

Pet Shop Owner Brings Hawaiian Guitars to Maine

BY ASHLEY MEERS

BUCKSPORT — Taylor, Gibson, Martin. Before they were the names of the finest acoustic guitars, they were the names of men. In a most remote outpost of Hawaiian culture — Hancock County, Maine — another name is earning its place on that list: Vance.

Vance, as in Vance Guitars, three of which were commissioned by Patrick Landeza and recently Grammy-nominated Hawaiian guitarist Cyril Pahinui.

It was just over five months ago that Landeza saw Vance Peters and his black-and-white Aloha shirt at the American Folk Festival in Bangor and approached the mustachioed Hamden native to comment on it.

"He picked it right out of 10,000 people," Peters said.

Landezza was just the man he wanted to see. On the recommendation of a friend, Tony Sohns, Peters was there to see him and Cyril Pahinui (son of the late, great slack-key guitarist Gabby Pahinui), two of the most famous

guitarists of the ki ho'alu, or slack-key tradition on their first trip to Bangor.

"I'm the biggest fan of slack-key," Landeza recalls Peters saying to him.

"He came to every single one of our performances," Landeza said, laughing.

Peters happily describes himself as an oddball, a dreamer. But he wasn't unrealistic in his dreams. Though Peters had mentioned his guitar-making and had shown his idols a few guitar pictures on his digital camera, neither he nor Landeza said they expected anything to come of it.

"I bought them a beer and I thought that was the end of it," Peters said.

Landezza humored Peters, though, after Sohns snuck him into the performers' party that night. That evening, Landeza picked up the guitar he'd seen in the pictures.

"I'm telling you," Landeza said, pausing. "The guitar sounded incredible. And this is his first guitar."



STAFF PHOTO BY ASHLEY MEERS

Vance Peters of Bucksport custom makes slack-key guitars.

Landezza handed it to Pahinui, who strummed it and found it was tuned to his key.

"They hugged me and said, 'Hey, you nailed it. We have full confidence in you,'" Peters said. "For me, everything's exciting."

"We looked at each other and said, 'I want number two and I want number three,'" Landeza said. "And the rest was history."

Peters handed them his card, or rather the card for the Bucksport pet shop he's owned for the last 30 years.

Up until Bangor's American Folk Festival, it was Vance, as in Vance's Tropical Fish and Exotic Pets. There was a turtle in the window, a nurse shark named Lelu in her own lagoon, a silk banana tree, undulating anemones, and more blue bubbling tanks full of exotic Crayola-bright fish than you could shake a fish stick at.

Up until August 2005, Vance Peters' collection of 35 coconut-buttoned Aloha shirts was just "a good way to be eccentric and pro-

mote the store at the same time," Peters said.

Talk about a sea change.

From the visual Mai Tai of moody, Tiki bar-like caves up a rough flight of stairs, the sounds of tank aeration give way to acoustic Hawaiian guitar music and the woodshop where Vance Peters, probably wearing one of his 35 authentic Hawaiian shirts, handcrafts those very guitars himself.

His sons' paintings, from when they were children, hang on the wall. Stacks of Hawaiian music CDs are piled against his boom box. Shells, hula girl calendars, samples of thinly sliced instrument wood, even little notepads decorated like Aloha shirts fill the space.

"This is what they fell in love with," Peters says, smiling, taking the very first Vance Guitar out of its fuzzy black hard case. Made of blond curly koa wood, a rare and expensive wood native to Hawaii, the instrument is inset with shark's tooth detailing, abalone purling, fret dots and of course, his symbol, a stylized V at the top of the head.

"Nothing too flashy," Peters said.

There's nothing, actually, that makes a good slack-key guitar. As Peters will tell you, it's a tuning and a method — strumming with a thumb pick while you self-accompany with the other fingers — more than it is a type of guitar.

Slack-key is "just a regular guitar," Landeza concurs. "It's the tone that has the *mana*, it is the essence that a guitar holds. You put your soul in that guitar; it becomes a part of you."

Over the weeks that followed, they communicated during every step of the guitar's crafting, Landeza telling Peters what he wanted in the guitar, Peters sending him pictures.

"It was like a child, like raising a child, from the conception all the way from the end," Landeza said Friday. "When I feel it for the first time on Tuesday, it will be complete."

Only one or two percent of the already-scarce koa wood is instrument grade; it costs Peters \$1,000 for "two little planks," plus three months of work (the typical hand-made guitar takes one) before he can sell one for \$5,000.

"The wood is very important," Landeza said. "We're Hawaiian

When we travel, we represent Hawaii as well. It's part of home. It's part of who we are as people. And it's a beautiful wood."

Peters has now created four guitars, listening to the music of each musician for whom he crafted them as he bent, carved and polished the wood.

It was a detail Landeza appreciated.

"He said, 'You put your *mana* in it,'" Peters said.

Mana is an ethereal concept; it's a little like your soul. For a *haole*, or foreigner, to even have *mana* worth respect like that, Peters said, is pretty amazing.

"He says I nailed it," Peters said.

"The thing about him, though, that's different; he's filled with Aloha. It's everything. It's like, your code of honor," Landeza said. "He exudes Aloha."

The guitar, he said, similarly impressed him.

"It was a full, deep sound, full of life," Landeza said. "It was a perfect guitar. I just couldn't believe that it was his first guitar that he had made. It was incredible."

Upon finishing the guitars, Peters wrapped them and double wrapped them in blister wrap and foam to be picked up Friday morning by DHL and next-day air shipped to Berkeley. On Tuesday, he joined three other Hawaiian musicians at Landeza's Berkeley house — and bearing surprise gifts of lobster, too.

The Hawaiians have taken Peters under their wing as a sort of craftsman prodigy. Landeza plans to give the instruments to the guitarists who perform on his own label, Addison Street Records, and develop the Vance Guitars design, including promotion, putting the Vance Guitars name on their albums and designing a label for the inside of the guitars. In short, Landeza says, he will "share his guitar with the world."

Next Wednesday, Feb. 8, Vance Guitars may gain additional exposure if Pahinui wins his Grammy. Pahinui plans to use the guitar on his Grammy tours.

"He will get immediate exposure," Landeza said.

"I believe in Vance. He's just a wonderful person," Landeza said. "And my first impression of Vance was just general Aloha — Aloha from the island of Maine."

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