CRAFT CULTURE:
TIM REEDE

custom guitars & basses

Tim Reede sits on the edge of a green loveseat with a handmade Sitka spruce acoustic guitar in his lap. He's in the attic above his custom guitar workshop, which looks from the outside like any other garage next to any other home in the Corcoran neighborhood of Minneapolis. Rock gods Jimi, Keith, Dylan, Lennon, and Neil Young tower above, their posters covering the ceiling. A blood-red curtain runs along the wall behind him.

With his black-framed glasses riding low on the bridge of his nose, Reede giddy-ups through a quick minor chord progression that's heavy on the low end. When he's done riffing, the guitar sustains its ringing, filling the narrow room with its fading hum.

"Do you want to try it?" Reede asks.

Of course you do.

By Brendan Kennealy
Photos by Kristine Erickson

As he passes the instrument over, light bounces off its pale soundboard. The wood shines. "You see these ridges in the wood? That's called bearclaw," he says. Jagged white grooves crisscross the grain, vanishing and reappearing like a mirage. Up close, it resembles a wrinkled dress shirt.

Reede turns the guitar over and points out the rich, dark-red wood on the body's backside. He traces the big swooping cathedrals of the grain with his finger. "This is Cocobolo rosewood, which is becoming more and more rare," he explains. "It's just a great-sounding wood, so I snapped up a bunch of it." He points at the wood stacked along the wall opposite the love seat. The end of each piece has been labeled with neat black Sharpie, and the pile is organized by both type and length. Easily over six feet tall, it could fill a parking space.

"That's mahogany there, and that's walnut," he says. "There's some alder, and there's some Swiss pearwood." He picks up a thick, unshaped plank of the dirty looking pearwood and inspects it, wiping away dust before replacing the wood on the pile. One of these

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days, he says, he may use it to build a guitar.

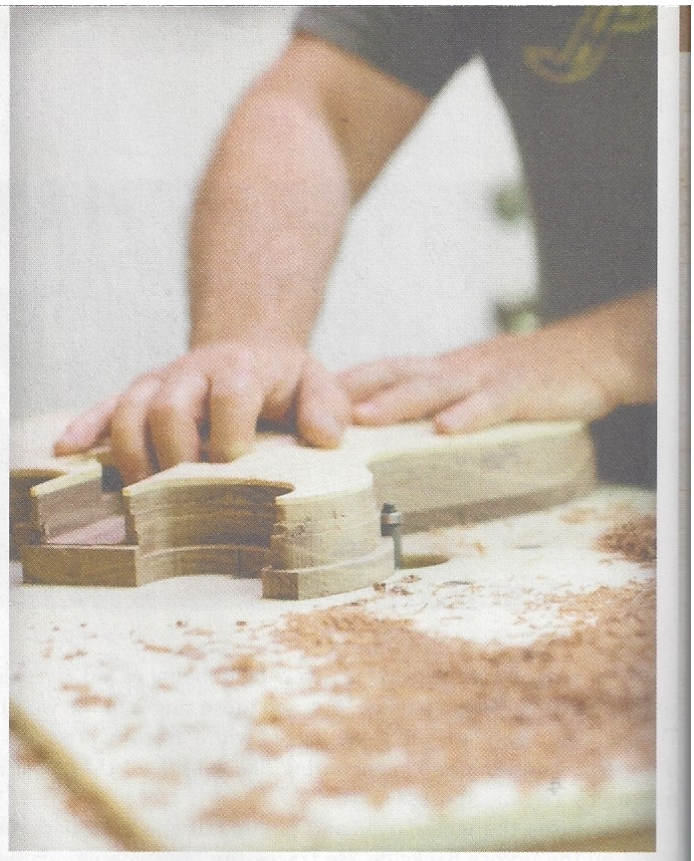
"I have some blistered oak in here that would be good for cabinets, but it's not resonant enough for a guitar," he says, tapping on the oak with his knuckle. It sounds like he's knocking on someone's front door.

Reede, it must be said, knows his wood. That's because when he's not building acoustic and electric guitars, bass guitars, and ukuleles—which he's been doing for 10 years—the 53-year-old works part-time as a cabinetmaker. He's been at that for 20 years, ever since he built a birdhouse for a former girlfriend's mom.

Wanting to do it himself, he learned how and realized through the process how much he enjoyed building things and working with wood. "That was a defining moment," he says.

Even before he got into the physical part of instrument making, Reede was involved in the music industry. He studied sound engineering at The Recording Workshop in Ohio and entered the music business. "I was playing electric guitar in a band and working as a music buyer at the Electric Fetus, and I just needed a change. I needed something more tactile," explains Reede. That's where woodworking came in.

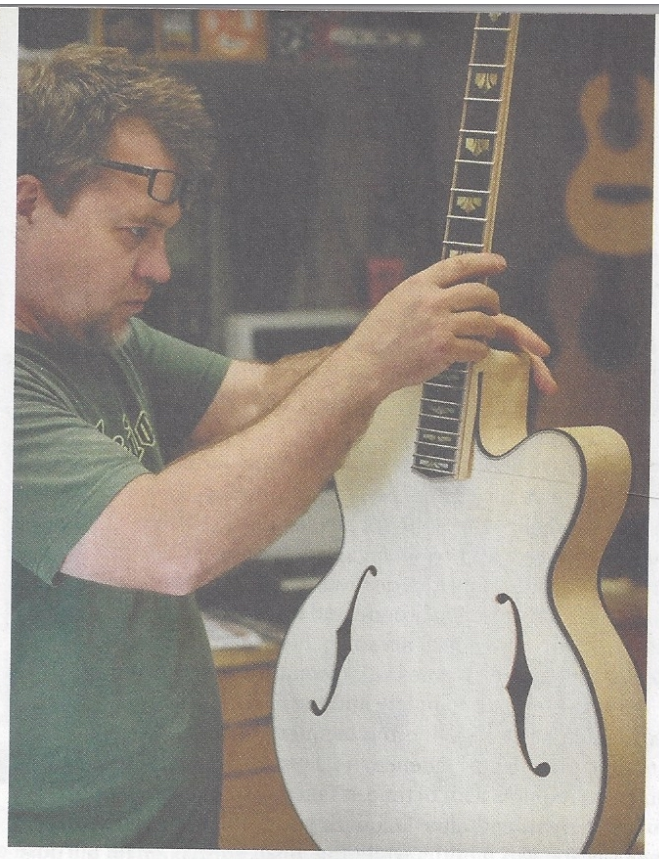
After finishing cabinetmaking school and building enough cabinets, benches, bookshelves, and coat trees to fill his house, Reede fell in love—with an acoustic guitar. He'd bought it as a gift



for someone else, but it ended up benefiting him, too. "I'd always played the electric guitar up until that point, but then I started looking at that acoustic and really thinking about making one myself."

In 2004, that urge led him to a one-year guitar repair and building program at Southeast Technical College in Red Wing, Minnesota. Ever since, Reede has found a way to balance music with craftsmanship, two things he is passionate about.

Reede selects the wood he uses for guitars very carefully, purchasing some of it from the cabinet shop where he works. The pearwood, for example, found its way to his woodshop because it was left over from cabinets Reede had built for a client's exercise room. He gets his hands on exotic woods like blood, ebony, and zebra in the same way. "If I find a piece that has a lot of figure or a



nice flame, they can't use it for cabinets because it's too crazy looking," he explains. "For cabinets, you want the wood to be homogenous, but this"—he points at the patterned wood—"is what you want on a guitar. Something unique or odd."

Downstairs in his workshop, Reede pulls a sheet of Carpathian spruce from a shelf and moves his hand over it in tight circles. The sound of his palm against the wood is amplified, reaching the volume of a loud whisper. When he holds the wood up to his ear and knuckles it in a few spots, the sound is tuneful. "Imagine how resonant that'll be with strings," he says.

The spruce he's handling is from Ukraine. "It's the same species and quality as Adirondack spruce, which is native to the U.S., but that wood was overharvested during WWII to make airplanes," he says, explaining the wood's long trip to his shop. The Carpathian, he continues, is easier to get and more affordable than Adirondack. Like all the wood Reede uses for soundboards, it has been quarter sawn for greater stability. This type of cut, which is akin to mowing intricate patterns in your lawn instead of cutting it in straight lines, makes a wood board less likely to cup or warp due to changes in temperature or humidity—well-known enemies of the guitar.

The process gets more complex with each step. Next it has to be bookmatched, Reede explains, "which means it's cut out of the same piece and then folded open." When placed side-by-side, bookmatched portions mirror each other. Reede pushes his glasses up on his forehead and eyeballs the grain closely, noting the alternating light and dark stripes. He says that when inspecting the wood, he's looking for perfect symmetry; straight, even lines; no defects; and stiffness.

"Stiffness is important," he says. "The trick is to design an instrument that responds to the lightest possible touch, but which is still strong enough to hold up to 170 pounds of string tension so it doesn't collapse. That's the balancing act."

Once Reede is satisfied with the wood he's chosen, he begins joining the pieces, using old-fashioned hand tools, braces, and hot hide glue—an adhesive made from connective tissue and hide of animals—to shape and fit everything together properly. It's a

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technical, but not technological, undertaking. "Handmade guitars—there's not much difference between how they were made 100 years ago and how I make them," Reede says.

Just like a handful of other luthiers making instruments by hand in Minnesota, Reede takes pride in working with historic designs, hide glue, lacquer finish, spruce tops, and braces. "I'm pretty much a traditionalist when it comes to that," he says.

Reede uses the hide glue—which can smell like road kill on a humid day if it's allowed to mix with water—to join braces to soundboards and guitar necks to bodies. He prefers hide glue, which he also uses to attach fingerboards, because it's "acoustically transparent." The adhesive, he explains, dries very hard and brittle, and that allows vibrations to transfer cleanly when the guitar is played, producing a pure sound. He likes that the glue is reversible, too. "If you ever need to remove the neck," for example, "you can heat it up and remove it for repair, or to reset the neck."

Of all the steps in building a guitar, the neck often requires the most patience. "It's kind of a form of meditation," Reede says, grinning. Because he prefers to use a dovetail joint, a method that uses no hardware to bolt the neck onto the body, he needs to make sure the neck fits perfectly flush against all points of contact. Any gaps between the two will deaden vibrations and affect the tonal properties of the guitar.

To eliminate those gaps, Reede uses chalk to determine where the separate pieces line up properly and where they do not. Then he uses a small scraping tool to pare down those uneven spots, shaving away wood where it's too thick. "This is what takes patience. You just have to do it over and over until you get the correct angle, until it is centered right."

Other parts of the process have become intuitive to Reede over the years, such as tap tuning. This involves tapping the soundboard, listening to the noise produced, and trimming excess wood off the attached braces until the desired quality of sound is achieved. By tapping around and finding as many frequencies as he can, scraping here and there, Reede can ensure all notes will resonate equally.

After the body is complete and the neck is joined, Reede can start applying the lacquer. This step is another practice in patience, he says. "Getting the finish on requires a lot of time. It takes 12 to 14 coats to get it right, and after lacquering I let the instrument sit for two months while the finish shrinks." The purpose of that long waiting period is that Reede is looking for a finish that is perfectly smooth, like glass. And that can't be rushed. "I get impatient and people get impatient sometimes," he says. "But the

reason I'm taking four months or more to build a guitar is because I'm trying to give you the best instrument I can."

Between the various stages of production, while waiting for that final layer of lacquer to set, Reede often takes to gardening. The vegetable garden behind his workshop contains onions, asparagus, broccoli, radicchio, peppers, tomatillos, and more. It's just one more area of passion for Reede, and this love for botany has even manifested itself in his guitar designs: he's currently working on a prototype electric guitar that will feature rose inlays along the fret board.

There's another thing Reede is excited to grow in his garden for the first time this season: willamette and cascade hops, which he plans to use in his homemade beer.

"I just started homebrewing this year, and I've made about 16 gallons so far," he says. "I'm just one of those people who has to do things myself, you know? I can't just buy a guitar or buy some beer; I have to make my own." The hobby, he says, has provided him with yet another way to learn and grow.

So far Reede hasn't cared much for the beer he's made, citing a lack of carbonation. But he thinks he'll eventually get it to where he likes it. "It's kind of like guitars," he explains. "My first guitar was not so good. But now I've built 60 of them. I'm taking custom orders by appointment and selling them here and there at shows, and they're coming out really nice now."

As he finishes the thought, Reede remembers he has a bottle of homebrewed Irish Red stashed in the fridge.

"Do you want to try it?" he asks.

Of course you do.