  
Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology  
504 N. Fess Avenue  
Bloomington, Indiana 47408

For more information, contact us at  
(812) 855 0418 or at [tradarts@indiana.edu](mailto:tradarts@indiana.edu).

For more information about instrument builders,  
visit the Crafting Sound website at  
<http://www.craftingsound.org>.

For more information about Indiana traditions,  
visit the Traditional Arts Indiana website at  
<http://www.traditionalartsindiana.org>.

Sponsored by:



**Technical Support provided by:**  
Weed Patch Music Company, Nashville  
Roadworthy Guitar and Amp, Bloomington

## Credits:

Project Research: Jon Kay  
Exhibit Curator: Suzanne Ingalsbe  
Text: Jon Kay, Suzanne Ingalsbe, and Katherine Forgacs  
Editing: Katherine Forgacs  
Photos: Jon Kay (except where noted)  
Layout and Design: Arle Lommel

