

HANDMADE HERITAGE

Craftsmanship may be losing out to mass-produced, factory-made products, but several local artisans are keeping our area's creative roots alive.

PROFILES BY RACHEL ANDERSON HILL AND TARA LYNN THOMPSON



At a recent Dave Matthews Band concert, Danny Barnes played one of Bishline's handmade banjos alongside Matthews. To see a clip of the concert, and hear the banjo in action, go to www.youtube.com and enter search keywords "Danny Barnes and Dave Matthews Band."

STRING THEORY

When others his age were perfecting the art of goofing off, Tulsan Rob Bishline was discovering the art of the five-string banjo.

IT WAS DURING the rock revolution of the '70s that 12-year-old **Rob Bishline** discovered his love for music. With a machinist father and his mother a natural musician (she plays lap steel guitar, Hawaiian guitar and piano), Bishline was destined to become a blend of the two. "I started playing music at a young age," he says. "I really flipped out for it."

Bishline was inspired by artists such as **Gordon Lightfoot**, **Cat Stevens** and New Grass Revival. Born and raised in Tulsa, he learned to play the drums, trumpet and guitar, but his real interest was the banjo. Bishline was young when he started to take banjos apart just to learn more about them, and he learned to play by ear.

"I would slow down the record player to learn," Bishline says. "I listened to it so loud in the front room, stopping and restarting throughout a song. I don't know how my parents didn't kill me."

His parents were supportive of his passion then, but they couldn't have known how far this childhood hobby would take their son.

After graduating from Rogers High School, Bishline attended the Roberto-Venn School of Luthiery in Phoenix.

Bishline says he later tried jobs like welding, where he could build things with his hands, but he kept falling back into music. And when his first son arrived, it was difficult to balance family life with playing on the road, so he began a full-time career of building and repairing the instruments he loved.

"People are kind of amazed that I do this, but I look at it as if it's any other job, except that I love it," Bishline says. "It comes naturally."

Just about a year ago, Bishline and two friends took an idea they discussed on the golf

course and made it a reality. Now, at 46 and the head of a successful company, Bishline Banjos, Bishline makes 50 to 60 banjos per year, as well as one or two custom guitars.

Bishline is quick to point out that luthiery is not a dying art. In fact, the market has become quite competitive.

"It's not a guy in a room with a chisel anymore," Bishline says. "When I started, it was a romantic thing. Now, there are so many people doing it, you have to stay on top of the technology to be competitive."

Bishline Banjos are holding their own. The stringed beauties are played from coast to coast, in Scotland, England and Canada. And

the best in the banjo-playing business, **Danny Barnes**, swears by them for their intricate, handcrafted detail and perfect tone.

"All I can say is, what I've lacked in talent, I've made up for in enthusiasm and hard work," Bishline says. "I have a passion for it - I want to be good at it."

Now the father of two teenage boys, Bishline says it is his mother who keeps him humble. He says she often points out how impatient and sloppy he's always been with everything from building model cars to completing home-improvement projects. But, she says, it's a different story with banjos.