



BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY KEVIN BENNETT

Vance Peters polishes the lacquer finish on one of two guitars he made for Hawaiian slack key guitarists Cyril Pahinui and Patrick Landeza.

First String

A Bucksport **BY EMILY BURNHAM**
OF THE NEWS STAFF

guitar maker, armed with 'the feeling of aloha,' is also making a name for himself with his slack key guitars

Vance Peters is best known as a purveyor of tropical fish, reptiles and aquarium supplies. He has designed large-scale fish tanks for area schools, hospitals — even a pool hall. His Bucksport pet shop is home to tangs, puffers, clownfish and a sleepy yellow-eyed turtle. A sand-colored nurse shark named Lelu swims circles in a 1,400-gallon "shark lagoon."

But Peters' wild shirts, tiki torches, palm fronds, gentle music floating through the air and other tropical touches hint at his most-consuming passion: all things Hawaiian. He travels to Hawaii every year. He knows how to play Hawaiian slack key guitar and has even learned how to make the traditional instruments crafted from koa wood.

Now Peters' personal passion is yielding some unexpected buzz. Hawaiian slack key players Cyril Pahinui and Patrick Landeza tried out the Bucksport man's first home-built guitar while they were at last year's The American Folk Festival on the Bangor Waterfront. The Hawaiians proclaimed it the best they had ever played and ordered two hand-crafted guitars from Peters. Pahinui, who has been nominated for a Grammy award for his contributions to compilation album "Masters of Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar: Vol. 1,"

may decide to play the Maine-built guitars exclusively.

Late last week, Peters put the finishing touches on his first order and shipped the guitars off to the West Coast. He also caught the red-eye to Los Angeles, where he's meeting with Landeza. Not bad for a guy who runs a pet shop in Maine.

"Vance really has a feeling of aloha about him," said Landeza, speaking from his home in Los Angeles. "The feeling of aloha isn't just 'hi' and 'bye' — it's the love of everything. The music, the islands. He really exudes that, and that is what drew [Cyril and me] to him. It made his guitars really shine. I was so impressed when I first played it. I literally could not believe my ears."

Off Route 15 on the outskirts of Bucksport, Vance's Tropical Fish & Exotic Pets is a dimly lit and humid place. A faint odor of fish food and plant matter lingers in the air. Peters, who is a skilled woodworker among his diverse pursuits, has a workshop above the store. He has constructed cabinets and refinished furniture for decades.

A guitarist himself, Peters says he used to be a rock 'n' roller, but now plays mostly Hawaiian music.

"I can't listen to anything else. I used to love Pink Floyd and Led Zepplin, but after this, that all sounds like junk," he declared, after playing a few bars of the mellow unhurried music. "It tells a soothing story. It's very traditional and relaxing. I want-

ed to try to get a guitar that was geared to that kind of sound, so I was looking to buy a koa wood guitar."

Peters shopped around online, but the \$5,600 price tag made him think again. Hawaiian slack guitars are traditionally made from koa wood, a pricey hardwood native to Hawaii. He also made inquiries while in Hawaii last year.

"I was in a music store on Kauai, and I was looking at guitars and asked the guy if he had any koa wood guitars," he related. "He said he did, but then I told him I wasn't going to be able to buy it, and he said, 'We're not going to let you touch it if you aren't buying.' That made me mad enough to try to make my own. I don't know if I can do it, but I'll try."

Back in Maine, Peters tracked down and studied with Winterport luthier Trent Hickman, who worked for Taylor Guitars for years. Then he ordered the thin sheets of tawny-colored koa. He made ebony necks and ordered an abalone inlay for the head and fret board. He wanted a guitar perfect for playing slack key.

Unique to Hawaii, the slack key guitar gets its name from the fact that the strings are loosened or "slacked." Set to a lower tuning than the standard E-A-D-G-B-E, the slacked strings produce a distinct, subtle sound.

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Peters

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Peters spent several months crafting his first homemade guitar. He took along his creation when he went to hear Pahinui and Landeza, two masters of slack key guitar, perform at the American Folk Festival.

"They picked me out of the crowd because I was wearing a Hawaiian shirt," Peters recalled. "I talked to them for a bit afterwards and told them I made guitars."

Tony Sohns, a biologist and educator at the Maine Discovery Museum in Bangor, took Peters to a party for folk festival performers and volunteers. The budding guitar maker was introduced to Landeza and asked him

to try the home-built slack guitar.

"When I played his guitar I couldn't believe it was the first one he'd built," Landeza remarked. "I play a \$4,000 Goodall Guitar, and this sounded just as beautiful. I couldn't believe he got it on the first try."

Peters remembers the moment well.

"I gave Patrick my guitar to play," he said. "He picked it up and played a few songs, and then told me that I put my mana, or soul, into it. They don't say that unless they mean it, and then he told me to make two more guitars, because he wanted to buy them."

Pahinui is retiring his old guitar and plans to switch to Peters.

"He will be playing Vance's guitar," Landeza said. "We wanted to bring him out here because

it's like a child being born. I wanted to complete the whole process, because these guitars are very special to him and very special to us."

"Everyone wants to know what Cyril Pahinui is playing. I see people buying guitars just because he plays them," the slack guitar player said. "We want to help jump-start Vance's career as a guitar maker. This is what we can do for Vance."

Maybe a year or two from now, Peters will walk into that music store on Kauai and see one of his own guitars displayed. Will he ask if he can play it?

"Oh, maybe," said Peters, with a chuckle.

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