COVER SHEET

TRANSCRIPTION NUMBER: 4 OF 17

Transcriber: Amanda Fickey, ABD, Independent Contractor
Date of Interview: 5/8/2012
Duration: 56:44 Track 1 (Stored on 1 DVD)
Interviewees: Ron Pen
Interviewer: Amanda Fickey
Cinematographer: Sean Anderson
Location: Niles Gallery, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY
Sponsoring Organization: Kentucky Craft History and Education Association, Inc.
Funding: LexArts, Kentucky Oral History Commission

Transcription Notes:

RP: Ron Pen
AF: Amanda Fickey
In some cases, words such as “um”, “uh”, “and”, “so” and “yeah” have been excluded.
Time notations have been included at approximately 2-6 minute intervals.
… Indicates pause, delay in conversation, or, weak transition/no transition in themes.
The following names of musical genres have been capitalized: Old Time, Irish, Appalachian, Calliope, Rock-n-Roll, Pop, and Cajun.
Attempts were made to verify the names of all musicians and geographical locations referenced throughout this interview.

0:00

AF: I thought we would start with some basic biographical information. Why don't you share with me a little bit about where you grew up and what it was like growing up there?

RP: I grew up in the middle of Chicago, pretty much downtown by the lake. It's a far cry from Kentucky. It's a far cry from Appalachia, except that it was very present to me in a real way. The "hillybillies" were the people across the street and they lived in a three or four story walk-up and they were the ones who always had the windows open and were listening to country music really loud whereas we listened to good music, i.e. that was Beethoven and opera, things like that. They were the ones that played in the street and I always wanted to play with them but of course I couldn't do that, I had to walk two or three blocks with my mother to the playground, you know the official playground that was lovely. They were the ones that went to public school and I went to small private school, a Latin school. They were the ones that life was lived outside. Even in the middle of the city they would be working on their cars on a Sunday, or someone would forget their books and go off to school and I remember the famous line, "Hey Clem, You forgot them there books!" and they'd shout out the open window and they'd crash on the street and the kid would pick them up and they'd be off to school.

So my understanding of what Kentucky and hillybillies were was formed by living across the street from it and I had not a clue that my parents were from Kentucky or that my mother's side of the family was from Kentucky. It really wasn't until years and years later I went to school in Virginia, in the mountains in Virginia, and I came back one day and I heard my mother listening to Waylon Jennings, she'd never listened to country music the entire time I was growing up, and I said, "Mother, what are you doing, this is like country music? And she says, "Oh I know, but I love Waylon Jennings so, his music just moves my heart, and you know all of your family were from Kentucky!"

And so, I guess I finally found my way back home in an interesting way. I went to school in Chicago and graduated from there and went to school at Washington and Lee, in Virginia, where I really first encountered Old Time music and fiddles and banjos. At the time, I had started music myself at the age four. My mother promised me I could avoid taking naps if I studied piano. Seemed like a great way of getting around taking naps which I hated. So, I did that. I took piano all the way through high school and at some point I hated it of course, every kid does, but my mother made me stay home and practice, before I would do anything else, for an hour a day.

Probably about seventh grade or so I started another instrument and one that I really loved and that was the electric guitar. I wanted to play Rock-n-Roll more than anything. I took, my grandmother was a pretty well-known Chautauqua performer and I inherited her guitars and ukuleles and I took this beautiful Martin guitar, 1880s vintage Martin guitar and put holes in and screwed in a bad pick-up from Radio Shack so I could play Rock-n-Roll. It was a bad guitar for Rock-n-Roll, you know, there was a lot of feedback and it just didn't have enough sound, but it's how I got started before I got a nice Gibson. So, I played in Rock bands in high school, and continued that when I got to college. This is late 60s and early 70s so I'm playing in a band called Cartoone House, with an "e" on the end of "Cartoone." We played acid tests, some things like that. We played at Washington Monument during the big strike.

It was an interesting time and I had switched over mostly to electrical organ at that point as well. But in Virginia I also encountered that Old Time music. A geography, geology, excuse me, professor was really involved in it and so I started going to Galax and had an exposure to Old Time music and that's really when I picked up the violin. I started with that at first and had my, it was so much easier to carry around

with me than the piano. I didn't have to worry about tuning pianos wherever I was, I could take the violin around, and it was really I think the bicentennial year. I'd moved back to Chicago, I was teaching in Chicago at a private school and was head of a fine arts department. I was spending more time trying to play Irish music on fiddle, and Appalachian music, a mandolin that I'd also picked up at the time. The bicentennial year was really a watershed one for me. I worked on the Delta Queen Steamboat playing Calliope and I read every word of Mark Twain and I developed a sense of American music. I'd never been taught that in graduate school or undergraduate, we didn't talk about American music. There was always European music that was supposedly our music and I realized that commercials on television, Rock-n-Roll, Aaron Copeland, it was all part of this patchwork of music that was tied to a sense of place and I was in fact an American and working on the Delta Queen Steamboat had an impact, the bicentennial of America had a serious impact, and then I bicycled on an old three-speed bike from New Orleans to Virginia which was you know, kind of an epic adventure, put me in touch with place. I slept in a hammock at night and I experienced everything, the perfume of honeysuckle and as you go down in a dip the bicycle was just magical to me.

6:50
(RP continues)

So when I came to Chicago I started teaching American music and at that point I really got a sense of how important that was. Eventually I got married, went to Europe for a year and played organ in a church and delivered cattle, and you know, experienced Irish life in a town where members of U2 live currently, so it was an interesting place and an interesting time. It was almost impossible to find Irish traditional musicians at that time, it almost had disappeared from the landscape and so I was desperately trying in Scotland and Ireland to find traditional musicians to play with and they just wanted to hear some of that na-nana-na-nana American stuff. So it was a good experience, I played more Irish stuff and some traditional music, and played in a church regularly, an Anglican church.

I came back and right away when the plane landed in New York there was a job waiting for me in New Orleans so I took that. Developed a fondness for New Orleans over a period of years on a steamboat and whatnot and that was another chairman of a fine arts department. So I got involved with Cajun music because that was the music closest at hand. I really developed a sense of the music that has the most power to affect us being that which is closest to the soil right there at hand. Music is portable, but it's not powerful when it's at a remove, and Pop music works anywhere in the world but the music that has the most strength is right there from that sense of place. So, Cajun music, I was playing Cajun music and researching that a little bit and doing another degree at Tulane University and then I made the move to Kentucky to do a doctorate. At that point Cajun music was not as important because here's this music in Kentucky, its Old Time music and there's such a tradition of balladry and fiddle tunes and shape note hymnody and things that I had been dabbling with for so long. I guess it's where I really got serious about playing it and then I didn't want to study it, I didn't want to make it an academic thing I wanted to keep it as something that kept me sane amidst the academy and its demands, but it kept happening to me, I mean people would keep asking me to do presentations and that and that and the next thing I know I'm working with it.

In some ways the dissertation and the book that I did 25 years later on John Jacob Niles were closely tied to that understanding of myself, personally, but it was also an understanding of myself as seeing through this character John Jacob Niles who was involved in traditional music, but also involved in with art music in much the same way I was. I wanted to do composition; my earlier degrees were all in composition rather than musicology, so looking at Niles gave me a way of looking at myself.

10:20
(RP continues)

One of the things that Niles did, and I guess it will tie in to our interview in part, is he created his own instruments and I had to understand what those instruments meant and why he chose to do that in his life. While I was here I started having experiences with musical instrument makers, with pianos it was never an issue. Our piano tuner, the first one at home in Chicago, was Mr. Antune. What a great name! But there was very little sense of craft and how important that piano was to me, it was just the device that I played on. The electric guitar was something that I bought in a store that someone made somewhere else. When I came to Kentucky finally, actually it was New Orleans where I had my first dulcimer that was made for me personally and that changed things. Suddenly I had something invested in that instrument, in the voice of it, in the construction of it and the look of it. I said, "My daughter's name is Robin. Can we make the sound holes look like Robins instead of circles or the scroll F," and he said, "Why sure." So that instrument is very special to me because it is my daughter's voice woven into the pattern of the instrument itself.

And then when I was here it became tied to the Niles instruments, and it also became tied to Homer Ledford whom I met very early here. He was a neighbor of mine here in Clark County. I had a fiddle that I'd been using for a number of years, the action on it was not very good, it was born in the very same year that I was, 1951, so I was tied to it, but it didn't feel very comfortable under my hand and people were going, oh that's going to cost a lot of money, you'll have to get the neck completely reset, and I didn't have a lot of money then, I was just a graduate student. You know what that's like, Amanda. So I took it to Homer with some trepidation, and went to this wonderful shop down below in the garage, back shed of his house. Homer looked at it and said "well, let's see what we can do about it and I'll give you a call", and he put the little tag on it and I marveled at this workshop, you know this bright green painted workshop where it was just jammed back with tools! You would he would pull a drill down from the ceiling or a sander or things out of the wall, it was just like an alchemist workshop in a way, just bubbling over with interesting projects and sawdust all over on the floor and that smell of varnish and wood that's so pungent. And I realized that boy this is a special place I've just been. This is the interface between music and instruments and we don't have a voice without these instruments in our hands. In a way it's what allows us this extension of who we are as musicians. We can sing, we can clap, we can make noises with our body, but this allows us to project ourselves in such interesting ways.

13:32
(RP continues)

So, it was a magical moment for me. Homer probably had the fiddle a week, two weeks and gave me a call and said come back in and see how you like it. So I did and I tried it and it was as though it was a completely different instrument. It sang beautifully and it was easy to finger the notes, and I went, "Oh my god Homer, it's wonderful, what did you do?" He said "Oh, a little of this, a little of that, I put a new bridge in, moved the sound posted". He said, "Do you like it?" and I said, "Yeah. Ok, now give me the bad news, how much is this going to cost?" He said, "Well, I think it's probably about $2.47" "Come on Homer, you've got to be serious," and he charged me exactly what he did in parts basically. I don't remember if the $2.47 is accurate, but it was something ridiculously low like that, very little labor and hardly any parts, I mean he made a new instrument out of it. So I kept going to Homer and I discerned over the years that he was a master luthier as well as a fine musician. He created ways of repairing an instrument without taking the back off of it, which in some ways is very destructive to an instrument to take it apart unless you really know what you are doing. It alters it forever. He could take a thin little

wire and put it through to where you would never even notice it with a patch that he would bring up from below and fix a crack in an instrument, it was just beautifully designed and thoughtful. He had a master touch with that. I did spend a number of years visiting Homer in various ways and then worked on the new edition of the University Press of Kentucky book on him where we added an interview and kind of gave him the last word in the book which I thought was an important addition to Gerald Alvey's original work.

15:38

AF: Now you have…

RP: You asked me one question and it went on for the last…

AF: I know…

RP: For three hours… Sorry.

AF: No, no, we'll just keep going. In terms of Homer, do we have an example?

RP: We've got one of Homer Ledford's instruments here.

AF: So let's look at that. Can you tell me a little bit about this instrument? Maybe when Homer would have made it?

(RP picks-up a dulcimer made by Homer Ledford from a display table off screen. Begins to discuss Ledford's work.)

RP: This is really a very, let's call it a very basic plain example of Homer's craft. The earliest known dulcimer maker we have in our region, the Cumberland highlands region, was a man named J. E. Thomas, James E. Thomas, usually known as Ed Thomas, and the shape that he developed, this hour glass shape, the hearts as the sound holes, is really what most people think of the traditional lap dulcimer, Kentucky dulcimer. That pattern really came from him. He painted his black, he used bad, inexpensive wood in making them, and maybe he painted them black to cover it up. Jean Ritchie said he just had a lot of black paint left over from painting a barn. For whatever reason, they mostly wore black paint on them, but this model, the same model, they were three strings rather than the four that you find mostly in dulcimers, but that fourth string is really one of the additions that came to the dulcimer world through our friend Homer Ledford. So the next step beyond Ed Thomas, who worked in Knott County, it passes to the Hindman School, the Hindman Settlement School in Knott County, where Jethro Amburgey, and later other Amburgery's in the family who started created a dulcimer that was built on that same Ed Thomas model and they started shipping those all over the world. They found their way into New York City and other places by shipping them. We have one in our collection that was bought by a woman at Columbia, a professor at Columbia who taught balladry, I showed you that earlier, the C.O.D., the price on that was about $26.80 I believe, so it gives you an idea of how much those instruments cost at the time.

18:10
(RP continues)

Because of Jean Ritchie's visibility at the time, and other dulcimer players like John Jacob Niles who we will also talk about later, the dulcimer spread pretty widely and were sold and became a, almost an industry, and Homer Ledford was later able to tap into that and market an industry. He grew up in Ivyton, Tennessee, went to the John C. Campbell Folk School where he really had his first experience with the dulcimer.

18:38
Interruption – cell phone rings

18:44
(RP continues)

Back to, before I was so rudely interrupted by my own cell phone… Homer Ledford at Ivyton, and then at the John C. Campbell Folk School, they had a few instruments that they wanted repaired and so he tried his hand at that and did pretty well and then decided that well, I can build one of these I bet and he did, and he later moves back to Kentucky, moves back to Kentucky later, he is teaching industrial arts at Berea and he eventually starts his own business where he is creating dulcimers as well as many other instruments. The pattern though they used in this is really basically Ed Thomas' through Amburgey, but he made some innovations and the tuning of these, and the playability of them is vastly better by subtly transforming the tradition. There's nothing major, larger about this, or different about this, but its, the dimensions, the fret placement, the way the end pens work and the strings are put through is vastly superior. The tuning pegs work beautifully, the friction pegs, he would put them in for people with mechanical action, eventually, later, but his tuning pegs, his friction pegs work wonderfully, and for a dulcimer player that's very important because you change tunings many times. The fret placement, you can see here is a large one, a large one, a small one, a large one, a large one, another small one, is the placement of notes in a diatonic C Major scale. So if you want to play in different keys, you can't really do it. It's not a chromatic instrument like the guitar, so we have to tune in different ways. Tuning is very important to a dulcimer player. So the friction pegs, or the mechanical pegs, are a critical item for them in more than other instruments.

20:51
(RP continues)

It's very subtle, but this is a Homer signature piece. The fret markings here, these are just carved in a little bit, but they are dogwood blossoms and it's a sense of place that Homer has. The dogwood is one of our trees that are widely found, he uses inlay in more expensive instruments and paint as well and creates this beautiful black and white dogwood among other symbols. So, that's an important aspect of it, and this is a very traditional Homer Ledford dulcimer. He uses good wood, much of it a lot of Yellow Poplar, the ones that he made from barn floors that he'd scavenged. A good solid instrument and I'm delighted to have it at the Niles Center for American Music.

AF: So we have a couple of different instruments here. Maybe to talk about those instruments, we could talk about the significance of luthiers in general in Appalachia and Appalachian history. And then talk a bit about John Jacob Niles and his work.

RP: Ok. Well, John Jacob Niles… I'm going to perhaps take this dulcimer… I think John Jacob Niles is an interesting figure because he is someone that begins his life very much as a traditional musician, but also was trained in art music by his mother, trained to collect folk song at a very early age, was transcribing it and writing at age 16 his first song that becomes famous, *Go Away From My Window*.

Here it is, he takes a fragment of folk song, go away from my window, heard from a black laborer, ditch digger, and he takes that and he builds on it and creates a whole new song that was taken to be folk song. In the same way he takes an instrument, the dulcimer, that he encountered at a very early age, but really in the 1930s when he is traveling with Doris Ulmann, he encounters it at the Ritchie family, in Viper, and there are pictures that document that meeting that were taken by Doris Ulmann. There he is with Balice Ritchie, who is playing the dulcimer. John Jacob Niles had been playing the piano mostly at that point and accompanying Marion Kirby as a duo across the world, playing piano and singing with it, but he thought it wasn't working for him, it felt a little bit like being a Vaudeville performer and he wasn't that. All of a sudden the notion of, I could use a dulcimer to accompany this music, of course, it's something he encountered as a Kentuckian and it was portable, he didn't have to worry about the pianos being tuned, at halls he was always playing on terrible pianos at various places, you have no choice, but with the dulcimer you tune them and bring them with you and they're absolutely portable.

23:58
(RP continues)

He made some of his own instruments, but he also had ones made that he picked up along the way and one that he commissioned is the one that I have in my hand. There were several generations of Hicks family in Beech Mountain, North Carolina, a rather remote part of North Carolina in the mountains near Banner Elk. The Hicks family was terrific ballad singers and story tellers, but they made dulcimers and Niles recognized that. I think this is 1933 or 1934. He asked for this one to be built and sent to him. And what he asked for was a bigger instrument, a bigger sound body so he could get more sound, and he asked for additional strings. Niles had a vision of dulcimers as being timpani from the orchestra, the back of the orchestra that really influenced his sound.

So this one **[demonstrates on dulcimer]** has six instead of three. It gives it more strings, more drone, prettier sound, a bigger sound body. It looks in some ways like a traditional dulcimer where you have your heart-shaped sound holes and whatnot. In some ways this dulcimer represents the compromise that luthiers make between tradition and transformation of tradition to new forms to suit performers demands. The Hicks instruments were fine for home use on Beech Mountain, but when you've got a performer like John Jacob Niles who is traveling the world who wants more sound to accompany his really unique falsetto-sounding voice, this was the instrument. So there was a transformation there.

I guess Niles took it a step further with his own instruments **[RP moves off camera to pick-up another instrument].** Niles came from a family of woodworkers, woodcrafters. His grandfather Adams, John Frederick Adams was a piano and organ builder, he made pianos, and he was renowned for the cases that he built were especially beautiful. We have no examples that we can find of those pianos. I keep hearing rumors about them, but they were mostly along Cincinnati and down along the river and floods at various times have carried most of those pianos away. But there was that tradition and other members of Niles' family, his brothers became woodworkers. So it wasn't unusual for him to do that kind of work.

26:48
(RP continues)

He became pretty skilled at it, and he created, at first, dulcimers that looked like dulcimers, and then he created these hybrid instruments. Well, this one's got eight strings, and it looks for all the world like a small cello that he built out of parts of it. He created the finger board here, sound holes. This is an interesting and beautiful instrument. I had the opportunity a year ago to perform with it. It was the first time I've done that; I've really tried to steer clear of doing any of Niles' own work myself. As a biographer I just wanted to keep some distance from that, but Michael Jonathan of WoodSongs said, I'm going to do this show, it's all going to be about Niles and about your book, and I'm going to have the Real World String Band play, I'm going to have these others people play, but I want you to play one of his instruments and sing. I went, Michael, I can't do that. He said, No, No, I'm serious; I want you to do this. You don't say no to Michael. I thought well I'll try one of them.

I took it out of the case where it had been for a number of years, and I had this moment of confrontation with an instrument that was part of the master's hand. I mean, this instrument was as close to John Jacob Niles as I could possibly be. John Jacob Niles died I think a year or two before I came to Lexington and taking the strings off of the instrument for the first time was revealing. I thought, this instrument was strung by John Jacob Niles forty-five years ago or whatever and that's the last set of strings on here. It's like taking Beethoven's piano and unstringing it and putting new strings on it. But I did, I took them off and I realized, oh my gosh, here's the pragmas, he had tied off every single string individually and knotted them. Musicians don't do that, they just put it through the hole, the string through the hole, and the friction ties it as you are turning it. He tied them all off, *it's next stage* **[unsure of transcription here]**, and it makes sure the string doesn't slip. I realized something about Niles just by the way he dealt with his instruments. I didn't know what kind of strings to use. This is a hybrid instrument, there aren't dulcimer strings that fit this thing, and so I found an old set of strings that Niles had in our collection that were orchestral guitar strings. What's an orchestral guitar? Who knows? You can't find strings for that. Whatever kind of instrument that was that was around in the 1920s and 1930s… So I tried guitar strings and I tried several grades of Martin guitar strings and I thought that would work and they did but then I thought, I have to figure out how to tune it! You know, it's been forty-five years since it was tuned, how do you tune it? Hmm, here's a picture of him playing "Hangman," and he's holding this instrument, and it's not just an instrument for him, it's a prop. It's a lover he's caressing and of course, the shape of the instrument plays into it.

"Hangman," it's about this woman being hanged, so there he is, holding it up as a noose swinging in the gallows, and I realized, you know, it was not just an instrument it was a prop, it was part of his stage act and his persona. So I got the strings, I saw that he playing it in the song, "Hangman," and I have a recording of "Hangman," and I played it and I found out what key it was in. It was in B! Nobody tunes instruments to B, it's just a ridiculous key to tune them to, but that's what he did and that's how he sang it. So I thought well, these frets don't go all the way across, I'll be it's got to be some sort of open B tuning, and I just tuned a B minor cord, B, D, and F# in various ways with the strings.

31:07
(RP continues)

I tuned it up and the instrument didn't fall apart. I mean, you've got to be nervous about that! How was it made, and not knowing the history of the instrument or the instrument maker, the bracing of hybrid instruments aren't regularly created… It's important. This is a big instrument. How strong is it to hold a huge finger board this size? Is it going to snap? But it didn't. It made me very nervous having this at home at my kitchen table. But once it was tuned, I ran across the strings, there was this huge rumbling B. It was glorious. It was really beautiful. And I went, that's it! The next day I played and sang, "Hangman," on WoodSongs and I didn't even have to tune it again. It maintained its tuning. The frets were that good, the tuning pegs were that good, and I realized something very important about John Jacob Niles. He was a musician known for writing for opera singers, known for creating songs that were famous in the folk revival, he was a writer and balladeer and all of these things. He carved these doors; the backdrop of this interview now **[refers to doors in background of video].** I think probably the spring house door that he created with again Kentucky images on them. There are tobacco leaves, dogwood blossoms and things, and very frequently he does that with his instruments as well. He uses images from our sense of place. So it was an experience for me to realize that this extension of Niles' voice and personality, the instrument itself, was an expression of who he was and, a pretty good expression; a good instrument. Jean Ritchie always called them, "Nilesimers" **[combination of Niles and dulcimer]** instead of dulcimers though because they were very quirkily John Jacob Niles rather than traditional dulcimers.

32:26

Videographer stops to change tape

33:32

AF: Thinking back through what John Jacob Niles was doing, what Homer Ledford was doing and some of the instruments that they were making or having commissioned and having small changes made to traditional designs to meet their demands and needs that they had as musicians. I think it's interesting to put that in a contemporary context and think about current instrument makers who have to make the decision to move towards computerized machines, to move towards CNC machines where they can input the specifics, how they want the instrument to be made, but there are portions that they are no longer doing by hand. I wondered if you would talk a bit about that, and do you think that will change the industry and if so, in what ways. And what are some of the decisions that luthiers have to think through before they decide to move to machines.

RP: I think those decisions and those issues have always been there for people, and the technology continues to change and luthiers and audience and performers continue to evolve with it, but the same issues have always been there. People accused Homer of, "Oh Homer, you aren't hand-making these instruments anymore, you are using a power saw." Homer would typically be working on maybe three to five dulcimers simultaneously and he could cut three or four backs at the same time. But he would always hold up his pocket knife and say, "Now this here is my workshop." And always, parts of it would have to carve by hand and I've never seen a pocket knife so sharp and there so many times where it was down to just a nub. So, you know, I had to believe Homer when he used that pocket knife on every single dulcimer, but he was also using power tools. That was the technology that at the time and it allowed Homer to create 6,000 and some dulcimers in a lifetime, which is a lot. Nathan Hicks, I'd be

surprised if he had done more than 200-300 dulcimers over a lifetime of good craftsmanship, well-built and everything.

The next step is, well, look at what we can do with the computer. Here are the beautiful fret markers that Homer Ledford's making with inlay. They were gorgeous, painted along with the inlay, the mother of pearl, and each one is separately done and designed, and it raises the cost of the instrument because there are more man hours, more person hours involved in making it. Now, what about Gibson guitar manufactures? To do the same kind of thing, if you want to recreate a historic instrument with beautiful fret markers of mother of pearl what do you do? Why we can feed it into the computer. It pre-cuts these, and they are available online and you can even have your own name put up on the fret board like custom designed instruments were forty years ago, and it's incredibly inexpensive. It's suddenly allowed craftsman access to a technology that saves huge amounts of hours of labor.

36:56
(RP continues)

Well, can you tell the difference? Probably not actually, in terms of… There may be some hand-painted aspects to Homer Ledford's prints that you couldn't get in a computer stenciled inlay, but they do very well and it allows you to mass produce things.

Look at the number of instruments, number of hours it takes for someone like Warren May whose created vastly far more instruments in a lifetime that's not finished yet the way Homer Ledford's is, he's created far more instruments. He's able to do that because of a system and the technology that allows him to do that. Basically, it's economics. You have to put a roof over your head and make a living at it. People are willing to spend a certain amount of money on an instrument and an entry level dulcimer people don't expect to pay that much so you can get cardboard dulcimers that actually sound pretty good. They're made with a wooden fret board and a heavy cardboard base, and those are, I don't know, typically about a hundred dollars maybe even less.

You can get build-your-own dulcimer kits that are fairly inexpensive and do alright, or you can spend four or five hundred dollars and get the standardized dulcimer now, or you can have personalized ones with all the fancy markings and special gears and things. And it depends upon the level of performance that you want out of the instrument. There are very, very few professional dulcimer players. There are a lot of people who want one to hang on the wall and play occasionally as they're learning. So how many expensive custom instruments can you build, as opposed to how many standards instruments that you are going to sell someday at a craft fair in Kentucky? I think that you are really going to be building towards the general market or audience for that instrument.

It's a different case when you are talking about violins, or you're talking about organs, or you're talking about guitars. Each instrument has a particular target audience in mind. If you are hand-building a violin, it takes a number of months to build by a master builder. There are not a lot of short stops you can take with that. You can use some power tools, but it really has to be shaved by hand. The back is a matter of, my violin that was created for me, I have a template of what the back looks like and he has measured at probably 150 spots the thickness of it and made a record of it. He does that with every violin and he tunes them. Each one is tuned different as a result of that. That can't be fabricated, but he sells a limited amount of these. He has an apprentice or two that are making their own under his supervision and he won the Kremona Competition, which is like winning the Super Bowl and it enables you to charge a certain price for an instrument. If you charge ten to fifteen thousand dollars you don't have to make

that many instruments a year. If you are making a student model violin and you can only charge five hundred or a thousand dollars, then you've got to mass produce those, and it's gotten to the point where computers and mass technology and materials like carbon fiber are enabling us to make good instruments, very useable instruments, for a fraction of the price of a hand-crafted special custom instrument.

41:08

AF: Do you think that most luthiers, when you think in terms of Kentucky, are actually making a living off of making instruments, or are they engaging in more wage labor and repair work and doing a number of economic activities?

RP: I don't think there's anyone that's making a living just out of being a luthier. Although, being a luthier also implies that you are repairing instruments and I don't know of one that wouldn't be repairing instruments as well. Some of them are also teaching music lessons, or working as a performer. Some of them are… I think pretty much repair is the other thing that you are going to be involved in. Particularly, there are string programs in the state, and this, I'm not going to say it's a cash cow, but it's a reliable income. If I were to have to have instruments in display cases awaiting the public to come in, if it's Art Mize in my private home, they aren't going to drop by a private home at the other end of town. Warren May, he may have some people dropping by just because he is in the town square in Berea in a shop that's very visible. Homer Ledford, you're never going to find your way to his store, his shop, unless you know where he lives. So you can't count on the drop by, but the school orchestra programs require instruments every year, and they have to have instruments repaired every year, and a bass is an expensive instrument to have repaired and so there's a built in market for a dependable pay check that's available to musicians who do that.

AF: But then, is there a geography to where these individuals are located? Because if they need to be closer to string programs….

RP: Of course, it's all about space and where you are and where the string programs are and how much competition there is. I would say typically violinist find the leading concert master and that sort, the violinist in town would not go anywhere in Lexington, even though there are some very fine repair violin sales places in town, they would typically go to Cincinnati or Chicago for their instruments. So, again it's a matter of what level of service you are talking about, the very finest, ones who are going to be in the large cities, members of the guild, as opposed to local makers who might be very, very skilled, but probably not at the level of Chicago.

AF: Well that's interesting to think about… If you are interested in doing this work that you are going to be very selective about, ok, well this is the sort of work that I can do, and how do I get close to individuals who will require my work, and then that automatically puts you somewhere in Lexington or puts you where an orchestra is actually located. So, how do luthiers then work in other portions of the state? If I want to work on instruments in Eastern Kentucky, what instruments would I be likely to focus on? Or what skillset would I?

44:41

RP: You are going to be working with string band instruments, and you'd have to learn something about working on banjos as well as fiddles. In Lexington you might have the same kind of mix, but a little less

so, and you don't have to extend… in East Kentucky you probably don't have to even have to be involved in band instruments. There aren't that many music stores in East Kentucky so if you are in a town the size of Prestonsburg or Pikeville you're going to have to be servicing wind band and marching band instruments, percussion instruments, in addition to string instruments. The string instruments you see will probably not be string orchestra because that's not where the state's orchestra programs are, but you will see traditional Bluegrass band musicians and Old Time musicians, so you'll have fiddle and banjo and guitar there. In this town it's large enough that you have stores that service basically the marching band and the wind band industry, and then other stores that are smaller that pretty much are more string oriented. So there is some differentiation there.

AF: Do you think that division exists between rural and city spaces in general. Orchestras tend to be more located in city spaces, or should I…

RP: I would have to say that it's dependent upon the particular state. For instance, there are states where orchestra programs are pretty widely found in rural spaces as well as urban spaces. Less true in Kentucky where we are much more marching band influenced. There are kind of two tracks, well three tracks, there is chorus, and then there's string orchestra programs, and then there's wind band programs and most of ours are chorus and wind band. The string programs tend to be clustered in Northern Kentucky and the fertile triangle of Frankfort, Lexington and Louisville. A little bit in Western Kentucky. We are much more about opry than opera.

47:01

AF: That's a good way to say it. Well then, thinking of the industry down the road, what are some of the challenges that producers, those engaging in repair and restoration work, what challenges do they face now and what might they face in the future? Can you think in terms of economic challenges, or social changes, or…?

RP: I would have to think that they're part of the same issue that's facing American jobs everywhere and that's outsourcing, and that's something that's already happened. If you look at the violin market for instance, rather than local makers for string instrument programs, Suzuki programs, they're all trying to use made instruments. It's much easier and less expensive and pretty good, well-made instruments coming from China and the cost of labor is so much less than what it is here.

On the other hand, they have to be repaired here. They can't be sent back to China. It's a specific level of instrument though, and this is true of not just violins. I tend to think that way because I'm a fiddler, but pianos have the same kinds of issues, that are coming from abroad, particularly Asia. You know, your Yamahas and all of that, a number of brands like that, as opposed to American-made brands which are very few left here. So that, I would say, is a challenge, and that's a challenge facing American industry in general, is the price of labor.

48:50
(RP continues)

Demand for instruments, I would say in some ways a lot of music can be created electronically and can be done with synthesizers and simulating instruments. People are doing all kinds of really interesting online collaborations with music and creating it entirely with computers, and that takes the guitar out of

the scenario, or the violin out of the scenario and lets you create "synthetic" kinds of music. So perhaps that's a challenge.

The other side of that is, because people spend so much time at computers and in isolation in a way there is nostalgia and a longing for human contact and retro-culture that's very cool. The same culture that's creating 33 1/3 LPs by alternative bands is creating opportunities for drum circles or playing traditional music. Lots of people are playing Bluegrass music because it's an opportunity to share music with other people. All of those require music instruments and playing music by hand with other people. So I think that's an important counterweight to the isolation of working at a computer and it gives people a social way of sharing music with one another.

And then there are the things that are in a state of perpetual motion. There are marching bands and concert bands in high school because it's built into the whole educational system, and orchestras. The educational system does not change quickly. And it's been in that mode for generations and generations. It remains to be seen if we are going to get rid of the wind band, marching band, pep band… It co-exists uneasily if you are at a basketball game or a football game, you're hearing the pep band or the marching band and they play a very important role in negotiating the chaos that's on the field. I mean, it provides a narrative theme. Thematically, it brings the alumni back into the presence of it puts the football band with the audience and with the alumni and so, the marching band, even though it's archaic, serves a very important function. But then they also have electronic music and sound reproduction. It could be a heavy metal tune that's playing at the same time, so they're being negotiated with one another.

AF: It seems like the safe thing to say is that the industry is always in flux in a way, but there will most likely always continue to be demand and there will be an audience and a need for instruments of some sort, which is a positive note, I think, just to recognize that that market will be there and even, I think, if computerization becomes more integrated in the production there will still be a market for hand-made.

RP: Yea, and the same technology that always looks as though it's going to kill something ends up being the technology that allows it to spread and transform itself. I'm just thinking, personally, here we are dealing with shape note singing. They were talking about that dying in the 19th century as a moribund tradition. There are more people doing it than ever before. Why is that? Well, it almost died because of the automobile using newly emerging technology, singing in individual places was being disrupted by migration patterns, people traveling, but that same technology – the car – allowed people to travel from one singing to the next, so it saved it and allowed it to flourish.

I would say that the electronic technology available on computers with GarageBand, or however you are creating sound, also allows you to record instruments and allows you to spread them and distribute them in a way that you could have never done before where you needed commercial recording studios and distribution networks of the bigger labels, now you can do it all independently, and you can record yourself playing dulcimer and put it on YouTube and thousands of people can see it. Your music, even a dulcimer which is a pretty archaic traditional instrument, has a place in the modern world and it gets used in all kinds of Pop manifestations. People are playing it like a guitar now. People electrify it. People create scalloped finger boards so you can bend notes with it. There are all kinds of adaptations that allow you to play it in Pop music and Rock music in various ways, and people are doing that and you can distribute yourself with the technology. So, I think we are looking at folklore in some ways. Folklore is looking at traditional ways of creating and preserving, when in reality we have to look at it as a butterfly, always in transition. You can't pin that butterfly. However pretty that Homer Ledford dulcimer is, and

you put a pin in it and put it in wax and admire it, someone is going to do something with the shape of that instrument and the number of strings.

54:48
(RP continues)

There is the story of the three strings to four strings. Homer Ledford is making three string dulcimers which are pretty traditional. Ah, Jean Ritchie's sister and brother-in-law, living nearby in Clark County, want an extra string to make it a little bit louder, a little bit more presence, so Homer goes and puts a middle string on there, an extra middle string, there's your fourth string. Suddenly people see it and go, wow look at that, the dulcimer can be something new, but they put it on the melody string and double the sound of the melody more than the drone and the next thing you know it becomes standardized and part of the precious butterfly that's pinned. So, it's a continual process of revision and transformation by whatever technology and according to whatever financial support that's inciting the change.

AF: Well I actually think that's a really good note for us to end on unless there's anything else that you think we discuss today that you feel is important and that we should bring up, or… otherwise, we'll stop there, Ron, and thank you for sitting down with me today, I appreciate it.

RP: It was a pleasure to talk about something dear.

56:07-56:43

Recording Room Tone

56:44

End of Interview