

Artist On The Ridge: Francois Vadeboncoeur

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FRANCOIS VADEBONCOEUR DISPLAYS AN ALMOST FINISHED GUITAR in his shop behind his Wheat Ridge home. As a hobby, Vadeboncoeur has made at least 50 guitars, dulcimers, ukuleles and other string instruments for over 30 years. PHOTO: MIKE MCKIBBIN

Pardon the pun, but when it comes to making guitars and other string instruments, Francois Vadeboncoeur plays it by ear. The Wheat Ridge man is a luthier, the term for someone who builds or repairs string instruments by hand. While some might not have heard the term, Vadeboncoeur said there is “quite a number” of luthiers across Colorado and the U.S. A few schools teach the craft as well, he stated.

“Seeing someone take an instrument and play it” is the most rewarding moment for Vadeboncoeur. “And every one of the guitars is unique since they’re made by hand. Not like a Martin or a Gibson,” two of the major mass-produced, brand-name guitars.

Some luthiers take a scientific approach to making instruments, Vadeboncoeur said. “I was always more of a put-it-together and see how it sounds kind of guy,” he noted. Vadeboncoeur made instruments “on the side” for about 30 years. Health issues that started in 2017 sidelined him until he can finish another 6-12 months of training and rehabilitation to regain the full use of his hands. Vadeboncoeur has 28 instruments in various stages of construction needing his attention.

Vadeboncoeur, 70, was born in Michigan and grew up in California. He started woodworking and learned how to play the guitar in his teens. He and his family moved to Colorado in the 1980s, then back to California. In the late 1990s, Vadeboncoeur met a man in a hardwood shop who introduced him to guitar making. Vadeboncoeur apprenticed in his shop to learn the craft while working full-time in construction. “Wood was definitely a hobby,” Vadeboncoeur said. “I was not in it to make money. If I made 50 cents an hour, I was lucky.”

Vadeboncoeur’s first instruments were travel guitars. The smaller versions of regular guitars are easier to take to places like the beach, he said. Vadeboncoeur estimated he had made between 30-35 guitars and around a dozen dulcimers. Dulcimers look like small violins, played with special hammers striking the strings. “I made one for a wedding present to my wife,” Vadeboncoeur recalled. “Her dad was pretty impressed.” Vadeboncoeur estimated it takes around 250 hours to make a guitar and 150 hours for other instruments.

Luthiers use many different types of wood. “I’ve probably used 10,000 lbs. of wood, all kinds,” Vadeboncoeur stated. “Brazilian rosewood is the best but it’s pretty expensive. I like walnut because it gives you a mellow sound and it’s not too expensive. But there’s ebonies, mahoganies for the necks, for the tops you want something like spruce or cedars.”

Different woods are used for their different properties, too. “You want the backs and sides to be resonant and reflect the sound,” Vadeboncoeur explained. “The top has to vibrate well and the fingerboard and bridge need to be a dense wood so it doesn’t wear.”

Vadeboncoeur sold some of his handmade instruments at a shop in Golden before it closed down during the coronavirus pandemic. “I never did sell very many of them, that’s not why I made them,” Vadeboncoeur said. “But they can get a pretty good price. A classical guitar that a friend made sold for around \$6,000 online. That’s pretty typical for a handmade instrument made by a known guitar maker.”

Vadeboncoeur and his wife moved to Wheat Ridge when he retired in 2016. “We came out to Colorado for my grandnephew’s christening and we thought we’d like to move back,” he said. “We didn’t want to live downtown like we did before and my sister-in-law lived down the road. We thought it was a nice place and nice house.” Their home features a partially buried piano harp in the front yard’s vegetable garden. Piano harps connect tuning pins to the strings and have to withstand a tremendous amount of tension. So harps are made of cast iron and weigh around 100 lbs., Vadeboncoeur said. “I found a broken-down piano and it wasn’t too hard to transport it and take the harp out,” he stated.



Recently, Vadeboncoeur donated most of his personal collection of musical instruments to Eric Trujillo, a violin maker and teacher in Westminster. Trujillo works with the Latino Cultural Arts Center Music Program, a group that repairs and provides musical instruments to school children. “I must have collected all kinds of instruments, mostly from my 10 brothers and sisters,” Vadeboncoeur explained. “We all took music lessons of some sort, so there were violins, trumpets, guitars. It’s rewarding when you see kids get a guitar and learn how to play it.”

Vadeboncoeur said he and Steef Sealy, a member of the area band Better Than Biscuits, made a guitar that Sealy played in the group’s performances. “I did give one of my first guitars to a guy in the Seattle area, he’s a professional musician there,” Vadeboncoeur added. “That was just to kind of get my name and my brand out there. I think he’s still using it, based on some photos he posted online and he mentioned my name.”

Other than those two, Vadeboncoeur is not aware of any of his instruments having been played by top guitarists or other musicians. Flattering recognition came when two of his former California apprentices called him separately, both wanting to know how to start a guitar shop. “That’s nice when people seek you out for that kind of information,” Vadeboncoeur said.