

The Wood Will Humble You- Amesqua/Jett Instruments-by lee kotick

What happens when a retired Madison Wisconsin Fire Chief and a Florida State University (FSU) geology professor, team up as luthiers? Debra Amesqua, a Tallahassee, FL., native and Danny Goddard, born in Biloxi, MS., have partnered in mid-town Tallahassee, to build high quality mandolins and guitars. Amesqua retired from her job, moved back to her childhood home and met Goddard at a café just steps from what has become their luthiery sanctuary.

Amesqua recalls, “I was sitting at the Black Dog Café early one morning when Danny walked in and asked if anyone was going to Jacksonville? I said, “I am” ... then he asked “can you leave right now?” I said, “no, but, I can go tomorrow”... and the rest is history. Danny wanted to buy a motorcycle, and I wanted to buy the Festool Chop saw. We talked music and luthiery the whole way there, and then some. I got my saw, Danny still has that motorcycle, and we both got a new and wonderfully playful, and respectful lifelong friendship.”

Both are active and giving people in their communities and their relationships with clients, vendors and suppliers are just as important to them as their instrument construction and repairs. These two highly trained individuals share strong community- oriented core values that bridge their generational differences.

The Shop

The Amesqua homestead was converted into a functional and aesthetically pleasing shop, and still maintains a homey vibe. There is no sign on the door, but the community knows its location and proprietors. State of the art climate control and indoor air quality are essential to the operation, as well as the background acoustic music. Coming inside from the front entrance to the right is a music parlor, decorated with a woven carpet, instruments on the wall, and seating to encourage ensemble playing. Amesqua and Goddard each have individual work areas with tools, jigs and various state of the art equipment and supplies. The kitchen provides chocolate and nourishment to these busy luthiers.

Amesqua recalls, “My family moved to Tallahassee in 1955 and we bought the Lake Ella home in 1962 when this neighborhood was squarely in the country. It has been such a joy to work on the instrument I so love, in a place I truly call home. I wanted to learn how to use my new ShopBot tabletop CNC machine and Danny wanted to learn to build guitars. He had the computer skills and I had the shop. In trade, Danny was responsible for developing his inlay/luthiery skills, and I got all of my programming needs for the mandolin. We most appreciate our jig and fixture collaborative skills. It is one of our greatest strengths.”

A distinct alignment of responsibilities between the two luthiers is based on their individual strengths and proclivities. Amesqua's passion is the archtop and octave mandolin, while Goddard's passion is the guitar. Amesqua notes, "Danny does the repairs and we both work on prototypes. We build at least two instruments at a time because we believe that if the building process is structured with thoughtfulness and care, we can build two instruments, or two hundred at one time. This requires solid procedures, and documentation of the build. You will see many examples around the shop. We begin this documentation with our VIB or "Very Important Book" of processes and procedures. I love this simple little book of procedures and charts, and we often update the processes making them better."

People love to come into the shop and play instruments and talk with the luthiers. The two help support musicians coming into Tallahassee with generous shop time, quality workmanship, and beautiful instruments.

Debra Amesqua

Born in Minnesota, Amesqua is a child of migrant workers. "I loved growing up in a large Mexican family of musicians. My Dad played guitar and trumpet in a local band called the Star Lighters, playing all the old standards. I remember hearing live performances of Louie Armstrong and thinking that my dad was just as good a player. I played guitar and clarinet in high school and in college and whenever times of trouble raised its ugly head; I would always resort to music for my comfort; as I still do today. Her passion for building and the nontraditional vocations attracted her to fire fighting in the early 1980's. "Back then there weren't any women in the fire service. It was an incredible career of 28 plus years- I was first at every level, I became the first woman fire chief in the State of Wisconsin."

The Amesqua Mandolin

Amesqua did a stint helping famed luthier Steve Klein work on Joni Mitchell's guitar, when she was living in California. Whatever instrument Amesqua builds, starts out with the highest quality materials. She's purchased wood from retired luthiers-wood from the 80-s and 90s. Old Standard Wood is a frequent supplier. Amesqua lets us know that, "When I began my journey to the mandolin, I had no shop, no wood, and no training. I had successfully used the project management theory called "Back-Casting" for many years in the fire service. Applied in this instance, I had to imagine what did not exist, and I had to manage myself from that perspective. So, I purchased a mandolin kit, and as I was doing the build, I would buy or make the tool I needed to reproduce the part. This took about two years, and was so much fun. I then attended the Builders Workshop at the Mandolin

Symposium, in Santa Cruz, CA., where I met master luthier Steve Gilchrist (08-09) and Lynn Dudenbostle (2010). I learned how to really look at the accuracy of my jointery, and listen to the vibrations as I work with these materials. You follow your heart, understanding... *The wood will humble you*. Sometimes it won't react the way you intended, as it has a life of its own. Working through this challenge will build your self confidence and patience." Amesqua hopes for each instrument to be its own being. "Each has its own voice. I tap into that voice using the resonance of my voice. When I finish a box I aim to hear a clear bell tone, surrounded in high quality craftsmanship. Marrying the two together is a glorious day in every luthier's life."

For carved top F-5 and Octave mandolins, Amesqua uses Adirondack red spruce tops and Sugar maple, Cuban mahogany and Babinga are her favorites for back, sides and neck. Old ebony is used for the fingerboard and headstock overlay. A variety of woods is used for pick guard and truss rod cover. Contouring of the pick guard is done by hand, and her logo is done in mother of pearl or shell. Her bridges are adjustable and non-adjustable ebony, Waverly tuners, and brass or silver tailpieces are used, as well as D'Adarrio strings. Labor-intensive French polish is employed.

Danny Goddard

Goddard may be described as a polymath—a geologist, teacher, musician, luthier and inventor. He's become known in multiple fields, working across platforms, and in many media including wood, metal, song, shell and computer code. He is a published scientist and songwriter and has won competitive awards from the National Science Foundation. For eight years he's been an adjunct professor of Geology and Environmental Science at FSU teaching Geology and Environmental Science courses. Born on an Air force base in Biloxi Mississippi in 1978, his Dad was in the Air force and worked on computers. Goddard got his GED, and three college degrees. Goddard was a percussionist in school bands from middle to high school, and picked up guitar in his latter teens. Goddard quips, "It was easier to carry a guitar than a drum set. Music is the thread that ties my whole life together." He's played guitar and recorded with the highly popular band The New 76ers for fifteen years, and is well-known for his original songs and arrangements. He's written over one hundred songs, in different genres, and receives royalty checks from A&E network and other television shows. He studied songwriting like others study instruments.

To develop expertise in guitar construction, Goddard studied other builders, including Dana Bourgeois, Wayne Henderson, Ken Miller, and Robbie O'Brien. A

recent proud moment was when Nick Dauphinas, from the Larry Stephenson Band acquired the Jett standard dreadnaught which is a structural copy of a 1937 Martin D-18. Jake Stargel recently played a Jett dread and was duly impressed. A number of local musicians have Goddard's guitars.

Jett Instruments

Jett is Goddard's youngest son's first name. Since tone woods, design and good wood working dictate the quality of the build, Goddard uses only the best materials he can find. "I have a close relationship with the wood and finished instrument. The build starts before I even meet the customer. For tops I use Sitka or Adirondack spruce and for backs and sides, I prefer rosewood and mahogany. I've also used Hawaiian mango and Koa. I purchase a lot of materials from Ken Miller, and have bought his jigs. I've built the standard sizes and my favorite is the L-00, but I'm fond of dreadnaughts as well," according to Goddard. As size and design dictate the sound more than any other single variable, he uses mahogany for necks, and all hide glue Adirondack bracing. "I'll hand-carve neck widths according to customer desire. I use ebony for the bridge, head plate and finger board." Goddard believes in the tone and volume produced from scalloped braces. Using Adirondack spruce for bracing, he does extensive brace shaping to tune tops and backs. He looks at traditional bracing and makes minor adjustments. "On my smaller bodied instruments, I do make use of ladder bracing. For bridges, I use the most dense and consistent material; either ebony or Brazilian rosewood. I've installed RFID chips in my guitars, based on a technology which allows the instrument to be scanned, with a built-in serial number. For tuners, I use Waverly's and Rubners."

Ornamentation is where Goddard excels. He has been recognized by his peers as someone to watch, making momentum in their world. "As the Shellsmith, and operator of the Knivery, along with my wife Kelly, I started inlay before building, and this has helped my craft." Having just completed an expensive inlay job, Goddard excitedly talks about ornamentation. "How great is the idea and how big is the budget. I've done everything from dots to dragons." Goddard is in increasing demand as a sub contractor for other luthiers to do their inlay work and he mentions that part of the business as growing the most. For finishes, nitrocellulose lacquer is used as well as a water based varnish. Ukuleles are French polished. For strings, he prefers Elixir nanoweb medium- phosphor bronze, and notes that on some instruments nickel strings sound great. For picks he prefers legal tortoiseshell and Blue Chip.

In the Florida, Georgia Alabama tri-state area, there is a need for good repair and set up work. Goddard limits repairs to vintage instruments; doing neck sets, and bridges and major cracks, and restorations. He has done compression refrets, and informs us

that, “For guitars that have a non adjustable truss rod you can adjust the relief in the neck using frets with varying thickness tangs.” In the vintage guitar world this is a valuable skill.

The Future

Amesqua and Goddard are hyper- focused on the process of the magic of the art form in the moment, and will continue to make high quality instruments as they become more successful over the next five years. Amesqua lets us know, “We are going to grow, and of that we have no doubt, as we build extremely high quality products, so success is never in question. We strive to grow with the highest of intent, honor and integrity.” Musicians and fans in the Tallahassee and surrounding area are fortunate to have such a team supporting the acoustic music scene.

For further information, visit Jettinstruments.com.

Lee Kotick, of Tallahassee, FL., is a retired educational consultant for programs for students with disabilities. He played guitar in Max Tillman and Bottom Dollar Boys and the Larry Rice Bands.

