Kantara

Arab-Appalachian Music???

Believe it or not, there is a connection, and it is called Kantara. Consisting of three or four Americans and three Tunisians, this band will be playing this Sunday evening (May 27) at the Gravity Lounge just off the downtown mall in Charlottesville.

Gordonsville luthier Brian Calhoun plays rhythm guitar in this band and he is joined by his fiddler/violinist wife, Ann Marie Calhoun. Sponsored by the U.S. State Department, this effort at musical diplomacy "combines traditional Appalachian music with traditional Tunisian music."

Not long ago, Brian, Ann Marie and the band toured Italy and Tunisia, "promoting Muslim-American relations," to rave reviews. "It actually had an impact," says Brian of the band's ability to improve America's image overseas. "It actually made a difference." Now the band will do the same in the states with stops in Charlottesville, Lexington, Ashland, and Washington, DC.

Brian and Ann Marie married in 2002. At the time she was the fiddler for the band Old School Freight Train, led by Gordonsville native, Jesse Harper (see Insider, Nov. 10, 2005).

In fact Jesse is a proud owner of a Rockbridge guitar. Ann Marie decided to leave the band to be closer to home. She taught fiddle and violin at Woodberry Forest for several years. Now she's back on the road again, with Kantara. And recently she returned from a tour of six South American countries, playing fiddle for British rock band Jethro Tull!

A page from the Rockbridge Guitars brochure shows off inlay work and musicians' testimonials about these outstanding instruments.

Rockin' Rockbridge Guitars

Ah, the guitar, the world's most popular instrument…easy to transport, capable of playing melody and accompaniment (sometimes simultaneously), fairly easy to learn to play (but maddeningly difficult to play well), easy on the eyes and ears, and adaptable to virtually every kind of music from Andres Segovia to Jimi Hendrix; from Django Reinhardt to Doc Watson. There are millions of them out there.

But in a basement workshop outside of Gordonsville, one out of a million is being made one at a time. "We're very particular about being meticulous," says Brian Calhoun, a soft spoken gentle giant of a fellow who can just as easily shave tenths of millimeters off of a piece of rosewood as he can do a 360 slam

The process of ordering a Rockbridge guitar starts with a phone call. The wait list is a year and a half. At right, each guitar takes three months to build. The smaller and thinner "000" model at left and the larger "Dreadnought" model at right. Below, Brian Calhoun must consider side to side and up/down tolerances to properly adjust the neck of a Rockbridge guitar.

Photos by Phil Audibert

"We're very particular about being meticulous."

--Brian Calhoun

were doing."

In the old days they did everything by hand. They even used to bend the moistened sides over a metal tube with a propane torch heating the inside. "Now, three people working full time, we try to cut out the parts that don't really matter if you do them by hand or not," explains Brian. But he quickly adds, "a lot of this stuff, like carving the bracing and getting the tops joined right, you need hand tools; they do a better job than a machine could do."

Brian snaps open a guitar case and pulls out their "000" model. It goes for about $3,500. It is a relatively thin-bodied, light guitar. "It's easy to get your arm around it, it sits on your leg nice, and it has a different sound," Brian says with obvious affection. He casually strums an E chord. The projection, volume and tone are outstanding from such a small instrument. "We sell a lot of these to finger style players and people who are playing slower, prettier music." Then he pulls out the "Dreadnought model;" the tone is even richer. This is the guitar the lickety-split flatpickers like. It will bring about $5,200.

He points to a pale line outlining the feminine hour glass shape of the body and stretching up each side of the tapered neck and around the edge of the peg head. It is a tiny strip of maple no wider than a guitar's third string. He turns the instrument over and points to the joinery of the neck to the body…"little details we feel we want to have perfect, even though nobody notices." Believe me, we noticed.

So what's next for Rockbridge Guitars? Sell out? Grow too big too fast? Become an IPO on the stock market? Whoa! Slow down!

Brian ponders the question. "We go back and forth about expanding or not," he says hesitantly. "We have four or five dealers right now who take up 20 percent of the orders." Dealers are good for people who don't want to wait a year and a half for a guitar. If Randall and Brian expand, they will have to take on more dealers. "Right now it's nice to take direct orders….it's also neat to work with the customers instead of just building stock models to go and put in the store."

INSIDER

By Phil Audibert

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dunk on the neighborhood basketball court. Welcome to Rockbridge Guitars, consisting of two partners, Randall Ray in Lexington and Brian Calhoun right here in Gordonsville. Just listen to what professional musicians are saying about these luthiers.

"The craftsmanship of the Rockbridge guitar is exceptional. Its flawless build and brilliant sound encase some of the finest tones to be heard in a new guitar today." That's Cody Kilby, the national flatpicking champion and guitarist for Ricky Scaggs and Kentucky Thunder talking.

"This is hands-down the best new guitar I've ever been fortunate enough to own. I feel extremely lucky," says Roy Curry, two-time national flatpicking champion and guitarist for Lone Mountain Band. How about bluegrass queen, Rhonda Vincent; she owns three Rockbridge Guitars…or the guitarist for the Dixie Chicks. The list goes on and on.

But if you want to buy one of these works of art, you need to, first, shell out some bucks and then stand in line for a year and a half. Randall and Brian, with the help of employee Adam McNeil, have 85 guitars on order. It takes three months to make one of these masterpieces, sometimes longer. Currently, one completed Rockbridge guitar leaves Gordonsville for its new owner every week.

"We spend a lot of time making sure these things look good, but the most important thing is that they play right," points out Brian from his surprisingly uncluttered basement workshop. One room contains the power tools…anything that makes dust; the other room is home to the hand tools and works in progress. Brian and Adam spend every day, Monday through Thursday 7 a.m. 'til 6:30 p.m. making sure that every Rockbridge guitar will not only please the eye and the hand, but most importantly, the ear.

It all starts with wood and Brian's most important hand tools, which are sitting on either side of his head...his ears. He spends a lot of time tapping on sheets of Adirondack spruce and Western red cedar. "Each type of wood gives a totally different sound," he explains. "We use these woods (spruce, mahogany, rosewood) because of the way they sound, first of all, and the way they look second of all."

Essentially a flat-top guitar, which isn't exactly flat by the way, has its back and sides made out of the same wood, usually mahogany or rosewood. The all-important spruce or cedar top is the face or sounding board of the instrument. "When you hit a string the top and back are moving," points out Brian. He demonstrates by playing a chord on one of his guitars. It rings gloriously. Then he presses the fleshy part of his arm to the body of the guitar like a dampener. It does not ring and sustain as well.

Above left, Brian Calhoun uses a tiny coping saw such as this to cut each piece of inlay. Not only does he do this work for all Rockbridge guitars but also for high-end Stelling banjos. Above right, using "blazing sharp" chisels, Brian Calhoun makes minute adjustments to the dovetailed neck joint. Although certain routine tasks are done by machines, the most delicate are accomplished with hand tools. Below, that's a Rockbridge guitar that Rhonda Vincent is playing. The bluegrass artist owns three.

Top photos by Phil Audibert. Bottom photo contributed.

"Each piece of wood is going to be totally different," he continues. He can run two tops of the same kind of wood through a thickness sander, and "one of them is going to be stiffer than the other. One of them is going to ring more when you tap on it. And so what we can do as a small shop is get the most out of each piece of wood." A stiff piece of wood he'll make thinner by two or three-tenths of a millimeter. Randall will then compensate for that difference when he makes the all-important bracing. "We flex on it by hand, tap on it by ear, we can get the optimum sound that that piece of wood has to offer as opposed to running everything through like a machine would do it."

Obviously, this kind of know-how did not come to Brian overnight. Born and raised in Rockbridge County, he started playing guitar in high school, and learned the rudiments of instrument building from his guitar teacher. He lasted one semester at Berklee School of Music in the Boston area, before he came back home and underwent apprenticeships with a mandolin maker and a violin maker.

Then he discovered inlay work, "and that became my first paying job." To this day, his incredibly complex and precise inlay work can be seen on high-end Stelling banjos as well as Rockbridge guitars.

Meanwhile, "one of my guitar mentors," Randall Ray of Lexington had 15 years experience building three or four custom made guitars per year, mostly as a serious hobby. He approached Brian about doing some inlay work. Then he asked Brian to carve a neck for him. One day they looked at each other and said, "We could make some nice guitars if we work together."

At this point they weren't even putting a name on the headstock of the instruments they were building. So, they came upon Rockbridge Guitars, sold one to Larry Keel of the Larry Keel Experience, and the rest is history. That was in 2002. "At some point we started getting large numbers of orders and started selling more and more guitars to professional players. That's what did it for us," says Brian. "We don't really advertise, and we get orders from all over the world." Good old word of mouth.

About a year and a half ago, Brian hired Adam, who had experience in woodworking, but not instrument building. For Brian that was a good thing because, "we were looking for somebody who was good at woodworking but who wasn't going to tell us how to build guitars. So he works out great." For Adam's part, "It was a little weird starting because I'm used to working in 16ths (of an inch) and now I'm working in 32nds, 64ths, tenths of millimeters."

Today Brian and Randall split the work between the two workshops. Brian and Adam make the tops, backs and sides and send them unassembled "almost like a kit" to Randall, who carves the braces and assembles the bodies. He then ships them back to Brian who has made the neck and fingerboard and done the inlay work. Each guitar makes four trips over the mountain between Gordonsville and Lexington.

Rockbridge guitars are truly unique not just because they are built to each customer's specifications, but also because of some innovation on Brian and Randall's part. "The ideal guitar is an old Martin," explains Brian. "But we didn't want to make an exact copy of an old Martin." Besides, Randall really liked the sound of old Gibson guitars too. "We took our favorite aspects of Martin and our favorite aspects of Gibson and we combined the two. Then we came up with some other things along the way, adding our own interpretations of what they

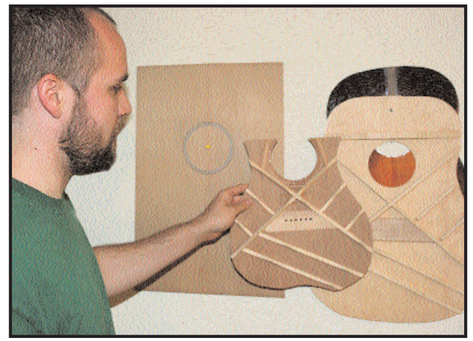
Building a guitar–from soup to nuts

So you've decided you want a Rockbridge Guitar. It all starts with a phone call. "We have lots of options," says Brian: model, wood choice, trim, inlay, neck width and shape, the list of choices goes on forever; so is the list of decisions to be made.

Brian points to the company's first left-handed guitar. "This guy's guitar is going to cost over $7,000; he knows what he wants…but a lot of times they don't know, and I'll talk them through it." Still, he adds, "No one's going to come in and buy their first guitar from us, so they'll know a little about what they want." A couple of clients have even flown their private planes down to the Gordonsville Airport to pick out their wood! Once final approval is given and a deposit taken, the price of the guitar is locked in, even though prices may go up while it is being built.

Now it's time for Brian and Adam to get to work. "Basically the first part of the guitar is building parts." The tops and backs are individually thickness sanded according to their stiffness and joined. The sides are moistened and placed between two heating sheets. A silicon heating blanket brings the temperature up to 300 degrees. The sides are carefully bent over the form and after cooling are joined together to keep their hourglass shape.

Next, the body of the guitar, still in pieces, is sent to Randall for the crucial bracing procedure. "It's not about aesthetics; it's about getting the braces to the proper thickness for the individual top," explains Brian. Once the bracing is in, the body is assembled with a glue that dries rock-hard ("you don't want something gummy in there that takes away from the sound being transmitted"). The assembled body is sent back to Gordonsville, where Brian and Adam do the delicate work of putting in the binding, a fine trim around the edges of the guitar that covers the exposed end grain of the tops and backs.



Above, although these particular examples will not be used, they show the bracing patterns for guitar tops and backs. Bracing plays a crucial role in how a guitar sounds. Below, Adam McNeil gradually cranks down on the waist of some guitar binding that he is shaping. Note the completed half side in the foreground. The process of wetting and heating the wood to bend it into a guitar side has drawn sap to the surface. It will be scraped and sanded away before finishing.

Photos by Phil Audibert

They've also been working on the neck, making tiny adjustments with "blazing sharp" chisels to the dovetail joint to the body. "It's hard because if you do too much of one thing then it's going to mess with the other," says Brian of the up/down and side to side adjustments. They do not glue the neck, but bolt it instead to the body. "That way, down the road, if we ever have to take the neck off, it's really easy."

Next comes inlay work, hours with a coping saw with a blade so tiny you can hardly see it…hundreds… thousands of pieces of shell, wood, metal and stone. Some inlay jobs take as long as it took to build the instrument itself…the artist's signature, family crests, birds, flowers, Celtic designs, the Simpsons even. On a work in progress, Bart and Homer chase each other up and down the neck!

Once he's routed the inlays into the fingerboard and head stock, he glues it to the neck and installs the silver/nickel frets. Then they shape the neck to the player's desired thickness, "and then everything is very meticulously sanded."

The instrument then goes upstairs to a converted laundry room to be sprayed with environmentally friendly water-based lacquer. It hangs to dry somewhat ignominiously from a common shower rod in a basement bathroom.

One more trip across the mountain so Randall can attach the neck, set the bridge, attach the tuners and string it up. Then back to Gordonsville, "and we let it sit for a couple of days. And then I do the setup work which is one of the single most time-consuming parts," says Brian. This includes making the guitar feel right to the player…intonation, string height, action, truss rod adjustment, frets leveled to within 1/10 of a millimeter, followed by a final buffing and a new set of strings. The pick guard is the last thing to install before it is shipped.

You are now the proud owner of a Rockbridge guitar. Go ahead and play it; you've waited a year and a half. It will sound like nothing you have heard before, and you'll keep it for the rest of your life.