

Paul Doyle Instruments

By Robyn Kilroy

Tucked down an alley in the middle of Galway City is every instrument-lover's dream. Local instrument maker Paul Doyle set up his workshop on Dominick Street in 1991, where he specialises in hand-crafted string instruments and restoration work. The instruments he works on range from classical guitars, to the more niche, such as mandolas (a very large mandolin) and hurdy gurdys.

Paul's workshop is located upstairs in an old, barn-style building. Body parts of instruments were piled everywhere on top of one another. Arms from guitars reached out into the walkways, and fiddles hung from the ceiling. The body of a large, dusty double bass lounged lazily in the corner. The whole workshop seemed to have little sense of organisation, yet it also somehow worked.

"I have a photographic memory," said Paul. "I think about where the last time I used something, and then I'm able to find it."

Paul's latest patient was a guitar belonging to a rather unfortunate 22-year-old. Its neck had snapped but he managed to mend it, with only the cracks in the varnish still left visible. Like a surgeon, Paul sat by his work bench and sanded down its neck.

"I started back in 1975 because I couldn't afford a good instrument, and I was working as a session musician in London in a recording studio," said Paul.

"I saw these beautiful guitars lying around and I really, really wanted one. I said to the engineer what's the difference between all those guitars and my crappy guitar, it doesn't sound right at all. He said they're all built with a good sound board, solid wood; and my one was made from plywood."

With this, Paul set out to investigate how to make a better guitar for himself. He attended classes in Tufnell Park in London, where he studied how to build one. The first guitar he ever built took nine months, and is still hanging in his workshop. His third guitar he ever made was also hanging next to it, both marking the sentimental value of crafting an instrument by hand.

"I don't think I'd ever sell them," said Paul. "I did sell [his third guitar], and it came back to me 16 years later. Some druggies got it and they smashed it up."

Paul's craft includes more artistic and unique takes on mainstream styles of instruments. His "Tree Guitar" is a striking design, with the sound hole of the guitar styled to form tree branches, and the bridge of the guitar shaped the form roots. When creating his more unique designs, Paul keeps in mind what's popular at the time, but tries to not let it look like a factory-made one.

As well as creating and restoring today's instruments, Paul also specialises in early and antique instruments.

“I worked in Manchester for two years, and I studied there with a factory that shows you to build early instruments,” said Paul.

Hidden amongst the clutter of wood and strings, gems from the past were picked up and showed off by Paul. The majority of them were copies of early and ancient instruments, some were stripped or in the middle of the restoration process. One of these instruments was a stripped apart cittern from 1764, an early instrument that is similar to a bouzouki.

Paul also takes on students to train in constructing instruments. At the moment he was two American students, one of them who was quietly working away at a body of a hurdy gurdy. Paul takes on students from all over the world and of all ages.

“The oldest man I had was 71, and he made a fiddle in four weeks. He came in 9 o’clock every morning, and he left at midnight every night,” said Paul. “And then four weeks later he made a viola.”

By providing a space for instruments to come alive through traditional craftsmanship, Paul Doyle is gifting his students with the knowledge of instrument making.