

Burlington luthier Ashley Rowley brings guitars to life

Emma Reilly

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Ashley Rowley didn't intend on becoming a luthier.

"Most people don't even know what that is," said the Burlington resident. "So I just call myself a guitar maker."

Rowley, 26, has just begun to make a name for herself as a sought-after guitar maker. She has made a custom guitar for Canadian indie songstress Lights and is currently working on one for Hamilton rock darling Terra Lightfoot.

So far, Rowley has made six guitars, each of which has taken between 200 and 250 hours to complete. Her instruments, which are made-to-order, cost \$3,000 each. To pay the bills, Rowley also works as a music teacher and as an administrative assistant.

Her career as a luthier began in 2007, when Rowley was studying classical guitar at Mohawk College. During her studies, Rowley's instrument needed repairs. That led her to master luthier Paul Saunders in Wainfleet, Ont.

"I basically decided that that's what I wanted to try to do," she said. "I had to beg him, literally, to take me on. I don't think he ever regretted it," she added with a laugh.

Saunders, who has been making custom guitars for more than 30 years, says Rowley is the only apprentice he's ever agreed to teach. Many who have approached him don't have the patience or humility to learn such a precise, time-consuming craft, he said.

"It takes a kind of special sort of person — it's something you've just got to love and want to do," he said. "Ashley was one of those rare people. She's very passionate about this work."



Ashley Rowley is a luthier, or guitar maker, living in Burlington.



The woods Ashley Rowley uses for her hand-built guitars are milled specifically for that purpose.

Saunders, who began teaching Rowley in 2012, says his apprentice is a patient and dedicated luthier.

"She's good with hand work and she's got a lot of the physical gifts that are required," he said. "She was determined to get it right — and whatever it took to get it right, she would do."

For Rowley, who spent hours in her dad's woodworking shop as a child, guitar-making allowed her to combine that hands-on experience and craftsmanship with her love for the instrument.

Rowley now offers three different styles of guitar: classical, flamenco and steel string acoustic. She uses different woods milled specifically for guitar making — including sitka spruce, Indian rosewood, mahogany, ebony, cocobolo and purple heart — many of which come from Exotic Woods, a shop in Burlington. She has also experimented with different sources of wood, including some salvaged from an old piano.

Rowley also adds unique details to each guitar, depending on the recipient. For the guitar she's working on for Lightfoot, Rowley has embedded a small bird made from abalone near the sound hole. A guitar for her father, who just moved to Belize, features a triangular design embedded in the decorative rosette around the sound hole.

"I kind of like the creativity of it. For every shape, I feel like there should be something a little bit different," she said.

Rowley also says her guitars have a more feminine feel than a traditional factory-made instrument.

"Everything I do is a little more dainty," she said. "I feel like it's important to have smooth curves and to make it look nice — it almost makes it seem like it's going to sound nice, because the sound's not going to be bouncing off weird edges."

Rowley says each guitar she has produced has had a very different sound. However, she says a handmade instrument generally has a deeper, more nuanced sound compared to a factory-made guitar.



Luthier Ashley Rowley is currently making a guitar for her father.



The rosette on the guitar Rowley is building for Terra Lightfoot is adorned with an inlaid abalone bird.

"I was taught so well by Paul that I have thought my guitars all sounded really nice — but I guess that's what you get when you have a great teacher," she said.

For more information, visit ashleyleannemusic.ca .

ereilly@thespec.com

905-526-2452 | @EmmaatTheSpec



Emma Reilly is a reporter with the Hamilton Spectator. Email: ereilly@thespec.com . Twitter: @EmmaatTheSpec .



Luthier Ashley Rowley files the back of a guitar.



Handcrafting a guitar requires patience, something master luthier Paul Saunders (who taught Rowley the craft) says she possesses.