

A Different Kind Of Builder

By Edward Tutwiler

Every since I started examining this eclectic world of Americana Music, I've been constantly amazed at the many levels of interest it presents. Further, I'm amazed at how it tugs one into its depths. In the past few years, I've gone on a quest for evermore details. This quest has included singers, songwriters, instrumentalists, teachers (of both instrument and voice), and builders of various musical instruments always trying to learn why they do what they do. It is truly an interesting journey. Recently this journey focused upon the instrument maker Mr. James Jones of Bedford, VA.

Americana Rhythm has profiled instrument makers in the past but they usually have been makers of guitars, banjos, and fiddles; however, I've wondered about the folks who custom make the lesser-known folk instruments. Therefore, when someone mentioned James Jones—Musical Instruments to the editor, we recognized destiny calling.



Mr. Jones has been building custom musical instruments since 1978 in his Bedford, VA wood-working shop. During that time, he has developed designs for ten different acoustic instruments. His signature piece is the hammered dulcimer, and that is what he is known for. Here's how he

says it, "I'm most known for my hammered dulcimers. I've built over 1500 dulcimers over the years and have a lot of well known players using my instruments." Nevertheless, James Jones makes a variety of different string and percussive musical instruments including Appalachian Dulcimers, Celtic Harps, Irish Bouzoukis, Bowed Psalteries, Zithers, Slit Drums and Thumb Pianos. And if that variety is not broad enough, Mr. Jones also turns out some Guitars and Mandolins on occasion.

The Breakdown

The Appalachian Dulcimer you are familiar with as we've profiled it here in AR in the past but you might like a quick definition of the others instruments in his inventory:

A Celtic Harp is a nylon-strung harp that is adapted from a traditional folk harp design.

The Irish Bouzoukis is also know as an octave mandolin and is played in the same manner.

A Bowed Psaltery is a hand-held, triangular shaped, melody instrument that is played with a bow. It is a fully chromatic instrument, which is set up like a piano with white notes to the right and sharps and flats to the left.

A Zither is a stringed instrument also called a lap harp or plucked psaltery.

The Slit Drum is an African and Central American influenced wooden box drum that is struck with ball-ended dowel sticks.

A Thumb Piano is small hollow African influenced boxed instrument sized about 6 by 9 by 2 inches. This box is equipped with various lengths of spring steel leafs that produce tones when the player plucks down on them.

We wondered what the muse was that drove such an eclectic mix of instruments. Here is how Jones explains it, "I started building instruments as a vehicle to stay in touch with my background in music, work with my hands, and to allow me economic independence. I started with the hammered dulcimer because I was intrigued by the instrument and it

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looked like something I could handle. To diversify my experience and continue to be challenged, I decided to build other instruments. I am still most known for my hammered dulcimers but enjoy getting a break while making a bouzouki or harp."

Journey To The Tune

The paths that artists take to arrive at their creative pinnacle are many and varied. Nevertheless, one might assume a maker of stringed musical instruments, which are often associated with the mountains of the south-eastern United States, would have some roots there about. In the case of Mr. Jones, one would not be accurate in that assumption.

James Jones grew up in both rural Oregon and in a small college town in the Midwestern, where his father was a music professor and mother an English teacher. While his early interests would naturally include classical music due to parental influence (and he did play the violin as a youth) Jones aspired to become a wildlife conservationist and graduated from collage with a degree in biology. He says his interests started to change as a result of taking

some art classes.

In his youth, Jones was a good basketball player but a stent in the army put everything on hold including a possible career as a professional basketball player. After his military duties, Jones went to graduate school at Murray State University in Kentucky, focusing on sculpture and printmaking. He worked in that field a bit and then went to Europe to play basketball professionally and coach for the next several years. Even so, Jones found time while there to set up a studio in his apartment and do some printmaking and collage work.

After returning to the US, James did a tour with VISTA in Massachusetts and ultimately earned a MFA at Massachusetts College of Art with a major in media studies and printmaking. It was during this course of study, Jones, by now



in is mid-30s, was exposed to woodworking. At the time, his sister was playing a lot of fiddle music and encouraged him to pick that instrument back up after an 18 year break. This renewed interest in the fiddle resulted in an interest in folk music and the learning of a lot of fiddle tunes. James began to wonder if he could

merge his abstract artistic ideas into a concrete form. He decided that making musical instruments combined lots of artistic and woodworking elements and dovetailed nicely with his musical background. He then decided that he could combine the idea to build musical instruments with the desire to become self-em-

ployed and that decision led him to build his first hammered dulcimer.

Hammer And A Chord
We asked Mr. Jones how he got started building the hammered dulcimer and he told us that he consulted Sam Rizzetta's material on constructing the hammered dulcimer that he (Rizzetta) published for the Smithsonian. James said that he also read material put together by Howie Mitchell that gave him insights into his experiments with the design of hammered dulcimers. James was exposed to the playing of Sandy Davis (Davis was teaching and performing on the hammered dulcimer in the Boston area during the period Jones lived there). Here is how he summed up the process, "When I got started there were a lot less examples of instruments. The renaissance was just getting started. In New England, I was able to see instruments built by Fred Montaque and eventually made a visit to see Sam in WVA. From those early influences I begin to develop a 12/11 dulcimer and a basic design. I am for the most part self-taught although I did take some work-

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shops on the fundamentals of woodworking early in my career." Elsewhere on his web site Jones is quoted as saying he took six months to design and build his first model; and after Sandy Davis helped him tinker that one to life, he immediately started another build and has never looked back.

We wondered if he started with a pattern to begin with. Here is how he answered, "No one builds in a vacuum. I started like other seminal builders with the 12/11 (twelve treble courses and 11 bass courses) and quickly added the 15/14 hammered dulcimer. I built on those early influences and over the last 30 years have developed a whole range of models. This range of instruments caters to the changing needs of players: larger more chromatic instruments to accommodate the more challenging music now being tackled by players and smaller more compact instruments designed to be more portable without sacrificing chromaticism and range. I now offer 12 different models. That evolution continues."

Jones works with his customers to customize instruments but also

builds to inventory. Here is how he puts it, "I work closely with most customers to individualize their design through their choice of size, woods, and ultimately their sound-hole design. Economically, it always makes sense to build groups of instruments so I usually build extra to have instruments that can be had off the shelf. I do enjoy working with customers to personalize their instruments." Working alone in his shop James Jones builds between 50-60 hammered dulcimers a year along with hundreds of octave zithers, bowed psalteries, assorted thumb pianos, slit drums, Appalachian dulcimers, harps and the occasional Irish Bouzouki or guitar.

Where The Home's At

How did a man of letters and international experience wind up in the hills of Virginia building musical instruments you might wonder? He said, "That is a long story. My wife and I met in the Boston area. I had already begun building in a cooperative wood shop in Somerville, MA, and she had started pursuing weaving. We both decided to move to a more affordable area in the country. My wife loves to grow things, and we had friends in the area (the

Bedford, VA area). For years we lived and worked out of a rented farmhouse. My first shop was an upstairs bedroom with my power tools on the porch. I eventually graduated to a converted trailer. After eight years, we purchased a house, and I constructed my present shop." (This present shop is a 2,000 square-foot building located 10 miles north of Bedford, VA at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, almost within sight of the Blue Ridge Parkway.)

James had a health scare a year or so ago that caused him to take a break for a while. He summed that up this way, "I stopped work for nearly 6 months as I contracted a rare disease called Vasculitis. It was a rough period but I'm nearly fully recovered and now work full time even though I just turned 65."

With that comment, we wondered what a typical day in the shop was like. Jones replied, "I generally put in a full day of work starting about 9:30 and working until 5. Since my shop is about 200 feet from the house, I always end up going over to apply finish or do little things over the weekend but have the flexibility to take time off as desired; one of the perks of being self-employed."

Building musical instruments is certainly an avocation not a vocation so we asked James to sum up for us his feeling about his avocation. "Building instruments has given me great satisfaction over the years. Like any occupation it has its pleasures and tedium. Ultimately the joy of seeing and hearing individuals using and playing my instruments makes it all worthwhile. I love the control over my life it affords and enjoy the challenges instrument building continues to offer."

To learn more about Mr. Jones, his hammered dulcimers, and his selection of other unusual instruments, point your computer's browser to www.jamesjonesinstruments.com.

You can send him an email to this address:

james@jamesjonesinstruments.com and the snail mail address of James' shop is:

1384 Coltons Mill Rd
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Phone: 540 586-6319

Visits to his shop and showroom are by appointment only.

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