

A Lifetime of Experimental Guitar Building: Luthier Larry Pogreba

By Brian D'Ambrosio

Keb' Mo and Bonnie Raitt have been recognized for decades as some of America's finest Grammy winning blues musicians. Jackson Browne has been churning out popular rock songs since the 70s. Emmy Lou Harris has been called one of this nation's most influential country music figures. Besides extraordinary God-given talent, the diverse lineup of icons has this in common – a guitar crafted by New Mexico luthier Larry Pogreba, whose list of notable clients is about as long as his career.

At age 75, the Truth or Consequences guitar builder continues to follow his own tune with regard to guitar design. From solid- and hollow-body electric guitars, to archtop semi-acoustic models like jazzboxes, to the long Weissenborn that rests on the player's lap, Pogreba's approach is one part practical and two parts experimental: "You build a few things that you know that are functioned to sell, but then you've got to build things that you want to try. And since the 1990s, people have been buying my experiments."

Noted for hubcap resonators

Historically, resonator guitars — which produce sound through spun metal cones as opposed to through the sounding board — have been mostly built using sheet metal or brass. Some time ago, Pogreba started designing them with an aluminum 1950s-era hubcap at the center.

"I'm not going to build something just because it's goofy," Pogreba said. "I've got to have a reason to stray, because they've been building guitars the same way for, well, 500 years. And, so you have to have an idea to change something that's that old."

"By the '70s, people all wanted resonator guitars like (Delta blues slide guitar master) Bukka White's, and they were so heavy that they all weighed 10 or 12 pounds because of the materials," Pogreba said. "People used to call them hubcap guitars. I realized there were only a few hubcaps that are the right shape to cover the guitar, like a 1952 Mercury, a '55 Olds, a '54 Packard, '53 Chevy."

One of the guitars that Pogreba is constructing he pieced together with Belizean rosewood burl wood and

mahogany. Another project includes a fingerboard of South African pink ivory. In his shop, he has stacks of red spruce and Appalachian spruce and big walnut slabs from southeast Kansas to cull from as well.

No matter what it is constructed with or how it is built, a guitar's potential is reliant upon the skill of the player, he said.

"I'll often have a guitar around for a month and I will think that I know that guitar, but then somebody like (instrumentalist) Darrell Scott or (rocker) David Lindley, they'll pick that guitar up and you're like, 'Wow! You never made that noise for me, honey!'"

Selling guitars to his musical heroes

Singer-songwriter Browne, who has sold more than 18 million records, owns at least five of Pogreba's guitars. In 2018, Browne received the Gandhi Peace Award for his contributions to world peace, and when he accepted the prize, he had a Pogreba guitar at his side.

"I don't know anybody who's more just absolutely eaten up with guitars than Jackson Browne," Pogreba said. "When he gets a guitar, he'll try different gauges and types of strings, different tunings. He'll do more experimenting with that guitar than I do. And he'll figure out the single best voice that that guitar has ... He might only use that guitar when he plays 'Running on Empty.' When he's traveling, the stage looks like a pawn shop because he's got so many guitars."

About 30 years ago, Pogreba met blues musician Keb' Mo. Soon after, he was introduced through him to Raitt. He has maintained a longstanding business relationship with Keb' Mo ever since.

"I was selling my resonator guitars at a Boulder-area music store. I was driving through town and they said, 'Keb' Mo is here at the radio station today.' ... Bonnie played on his album and saw that guitar, and the tech sent me the measurements for her guitar neck, what she's already used to, so that thing would feel comfortable as soon as she picked it up. She said she wanted to take it out and play a gig with it."

About 15 years ago, Raitt invited Pogreba to attend one of her shows. Coincidentally, Keb' Mo opened the engagement, and the two musicians played side by side for an encore. Each clutched one of Pogreba's instruments for one song.

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Pogreba started building guitars while he was a sculpture major in college.

"By '75 or so I was wanting to build more fun kinds of stuff, and as wacky as people were back in those days, they were really conservative about their guitars. They had to be just like the one grandpa had. ... You didn't have that much freedom to design something far from the way they had been building guitars for the last 100 years."

Sometime around 1990, Pogreba discovered a book about experimental guitar building and was inspired by the unusual depictions enough to reconsider the course of his life.

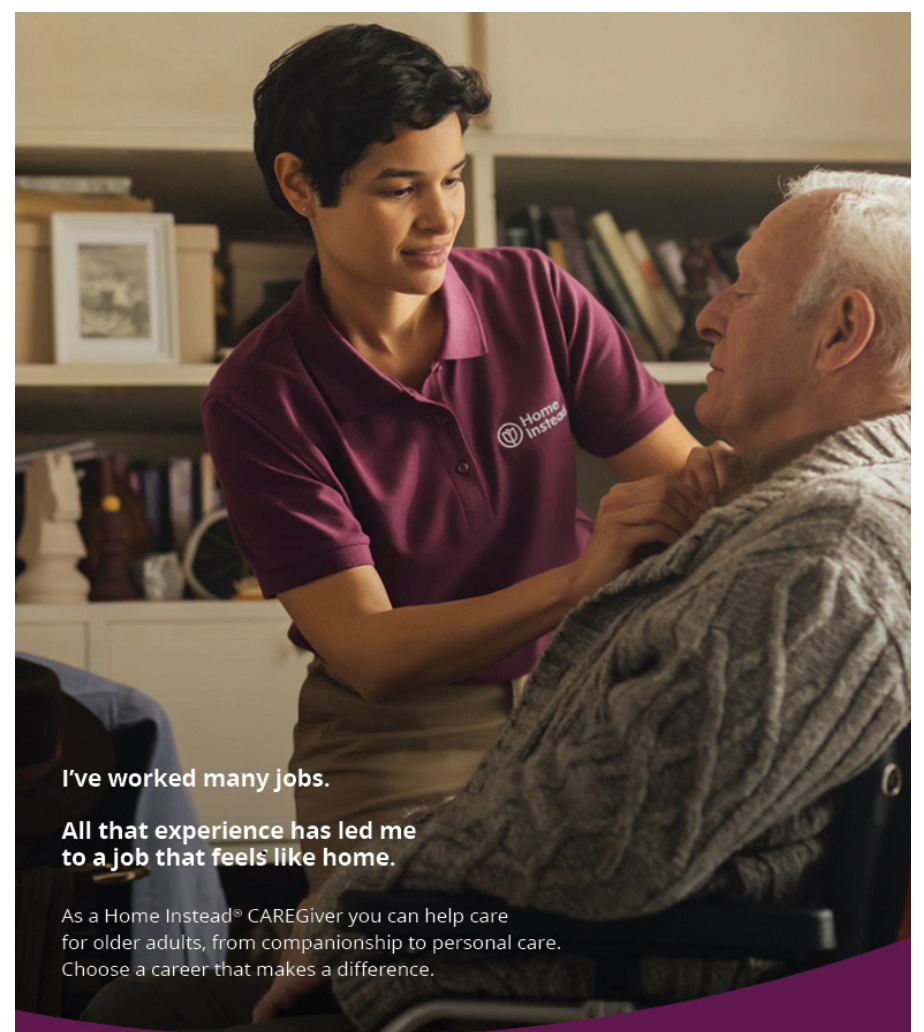
"I thought that things had changed and unusual guitars would be more accepted," he said.

After scooting around the country, the peripatetic Pogreba ultimately returned to Truth or Consequences,



where he lives off the grid and remains as fascinated and delighted as anyone by the unexpected, creative, and sometimes bizarre pieces of art that his unbounded thinking somehow constructs.

"These asymmetrical guitars and the fan frets — they're kind of unusual," said Pogreba, inspecting one of his concoctions. "But inventive people will try him, because there is a definite advantage to this setup."



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