

said. “I figured it was time for the shop to start making money, and dove in.

“Over the years I’d slowly gravitated towards violins,” Davidson continued, “and I realized nobody was really doing this work locally. There was one guy in Redding who retired after the [Carr] Fire up there. I started properly apprenticing violin work with a guy named James Wimmer [owner of Violin Wise] in Santa Barbara.

“That was a great experience. He basically said, ‘Oh, you want to start doing violin work? Here’s everything you need.’ He’s been an amazing mentor.”

Poison, imperialism, sustainability

Davidson explained his shift of focus to violins wasn’t entirely a matter of infatuation and survival, but that some deeper reasons also drove the change.

“With the reevaluation of one’s life that came with the pandemic, I started really looking at the history of guitar making, and there are some things that really irked me,” he said. “One big problem is [guitars being mostly made] with African or South American tropical hardwoods. The world has been hyper-focused on these woods since the time of colonialism.

“In Europe, they’d been making instruments out of native woods for hundreds of years. All of a sudden, they went other places and said, ‘Wow, look at this wood ... let’s take all of it!’ That’s led to clear-cutting forests and all kinds of terrible things.”

Moreover, many of these tropical species are downright dangerous to work with, Davidson said. As examples, he cited Indian rosewood (“The dust sticks in your lungs and never goes away”), ebony (“it’s extremely carcinogenic and like little razor blades that you breath in”) and snakewood (it’s actually venomous and will toxify your blood”).

He said other common guitar woods have been driven nearly to extinction and only old samples are available, for steep prices.

“I don’t want to be chasing the newest tropical hardwood, knowing that wood wants to kill me,” Davidson added.

Violins, by contrast, are made primarily from maple and spruce. He noted that European builders—after 600 years of using the same “wood recipe” for violins—have curated and kept up forests to ensure the sustainability of these sources.

That long history is part of what appeals so much to Davidson about violins.

“They’ve had time to evolve; guitars are babies by comparison,” he said. “The history and evolution of these instruments, the base of knowledge we’ve built around them, it all



Davidson cuts the soon-to-be-scrolled headpiece for a new violin.

PHOTO BY KEN SMITH

really speaks to the academic part, the musicologist, in me.”

The first build

Occupying the spot of honor in the center of Davidson’s work bench during the CN&R’s visit was one particular violin, its antiqued finish making it look like an ancient instrument despite the fact it was brand new, yet to even be strung.

This was Davidson’s first full-solo violin build, patterned after a 1702 Stradivar. He said he put about 100 hours into its construction, not including countless hours spent sanding and staining and reapplying the finish more than two dozen times to build up the aged-looking veneer.

“Antiquing takes a lot longer [than normal varnish],” he said. “It’s like giving an infant a fake ID.”

A week after the visit, Davidson’s debut violin was complete. To celebrate, he called his friend and fellow local fiddler, Phillip Harrold, to come hear it sing for the first time. Harrold joined him for a few songs on an instrument built by Davidson’s violin-making mentor, Wimmer, creating what Davidson called a special “master-apprentice moment.”

“If you told me two years ago that this is what I’d be doing, I would have said, ‘You’re crazy,’” Davidson reflected on his journey into violin craft. “Life sometimes has its own way of working out, of getting better and more interesting.” □



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