

KENDRICK

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evenings and weekends off,” Kendrick said with a laugh. “Anytime I was off, Sundays, everything, I was here in the shop working.”

Most recently, Kendrick was an engineer with Nestle in Mount Sterling. He retired from there just under two years ago. His engineering background helped with the transition to luthier.

“There is a lot of engineering involved in acoustic instruments,” Kendrick said. “Precision plays a big part in it. As far as the sound quality goes, the results depend on what you do. I was (worked as a) tool and die (maker) way on back and we measure things in thousandths not inches.”

“I do a lot of measurements and then you do learn the feel and the sound and all of those things. It all complements each other,” Kendrick said. “Everything that has ever been built has engineering in it.”

Kendrick said he takes pride in doing things himself, from engines and transmissions to the fine musical instruments he makes he “takes pride in being able to do it myself.”

More than guitars

“Acoustic guitars, like you see laying there on the table,” Kendrick said when asked his favorite thing to build. “I’ve built banjos and mandolins, I’ve built one acoustic bass.”

“I like dreadnought guitars, though I’ve built others,” Kendrick said, adding there are certain style he enjoys from the frets to the inlay layout. Most of the guitars have been those used in bluegrass and other traditional mountain music.

Kendrick says mandolins are the most demanding instruments he makes.

“It’s a lot of carving and it’s rough on the joints,” he explained. “I enjoy building the mandolin, but it is the hardest to build.”

Most of the shop’s work is in repair work.

For repair work, the shop gives a cost upfront for all the work required. For custom-made commissions, all are on a contract basis.

“We take a deposit that covers material and build form there. We don’t build any models, it’s all custom work.”

The build of a Kendrick

A custom build can take six months, Kendrick said.

Kendrick has built 43 custom serialized instruments.

“It’s probably a little over 50 because I’ve built several dulcimers and other stuff,” Kendrick said. “And some things people have started and couldn’t finish. I’ve finished it for them, I didn’t serialize it, it’s not a Kendrick instrument.”

Kendrick said his instruments start around \$6,000 and go up from there depending on the amount of inlay work and amount of work required.

“There is so much hand work that goes into a typical, not real fancy guitar, (the build) takes about 150 to 160 hours of time,” Kendrick explained. “The fanciest one I ever built had 321 hours in it.”

The wood can also drive the cost up. Kendrick is currently working on a guitar he start-



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The GPS on my phone told me I had a turn coming a half or a mile or so. I turned off U.S. 460 and headed down a country road.

The phone told me to turn down a dirt driveway. Past a log cabin, I pulled down the hillside and pulled up to a wood cabin in the woods; off to the side sat a garage.

Out of the door came two men, Neil and his son Josh.

They showed me to the workshop, behind the garage, in which sat a couple motorcycles and a muscle car. Along side was a trike Neil’s father had built. Making ran in the blood of the Kendricks.

As we settled in for the interview, I started talking to the men. Neil’s knowledge and expertise was unmistakable; he explained in details that went over my head. Josh seemed to be listening to his father as intently as I. For me it was looking to understand enough to relay the information to the readers. For Josh, I think it was to soak up as much as possible so he could do his father proud as Josh is taking over the family business.

ed for himself over 20 years ago.

“This one is Brazilian rosewood, which is \$5,000 worth of wood for the back and sides and a red spruce top,” Kendrick said.

Kendrick makes everything in the shop. From stenciling the top and bottom of the guitars, to cutting them out, to forming the sides to shape and steaming them to create the curves, installing bracing to ensure they stay in the correct shape, even the finishing work is all done in-house.

He does the inlays by hand, cutting the pieces with a saw under a microscope and placing onto the guitar.

“The most laborious thing is stenciling,” Kendrick said. “I’m really enjoying the layout work, you know of measuring things out and planning it out.”

The importance of wood

Not every wood can be used to make a Kendrick guitar.

“You can’t go out and harvest a tree yourself and make a guitar out of it and have it as something that will stay together,” Kendrick said. “You have to have the wood controlled, you know, these wood brokers guarantee the wood to 6% moisture content.”



PHOTOS BY MATT JONES | THE DAILY INDEPENDENT

TOP: Neil Kendrick sands a mandolin. **ABOVE:** Joshua Kendrick holds a guitar his father made and then named in his honor. **BELOW:** Neil Kendrick places the pieces of a mandolin he got from the shop of Ed Rose in Lexington. The mandolin was in a bag for several decades before Kendrick began the repair process.

They spoke of countless weekends traveling to bluegrass shows building a client base for their guitars and the work they did on Martin guitars as an authorized repair shop. They showed me part of the collection of instruments they’ve made.

During our talk, it came to light the cabin I drove by at the top of the drive was originally built as a shop for Neil to sell his guitars and other supplies for musicians.

They thumbed through a binder with printed photos of guitars Neil

made during his career. I think the trip down memory lane was more for them than for me, but I was happy to oblige.

Because for me, knowing that there are still people making things in shops behind garages was a treat enough.

In the woods, between the Red River Gorge and Cave Run Lake, sat a man between an artist and a previous life as a tool and dye maker, making instruments using the best of both halves of himself.

Martin because Martin is very particular about working on their instruments,” Kendrick said. “That you’re going to have the right kind of knowledge and the right kind of approach about it and the attitude about it to do well.”

Being located in Menifee County enabled Kendrick to build a relationship with Martin.

“They used to be well below market on what shops would charge,” Kendrick said. “Not necessarily for me here because we’re in a very depressed economic area. So I don’t charge like they do in Lexington or Ashland or whatever. So my rates were close to Martin’s rates anyway. They have upped their rates since then.”

The future of Kendrick

The business is now owned by Joshua, Neil’s son.

“I grew up around it my whole life,” Joshua said. “I spent a lot of time in the retail store.”

Neil had a retail shop in a log cabin up the hill from the workshop in 1997, but closed it seven years later to focus on custom and repair work.

Around that same time, Neil was able to buy the entire shop of the late Ed Rose from Lexington.

“His son had his whole shop, all the equipment in the shop for sale. So I bought the whole shop,” Neil said.

Neil sold some of the large tools and paid for many of the tools he used to build his business.

“It was one of the smartest buys I every made,” Neil said.

The fully functioning shop as well as decades of loyal customers have set Joshua up for success, Neil said.

Joshua doesn’t make instruments at this point. His focus is learning and mastering the repair side of the business, learning from the hands of his father’s three decades of knowledge.

“Josh has the advantage of all of those years. It’s like on-the-job training all the time for him,” Neil said, the

duo would spend weekends at festivals when Joshua was a child. “He’ll get comfortable enough to just turn loose, whereas myself I had to learn the hard way.”

Joshua said he would work in the shop doing the simplest of tasks several years ago.

“About a year ago I got more serious into it,” Joshua said. He said he has decided following in his father’s footsteps was what he wanted to do in life. “As I’ve got a little bit older I’ve developed a lot more of an appreciation for handmade things and these skills that are of at threat to be lost of time that people don’t keep on with them.”

“I’ve been focusing on the repairs,” Joshua said, adding he hopes to make custom guitars in the future. “The most fun part of doing repair work for me is when someone brings something in and it’s not quite right not sounding as well as it should and they get it back afterwards and they’re really happy with it.”

“I’m busting at the seams,” Neil said, about his son following in his footsteps. “It totally makes me happy that Josh would want to carry on with that. The whole old world, old school kind of things, you know crafts are quickly being lost. There’s a lot of things that we do with this that you can automate. For example, I used to program CNC equipment for years and I could do that. I could do all the inlay, all this stuff that way, but I don’t want to. I want to do it the old world way by hand with the hand tools. That’s still the true craft.”

For more information about the services offered by the company or to commission a custom instrument, contact (606) 782-5850 or email neilk@mrtc.com.

As for Neil, he plans to continue building custom guitars, but looks forward to being able to take off for a couple days on his motorcycle whenever he wants.

