

Mike Bellame



Left: Master luthier and Troublesome Creek founder Doug Naselroad. Below left: The design of the Uncle Ed Series dulcimer dates back to the 1870s.

The dulcimers, guitars, and mandolins from Kentucky’s Troublesome Creek are crafted with a true sense of place.

by GINA DECAPRIO VERCESI



Music has long been central to life in Eastern Kentucky. For generations, locals have gathered on porches to pick and sing, carrying on traditions nearly as old as the mountains themselves. And because Appalachia has always been a land of making do with what’s available, the people fashioned their instruments from whatever the hills and hollers could provide.

That tradition is alive and well in Hindman, a small coal town that is the birthplace of the modern mountain dulcimer, the hourglass-shaped instrument that became the defining sound of Appalachian folk music. It’s also the foundation on which master luthier Doug Naselroad built the Appalachian School of Luthiery, where budding artisans—most of them recovering from substance-abuse disorders—learn to craft some of the country’s finest dulcimers, guitars, and mandolins.

A Kentucky native, Naselroad has been making stringed instruments since 1969, including a stint at Collings Guitars, the legendary custom guitar company in Austin, Texas. When he arrived in Hindman to establish the school in 2012, he found a community in crisis—gutted by the collapse of the coal industry and devastated by the opioid epidemic—and people searching for work, purpose, and a



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Artisans develop skills at the Kentucky nonprofit, turning their craft into steady work.



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way forward. Luthiery, he discovered, provided all three.

“Making a musical instrument requires attention to detail and dedication to a goal,” says Naselroad. “The gratification is not instant. It’s the exact opposite of drugs. But as time goes by, the memory of the gratification from drugs gets smaller and the gratification gained from luthiery gets bigger. I never thought instrument making could have that kind of social impact.”

To increase that impact, Naselroad built a manufacturing facility where his students could turn their hard-earned craft into steady jobs. In 2019, the Troublesome Creek Stringed Instrument Company was born. It’s the only nonprofit stringed-instrument manufacturer in the world.

Troublesome Creek artisans produce more than 100 handcrafted instruments each year, including the Uncle Ed Series dulcimer, which is based on a template for one originally produced in Hindman in the 1870s. In true Appalachian fashion, the instruments are made from local tonewoods sourced from the surrounding hills. Appalachian

red spruce, quilted cherry, black walnut, and curly maple are used for backs and sides, while flamed maple, butternut, and sassafras are used for necks. “Suffice it to say, we don’t have to go to the rainforests of Brazil or Honduras,” Naselroad says. “Appalachia is one of the richest repositories of musical wood in the world.”

Unlikely species find their way into the mix as well. “We love to try new recipes,” he says. “We use a lot of ‘trash trees’ that people wouldn’t normally associate with any kind of fine craft—like Osage orange and hackberry—but that result in wonderful instruments. I believe Stradivari would have used the woods of Appalachia if he’d known about them in his time.”

The instruments made by Troublesome Creek continue a musical heritage that began nearly three centuries ago. “Folk arts are living arts,” says Naselroad. “Things that are culturally rooted in a place are always the best things to try to grow. We’ve reminded folks that this is our history.” As it turns out, it’s also their future. ☺