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Posted: 12:00 AM

Pilot comes full circle with second career Dan Burke has created a second career making resonator guitars at his Freeport business.

By Deborah Sayer dsayer@pressherald.com News Assistant

Retired pilot Dan Burke, 63, has selected a second career that still keeps him seated with his hands on the controls. And, one that resonates with his love of music.

Burke is the owner of Burke Resonator, a one-man instrument-making operation in Freeport. By day, he makes custom-built resonator (aka dobro) guitars. On weekends, he's frequently playing them at varied gigs as a member of two bands.

Burke began playing guitar as a teen in the high school garage band, "The Fabulous Rivas."

He said he was content to pursue his American dream of living life "as a starving musician on a tour bus," eschewing wealth for fame, though hoping for both. ... At least, until the rock band's front man, a pilot in training, took Burke up for a plane ride.

"(That flight) ruined a perfectly good music career," said Burke, who immediately turned his attention to a career in aviation. He spent all his free time at the airport doing odd jobs to pay for weekend flying lessons and entered the U.S. Air Force upon graduation. That led to a 36-year carrier as a pilot for both private and commercial airlines.

An apt woodworker, Burke still tinkered around the wood shop and played guitar during his free time. But it was not until he officially hung up his aviation wings, that he rediscovered his love of playing again.

Burke's inspiration came after attending a bluegrass festival with a friend.

He happened upon one of the many impromptu guitar jamming sessions such festivals are known for and became transfixed with one resonator guitar player he called, "a real hot picker."

"I was at his elbow for three hours watching him play," said Burke. "That changed everything for me. I'm a musician at heart. I knew that if I got involved in music again, it would be at the expense of everything else."

Burke bought a low-end resonator guitar to practice on but he was not pleased with the instrument's quality.

A friend, who knew of Burke's woodworking expertise, asked the obvious question: "Why don't you just make your own guitar?"

For the next six months, Burke exhausted every possible resource on building resonator guitars. He read books, searched the internet and "haunted the shops of fellow luthiers" who were perfecting their craft.

He created two guitars at once, reasoning that he'd keep one and sell the other to recoup the cost of materials, including



Photos courtesy Dan Burke click image to enlarge



On some evenings and weekends, Burke plays the guitars that he builds.

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proprietary hardware and specialty woods, which can be expensive.

He was pleased with the final result but kept both guitars for one year to see how they would hold up when subjected to Maine weather.

"Guitars are affected by humidity, and there is a lot of force and tension on a stringed instrument," said Burke. "They can implode. I wanted them to go through all four seasons to see how they held up. They did. And, I found out a lot about instrument-making that year."

Burke added guitar-making equipment to his wood shop and became an inventor, creating a few needed tools (retrofits of items he had on hand) to do a variety of needed applications. He also created a waterbased, nontoxic finish for his guitars.

"It's a challenge that is also fun," said Burke. "You are solving seemingly unsolvable problems and capturing the technique to be used again on future projects. I'd visit a luthier friend, study his tools and make comparisons (to perfect my own)."

Burke prefers to work with figured maple (aka tiger or curly maple) and a quartersawn method of cutting pie-shaped wedges, lengthwise, from his wood stock to glean vertically grained strips of wood for his guitar bodies. It's a laborious process that is prized by luthiers for its physical strength and visual appeal.

Burke cuts the guitar faces and backs on a band saw, sands them down to a preferred 1/8-inch thickness and bends the side stock into shape using a steaming process. Once the bodies are glued, sanded and several coats of finish are applied, Burke fits them with proprietary hardware like the dobro's inverted resonator cone and signature chrome "hubcab," that graces its front. It's a several weeks process for each guitar.

But it's worth the result, such as when Burke recently hand-delivered a custom guitar to a session musician Nashville, Tenn., whose initials were carved into the wood stock.

"(The player) took it out of the case, sat down to strum it and got a big smile on his face," said Burke. "That felt pretty good. The thing I really like about doing this is that it is very much a creative outlet. You are creating beautiful things that others will enjoy over and over again."

Burke said that whether he's creating an instrument or setting his working schedule, "it's all about the tone."

Some days, Burke puts in 12 hours in the workshop. Other days, he avoids the space altogether.

"If I'm not in the mood, the worst thing I can do is go in to the shop to work," he said. "I'm retired. This is more of a hobby than a business. I do this for enjoyment, not as a job. And a quality instrument sells itself."

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