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Arnold Shultz fund
and more...



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Bluegrass *Express*

Gareth Jenkins: The Man Behind the Voice

Interviewed By Linda Leavitt

When I first caught up with world-class luthier Gareth Jenkins, who works for Preston Thompson Guitars in Sisters, Oregon, we were barely a few months into 2020, and the world had suddenly transformed into a far more uncertain and bewildering place than any of us might have previously imagined, all because of a microscopic critter that made people fall ill, on a massive scale, all over the world.

Back in late March, many of us hunkered down in our jammies (if they still fit), traumatized and glued to the news, learning about the social, cultural and economic sea changes happening before our eyes. We worried about the safety of our family and friends who had to go to work despite the risks; we wondered how we would pay the rent, when we would get to play music with our friends, and whether we would ever get to hug anyone again.

In March, businesses in Sisters were closing, except for those deemed “essential”: Grocery and liquor stores, coffee shops, bookstores, and the few restaurants that offered take-out food. While it seemed

like much of the world was at a standstill, demand for Preston Thompson guitars remained strong, and Gareth Jenkins found himself busier than ever doing what he’s done so well during the last ten years: Making new guitars sing.

During a hike up Wychus Creek in the



Deschutes National Forest (six feet apart, of course), and later, during a wide-ranging phone conversation, Gareth spoke eloquently about the state of the world, his family, his love of nature, music, his work in the bluegrass community, his KBOO Music from the True Vine radio show,

guitar building, and how he joined Preston Thompson to produce guitars played by some of the finest bluegrass musicians in the world.

Gareth has been a woodworker or has worked in the woods his entire adult life. He moved to Oregon during the late 1970s, drawn by the forests and the rugged wilderness, a landscape that is quite a departure from his native Ohio. He and his siblings developed a deep appreciation for nature from their father, who was a forester and park superintendent (and amateur woodworker), and from their experience at their uncle’s cabin on a lake in northern Ontario where they spent much of their summers.

After Gareth moved to Oregon, he worked fighting fires in the Fremont National Forest outside of Paisley, Oregon. The next year, he worked for the U.S. Forest Service in the Sisters ranger district, where he was in charge of the wilderness trails, putting a two-man buck saw on his shoulder and hiking every day to make sure the trails were clear. The following summer, he worked in Alaska

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with kids in a YCC camp and also built trails.

During that time, Gareth had the winters off, and that's when he started building Appalachian dulcimers. "I was living in this tiny cabin in Seaside, trying to build a dulcimer in my kitchen. Then a friend started a wood-working business in Forest Grove and I fell in with him around 1981. We worked together until the economy tanked in the 2000s. I did about thirty years of working with him and on my own, mostly building high-end furniture, boxes and desk accessories that sold in galleries around the country, like The Real Mother Goose. I had this wood-working aptitude, interest, and knowledge, but I'd always been into music. Ever since I was about 9 or 10, I've been a "music-oholic." When the economy tanked, I was living in Forest Grove. My kids, some friends, and former partner Brenda tried to decide what to get me for my birthday, and it came down to two options: To send me to Oaxaca in southern Mexico for cooking school, or to send me to luthier school. Luckily, they chose the latter, because as it turns out, I'm allergic to nightshade vegetables!"

Gareth went to Charles Fox's American School of Lutherie, which bills itself as "the original and longest-established school for luthiers in North America." With that education, and with his friendship with Portland luthier John Greven, an icon in the guitar-making world, he was on his way.

According to Gareth, John Greven and Wayne Henderson and a few others are the masters of vintage-style guitar building and John is truly a master of voicing an instrument. "He can make a guitar really sing. John's been my main mentor, especially when it comes to voicing, and he's always somebody I can turn to when I have questions. John and I have become

close friends, and he's somebody I go to see nearly every time I'm in Portland. I've learned more from him than from anyone else and I am eternally grateful."

Gareth built guitars in his Forest Grove shop for a few years, while John continued to guide him. In 2011/12, Gareth met Preston Thompson at the River City Music Festival. Preston, who trained at Charles Fox's school when it was located in Vermont, and who built guitars during the 1980s, had just returned to guitar building in a shop over his garage in Bend. During the festival, Preston had a suite at the Red Lion Hotel, where he displayed a couple of his guitars, along with six or seven vintage guitars he possessed.

Gareth continued: "I wandered in and we started talking about guitars, and found that we were both passionate about vintage-style guitars. I mentioned that I had apprenticed with John (Greven) and that immediately gave me some 'street-

cred' with Preston. He was also impressed by the guitars I was building. We started talking for hours on the phone about guitars and building. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of Martin guitar history. Eventually he came over to Forest Grove with his wife, Julie. Brenda and I had dinner with them. Toward the end of dinner, Preston asked whether I would be interested in moving to Sisters to make guitars. I had no idea what he meant, or how serious he was, but as dinner went on, he made it seem like a possibility. That was during the recession. We had some flexibility and figured it could be an adventure. We tried not to get too excited, because at that point, Preston didn't have a shop yet."

Over the next year, Preston looked for shop space in Sisters, and finally settled on a spot in the building next to The Belfry, the premier music venue in Sisters. Gareth moved to Sisters that spring. "We worked on getting the building ready while building our first instruments, and in October

2013, we had our grand opening. There were just three of us in the shop in the beginning. I built everything except the necks: the bodies, assembly, frets, setup, some finish. Everything we did was handmade. Then, as we hired more people, tooled up more, and got more orders, the roles got more specific. Over time I moved out of setup and more exclusively into what we call "white wood," which is the raw wood section. I remain responsible for the wood, gluing up tops and backs, bracing them, carving the braces and voicing the guitars. Since 2013, I've voiced around 700 guitars, many for well-known artists including Molly Tuttle, Billy Strings, Laurie Lewis, Claire Lynch, Tim Stafford, Chris Jones, Chris Luquette, and others."

Linda: What does it mean to voice a guitar?



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Gareth: There are a lot of factors to getting the best sound out of a guitar. Some of that has to do with how a guitar is set up. The frets, nut, saddle and bridge as well as the dovetail joint which secures the neck to the body, all have to fit really tightly so the sound vibrations transfer through the material. If there's anything that's loose, it can absorb sound. Even down to things like the bridge pins that hold the strings, which are tapered, so the hole in the bridge has to be tapered correctly so it fits really well.

Then there's the selection of wood. The sides and back are called tone wood for a reason, because the top is like the drum head, producing the sound, while the back and the sides are like the spice in a dish, coloring the sound. Because of the structure of the material, whether it's hard/stiff or soft, whether it's resonant, whether it has a lot of sustain, all of those things influence the sound.

The top is crucial to the sound. Different kinds of top materials, whether Adirondack spruce, which we mostly use, or Sitka, Engelman, European, Lutz spruce, all have different qualities and are used for guitarists who demand different amounts of responsiveness or sound qualities. After that, the brace stock is chosen to enhance the different tops and the amount of material you carve off of them and the resulting differences in shape help to change how the top and guitar sound.

An additional step I do that most don't is that I hand-graduate the tops. What that means is they are thickest under the bridge and they gradually get thinner as they go out toward the edge. The treble side is usually a little thicker than the bass side. How much you graduate depends on the stiffness of the top, the size of the guitar and the desired sound. There are a ton of factors, as you can see.

Linda: What is the process for how you approach each client who wants a guitar?

Gareth: I like to talk to the person about what they want the guitar to do, how they want it to sound, and I ask what kind of player they are and what kind of music they play. Everyone is different. If you're a bluegrass player and you're playing lots of fiddle tunes and play in a group situation, you want a banjo killer that's really going to cut through everything.

If you're a finger-style player, especially if you use the meat of your fingers and you don't play with a lot of other people, then



Gareth Jenkins and John Greven

your need might be for something that is more subtle, while very responsive. Also, if you have a guitar you like and you're trying to upgrade, what do you like about your guitar and what do you not like? All of those things go into the little computer in my head and that will inform the choice of material and how I voice the guitar.

Linda: What makes a Preston Thompson guitar different for a flat-picker from a Martin guitar, especially a "prewar" Martin?

Gareth: Well, to many the gold standard for vintage-style steel-string Martins was the guitars they were making in the 1930s and into the 1940s ("prewar"). There weren't a lot of them made and there weren't a lot of them that survived intact. Those guitars were lightly built and there were a lot of design features that all went into making these amazing-sounding instruments. Less mass requires less energy to move it. When you have a lightly built instrument, it will respond better. The sound was amazing and the price tag now on original prewar Martins can be in the six figures.

John and Preston shared an advantage. John lived in Nashville for quite a while, and he worked at Gruhn Guitars in the 1960s and '70s. George Gruhn and the Mandolin Brothers were the guys who drove around Appalachia, knocking on doors and buying old instruments and they kind of created the vintage guitar market. George Gruhn's shop was right across the alley from the Ryman Auditorium, and it was sort of the epicenter of instruments in the country and bluegrass scene at the time, and those prewar guitars were the guitars on their workbenches. By the way, you've probably seen those incredibly fancy vintage banjos, the banjos that have inlay everywhere and

carved heels and all of that stuff? John was their inlay specialist. His inlays are second to none. But having the opportunity to work on those instruments and play and hear them gave John an advantage and something to shoot for.

Preston also worked at Randy Woods, another vintage place in Nashville back in the '70s where he also had the opportunity to work on and hear these instruments. Most people today have never heard those

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guitars, because a lot of them are in the hands of collectors. They're worth six figures, and sometimes a lot more.

However, after the golden era, Martin started building their guitars so they would be less likely to need repairs. Up through the 1960s and '70s, nearly everything they changed was in response to building them more like tanks. Good for the lifetime warranty, but not for the sound.

John and Preston shared the goal of wanting to get as close to that prewar Martin sound as possible, and still create a guitar that is strong enough to survive. Luckily for me, every once in a while, John gets a prewar repair job, and he calls me and we get to go inside it and figure out what it's all about, make measurements and all of that.

I feel fortunate to be part of that legacy and to have been associated with these two men. Preston Thompson passed in 2019. In the past ten years, and through over 700 guitars, I have gained a lot of skill and knowledge about making guitars sound great. As I tell people though, the one thing I still haven't figured out quite yet is how to build in "old" into a guitar. That I can't do, and nobody can. That's one of the big keys to a great-sounding instrument: How much you play it and how old it is. A new guitar is going to change a lot in a week, not to mention months and years, because when you first string it up (put it under tension), it is tight, and only through vibration and all the other factors that come with time (UV, oxidation, beer spilled in the sound hole) will a guitar "relax" and then truly vibrate.

When we started Thompson Guitars, we wanted to build guitars that would get close to that vintage sound and turn people's heads, and if you can build that guitar for between \$5,000 to \$15,000 instead of six figures, then you have a market. That's kind of where we're at.

Linda: If this is the golden age of guitar making and they sound good right away, how is it that those guitars don't need to be played before sounding good, and they

sound good out of the box?

Gareth: People have tried to learn why Stradivarius violins sound so good. They've done everything from measurements to scientific studies, figuring out the finish, everything. But no one can really build one like that. They were geniuses, but again, those instruments are also really old. No one knows how Preston Thompson guitars will sound in 50 years. But because they're starting out as such good guitars, they should have a leg up on being pretty phenomenal in the future. It is the attention to detail, wood selection, skills from repetition and experimentation, an ear for sound and a willingness to take the time and put yourself into what you do - that is the difference.

Linda: You said that torried wood is brittle, right?

Gareth: Torried wood is a baked process, so all of the resins are burned off. That process creates a different sound than a guitar made from wood that's not processed that way. Any time you create a different sound, you're going to get noticed. It's a new process, so people don't really know yet whether the sounds will change over time. From what I understand, torrifaction was originally used to make fence posts so they wouldn't take on water and rot. The jury is out on wood processed like that. Some luthiers find difficulty gluing it and problems during repairs.

Linda: Do you use torried wood?

Gareth: I would like to experiment with it, but there's so much demand for the guitars that we make that I haven't felt the need to use it.

Linda: How about shipwreck wood?

Gareth: We had some Brazilian rosewood that was cut in the 1930s and had sunk on a ship that was

headed to Denmark. We also use "sinker" mahogany that comes from the rivers in Central America. The sinker wood is pretty amazing.

Linda: What do you like about the sinker mahogany?

Gareth: Sinker wood definitely makes a different sound. It smells different when you cut it and heat it up and bend it, sand it. When wood is in water, some of the substances inside the wood cells are washed out, and the wood takes up minerals. Perhaps they were cutting old-growth trees too, or there might have been some different subspecies, but whatever the factors are, they create a guitar with a little more warmth and punch to it.

Bluegrass players like mahogany because the notes are crisp and decay a little quicker, and the guitar has more punch and cuts through the mix, because it doesn't have a lot of overtones to it. Brazilian rosewood has more warmth to the bass and mids, and to some a more complex sound. When these woods have been in water for long periods, they become even better. The new Molly Tuttle signature model, for example, is made from sinker mahogany.

Linda: Do you choose the tops and backs for particular guitars that you build?

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Gareth: In general, customers choose materials, and that sometimes has to do with their budget. They often choose a package. D-18 mahogany and D-28 are our basic models, and customers can upgrade from there.

Linda: Do you tap the wood to see what is a good top?

Gareth: Yes, I try to as much as I can within the constraints of a production shop. If the guitar is for an artist or a customer who wants a certain sound, then I definitely do. As I have mentioned, if they can talk with me about what they want, then I can go through the wood, tap and figure out which set has the characteristics that they might want. Especially with tops. When I get a batch of new tops, the first thing I do is pair them up, mark them and send them through the thickness sander so they're all the same thickness. Then I tap each one, looking for a clear fundamental note, also some sustained ring, a bell-like tone. Some will have a higher or lower pitch, and some tops will be less stiff and have a little less of a ring. When I work with a client, I can match the set to what a customer wants.

Mass-produced guitars are just assembled from parts in a bin, rather than created, so their sound tends to be inconsistent. Our guitars cost more and sound better and more consistent because it takes more calculation and time, the woods are better, and each guitar is individual. The attention to detail that goes into a custom instrument, as opposed to a factory instrument, makes it cost more, but also, the chances of your having a great guitar are much better.

Linda: I hear you're making your own guitars now. Last fall, I heard Jared Widman play a guitar you built for him. It sounded beautiful.

Gareth: Thank you. Yes, I got into this to build guitars, and my experience at Thompson guitars has been a great opportunity to learn a lot of things, apply my abilities and fine-tune those techniques. As roles in the shop have gotten smaller due to the demands of production, I've realized that I really have missed making the entire

guitar, so my attempt now is to build more on the side because I want to keep learning and growing. There are things I can do in my own builds that I can't do in a production shop. I can experiment more and pursue new ideas and techniques, different body shapes. That's where I get my juice from.

Linda: It seems like if you are building on the side, you're even more valuable to Thompson.

Gareth: I know that I add value to the company by my voicing of these instruments. When we started the company, it gave me an opportunity to create a sound that has turned people's heads (players and artists alike) and has helped put us on the map. I plan on and hope to continue doing that. I've been creating beautiful things out of wood for forty years now. That's who I am.

You asked what makes a guitar sing? Part of it is the person, and who the person is and how they feel about what they do. I really believe that someone who loves what they do and has a passion for it and can keep their ego out of it - they're going to be able to create something that other people can't. You build a better guitar by being a better person and if you're not willing to work on yourself, then you won't get any better and you won't grow. And I want to continue to grow.

Linda: Before we went on that hike, I had no idea about what a student of philosophy you are. I have a tangential question for you: How has COVID-19 changed your life? Or has it?

Gareth: It has been a challenge, hasn't it? We are all learning so much about ourselves and about each other. We are seeing more clearly some of the inequities in our world and it is challenging us to question some of the things we have believed or taken for granted. It is a very good thing.

On a practical level, COVID-19 has made me work from home, and it has made me set up systems at home to allow me to do so, to be more independent from the shop.

Logistically, figuring out what needs to happen, what kind of tooling, what kind of physical space. It's been a positive thing for me.

Where I live, I'm way out here (outside of Sisters) in the high desert, surrounded by the Tumalo Natural Area. It's not like living in town and being sequestered in your home and you get to go out and take a walk and see people. But I have nature, which is a wonderful thing, and I get out in it as much as I can, especially this time of year. The views of the mountains, the coyotes, the quiet, they are the things that sustain me. Besides, it is a wonderful environment for a meditation practice.

This has also made all of us appreciate the things that truly matter. I have Zoom meetings with my siblings, my good friends and my kids, and one of the subjects we talk about and reflect upon is the fact that we are so blessed. We are blessed to live in beautiful places, to have an appreciation for nature, and we have interests and passions that occupy our minds. We read, we study, we have our work, and we're all fortunate enough to have good connections. We are healthy and with incomes that allow us to isolate. We are the blessed people in all of this and I count my blessings daily.

Linda: In addition to your guitar building, you have many other connections to our bluegrass community. How long have you been an announcer on the *Music from the True Vine* show on KBOO radio?

Gareth: I really don't know exactly, but I have a distinct memory of my son being in a crib, on a Wednesday night, when I kissed him goodnight and went off to Portland for my show. He is now 36 years old and a professor at Princeton with a two-year-old son of his own. So, a long time.

Linda: You announce the show on the third Saturday morning of the month, right?

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Gareth: Yes, from 9:00 a.m. until noon on KBOO, 90.7 FM.

Linda: What's been your favorite thing about being a music curator and an announcer on the *True Vine* show for all of these years?

Gareth: I've always been astounded that I'm even there because I am really shy, but I have always been passionate about music since I was a child. When I moved to Portland, I listened to Jim Seafeld on KBOO and recorded all of his shows on cassette. I had a huge record collection. I was probably County Sales' best customer.

KBOO had some turnover, and one of the people doing the show, I swear to God, he must have had only three albums. I don't know how I got up the gumption, but I approached KBOO about doing a show. There wasn't much of a training program back then. I showed up on a Wednesday night, expecting I would shadow a person for a few shows. They were so excited, they showed me the library and a few of the dials and they left. I've been there ever since, trying to learn how to do it.

Back then, our audience was smaller than it is now. The time slot then was 9:00 p.m. until midnight. But then we switched to Saturday mornings. Steve Reischman was doing the ZooGrass concerts which were becoming very popular, so I got the idea to print up fliers announcing the change, and handed them out every week to the concert-goers outside of the Zoo. With time we grew into the most popular show on the station.

I've always been aware of how much great music there is in the world and in bluegrass. It has been one of my true pleasures to turn people on to that music. I'm passionate about the music and I am honored to be able to do the show so I can share music with people. Besides, I don't have to bore my friends by making mixtapes for them. I can share the music on the air.

The *True Vine* show has also afforded me the opportunity to announce other shows over the years, which has been fun, at places like OBA-hosted concerts at the old Northwest Service Center.

Linda: It must be interesting to have an influence on people you don't even know.



Gareth Jenkins at KBOO radio

Gareth: As you know, from what you do, music can enrich people's lives. I truly believe that having access to good and different music increases the quality of your life. Portland is a somewhat transient town, lots of people moving in and out, so there needs to be a certain amount of continual work to bring people into the community, to give them access, to raise awareness of bluegrass, awareness of shows. That's why the OBA calendar, and the calendar on the KBOO show, what you and Greg are doing at Taborggrass, our radio show, all of those things are part of the fabric of the bluegrass community and they enrich people's lives.

The participatory nature of bluegrass also sets this music apart from other music, and keeping people aware of where and how to get engaged is important. You camp together. You jam together. It's a real blessing. There is no other music genre that makes room for that communal music making. It is also a healthy and safe place for kids to be. Part of my role on my KBOO show is

to try to help create those connections for people, in the community and also in the music. My KBOO experience has been very rewarding.

Linda: Right. I think that's why so many of us are feeling a level of grief at this point, because we don't have those jams, shows and festivals to look forward to, and I imagine when they start up again, it's going to be a great time.

Gareth: I can't wait.

Linda: There will probably always be people who say if you don't play Stanley Brothers or Flatt & Scruggs, then get off my porch. One time someone I respect told me women can't really sing bluegrass because they can't reproduce the classic harmony stack.

Gareth: Well, as with everything, there is some truth in that. We have the ongoing conversation that there are two camps in the bluegrass community, each with differing ideas about what bluegrass is. The strict traditionalists and the rest. I think there is room for all under this bluegrass umbrella. I'm seeing more crossover, more women, more young people making amazing music and more willingness to experiment. Partly that is a West Coast phenomenon, of course.

If you focus on the traditional sound of bluegrass, unfortunately there have been too few women who have been able to create that kind of sound, that buzz, and in large part that was due to a lack of opportunity. Delia Bell and Hazel Dickens are just a couple who could, but there's also nothing wrong with a different sound. Jim & Jesse and The Osborne Brothers didn't sound like Bill Monroe or the Stanley Brothers, and Charlie Waller definitely didn't sound like any of those guys.

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I get responses when I'm doing my show in support of all sorts of bluegrass. There's room under the bluegrass umbrella for everyone. For God's sake, The Po' Ramblin' Boys and Danny Paisley are going strong, and they played at Pickathon. I think that was because of Patrick Connell. Those bands are about as raw and trad as you can get, and they're playing at Pickathon. So that audience is getting turned on to that. Just because someone likes a certain kind of bluegrass music doesn't nullify the other kinds of bluegrass music.

New Grass Revival doesn't nullify Bill Monroe (that ain't no part of nothing). There were people who didn't like the Bluegrass Album Band. Same goes with almost any innovation. Some people don't like change. But there will always be traditional bluegrass even as others are innovating. We are all different and have different influences. If you listen to it and you like it, you like it. If you don't, you don't; move on to something else.

Linda: I have a hard time placing boundaries on any genre. It's kind of like the Supreme Court's definition of pornography. I know it's bluegrass when I hear it. For me, what makes the music bluegrass is that drive and the singing and the banjo. It's in the ear of the beholder, for sure.

Gareth: It is, yes. It's really hard to draw a line about what bluegrass is because the influences we have in our lives aren't the influences that were in the lives of the founding fathers of the music. What they heard in the way of music around them isn't what we have that surrounds us. We have to search it out.

You know there are a lot of young people, like Reed Stutz and Kristin Melling, who immerse themselves in the traditional side of the music, the roots. It's about how serious you are about trying to figure out what makes bluegrass "Bluegrass." It isn't an easy musical form and to do it well takes a lot of study and practice, but if you get it down, then you have a firm foundation to work from. There are so many ways to approach

bluegrass, from The Steeldrivers to Danny Paisley. Especially the vocal part. As you know, it's not an easy thing to do.

Linda: It takes work and people are surprised about that.

Gareth: Most people forget that all of those people they look to, like Stanley Brothers, Bill Monroe, Flatt & Scruggs, all those musicians lived that music. They got up at five in the morning, drove to the radio station, played for an hour, and then they got on the bus to play more shows that evening in school houses. They did that daily, they worked hard at it. That's why if you listen to the old recordings, despite the roughness of the production



qualities and sound, you will hear a tightness of their sound that you don't get as much nowadays. Production values are better now and there are so many amazing pickers and singers, but that rawness and tightness of sound is lacking because they don't play as much.

Linda: Plus, they grew up playing with family and hearing that sound, singing in church.

Gareth: People in our generation and later are learning the music from the radio, records and YouTube. We're not going to sound like those early guys because we

didn't have the same influences and we don't have the same accent. One of the reasons we sell so many guitars in the southeastern U.S. is because there is a deep tradition there of people playing and singing together for generations. It's the same with learning bluegrass. If you haven't grown up in that environment, then you probably aren't going to sound like them. Now, to really sound like a traditional bluegrass person, you've got to study it.

Linda: I grew up singing in the Southern Baptist church. My father sang in a gospel quartet. I don't remember not being able to harmonize when I was a little kid. Everybody in my family and extended family, everyone at church could sing, and most everyone played some kind of instrument, so I was surprised when I met people out here in Oregon who were told by a family member or teacher when they were children to not even try to sing. That just hurt my heart to hear that.

When people come to Taborgrass, many of them are learning about bluegrass, learning to work their instruments and singing for the first time, and I think they are especially brave. Plus, it's a big commitment of time. The primary motivator seems to be that the music is an entrée into a community and a way of life that's not necessarily centered around playing for other people, but playing with other people, and that's a beautiful thing.

Gareth: You are infinitely blessed to have grown up with music all around you, and it is part of who you are, part of your world. Then you are so blessed, especially if you can figure out how to play it and share it later. One of the things I feel really blessed about being in bluegrass for as long as I have: I talk about how John (Grevin) and Preston (Thompson) have that sound in their head about how a guitar is supposed to sound. I've heard so much bluegrass. I can hear harmonies, but I'm not trained. I'm pretty instinctual. But it is there and it is a blessing.

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Linda: How did you get interested in bluegrass, in particular?

Gareth: I was still in Columbus, at Ohio State, and I'd been playing guitar a bit. The bluegrass I was aware of at first was Doc Watson, The Seldom Scene, those kinds of performers. I ran across their recordings, so I decided to get myself a better guitar, and started playing more. It was from there that I dug deeper and deeper and found the roots and all the branches.

One of the great joys of life for me is to discover new music. I dive in obsessively. I've done that with African, Jazz, Reggae. I read everything I can, listen to everything I can, I want to learn all about it. I did that with bluegrass music when I was 22. That was a tumultuous time, in the early 1970s, kind of like now, but in a different way. There were long hairs and rednecks. Bluegrass is one of those places where there's been an overlap, since the 1960s. There were a couple of clubs in Columbus that would have Ralph Stanley or Larry Sparks, somebody like that, but you had to pick and choose which clubs you went to because if you had long hair...

When I moved out to Oregon, there was Dr. Corn, Sawtooth, Muddy Bottom Boys. A lot of those bands played weekly, if not more, and they got really good. It was an exciting time to move to Portland.

Linda: Were there a lot of clubs that featured bluegrass bands?

Gareth: Rock Creek Tavern, for example, was like Muddy Rudder in some ways, but with a lot more people. There was this whole scene of musicians and clubs. Steve Reischman and Sunny South. Steve had several bands over the years. That was a good time.

Linda: Meara MacLoughlin is creating an infrastructure for the music community through her non-profit, Music Portland.

She says that many venues are at risk of closing for good. At least three small venues have declared bankruptcy because of the pandemic. It's in those small venues that local musicians build their craft. Where do you see it all going?

Gareth: Portland was a backwater when I moved there. It was a cheap place to live.



There was a great art scene, music scene (all kinds of music). Gentrification hadn't moved in yet; warehouse space and house rents were inexpensive and available. Then condos moved in and artists had to move somewhere else. There was an amazing jazz scene in north Portland earlier, for example. Everyone from Duke Ellington on down played there, but that was wiped out when they moved the freeway. If you want to have a loft where you can paint or a club that hosts bluegrass or jazz music, it has to be a cheap place. Now that Portland has gentrified, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for that to happen. Portland is pricing itself out of what has made it attractive for so many people

for so long. The options for clubs playing bluegrass are getting smaller and smaller. But things go in cycles. Maybe 5 or 10 years down the road, there might be closed places that would be cheap to buy. All you can deal with is what you have right now. COVID-19 may alter all of that.

Linda: You shared your favorite female bluegrass artists with me via your Spotify list back in April. When you look for music for your radio show, where do you look?

Gareth: There used to be a big pile of LPs and two turntables at the station and jackets and sleeves everywhere. Then there were CDs, and there's always the library. The bluegrass section is not as extensive as the African music section. I did an African show on KBOO for 15 years and had a mail order business selling African music. The programming director gave me a budget to order African CDs for years, so we have a pretty extensive African music library.

Linda: Wow! I didn't know that about you!

Gareth: I quit that show when I moved to Sisters. For a while I was doing a weekly African show and a monthly bluegrass show. At one point, I sat down and figured out how many shows I'd announced, around 800.

For the bluegrass shows, I have three terabytes of music collected on my computer, with a good deal of that bluegrass. Musicians don't send out hard copy anymore, so most music is offered to DJs through websites such as Air Play Direct. It's only 320 bit, mp3 quality, which is the downside. However, most people today wouldn't even know what a decent stereo sounds like. They have computer speakers and headphones. MP3 quality is a third of the size as a CD. I download CDs onto my computer. I play new stuff from Air Play Direct and try to play what's new.

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Gareth Jenkins: The Man Behind the Voice

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Sometimes I'll go to the *Bluegrass Today* chart to see what people are spinning. It's always a dilemma to figure out a set list for the show because I want everyone to have a home there in the show. I want young people and traditionalists to find something in the show they'll enjoy. I want middle-of-the-road people to enjoy the show. I want there to be women, gospel, all the aspects, but still flow. It takes a lot of juggling to figure out a mix that touches as many of those bases as possible.

I have enough bluegrass music to play forever, but you have to distill that down to maybe 50 numbers for each show.

Linda: During my KBOO shows, I'd depart from my setlist, depending how I felt while hearing the song that was playing, kind of like what happens on the bandstand when you plug in something off-list.

Gareth: Oh, yeah! It's only recently that I've had a real set list. I used to wing the whole thing. It was like surfing. Sometimes you'd crash, but usually you would really find a good groove. One song inspires you to play another. There are all of these factors that enter in. I do keep a big box of CDs next to me to pop in when I feel like it, though.

Linda: Do you think you'll continue to do the show as long as you live?

Gareth: Maybe not as long as I live, but for a while, I hope. Now that I am not doing the African shows and just doing the bluegrass show, I'm going deeper into that music, and it enriches my life. As long as people feel that they enjoy the show and that they are learning about the music from listening, then I hope to continue to have the opportunity.

Linda: What are the kinds of things the OBA could do to support the bluegrass community going forward?

Gareth: I've been involved in enough volunteer organizations, everything from OBA to KBOO to a couple of food co-ops, that I know new things can be threatening, because people are volunteering, and their bandwidth for struggle might be less than if they were being paid. There needs to be a way to be inclusive, inclusive to other parts of Oregon, inclusive to all age groups, inclusive to the broad umbrella of what bluegrass is. I have friends and you



have friends who think if it's not traditional bluegrass, it probably should not be part of the OBA. But then again, you have bands like Never Come Down. They are amazing.

Linda: I saw their March 7 show at The Old Church. That was the last show I saw, and I think that may have been the last show for a lot of people. One of the best concerts I've ever heard.

Gareth: They're great players, they have a mature approach to dynamics, most of what they play, some people wouldn't con-

sider it bluegrass. But we need to include bands like that and a lot of the other bands that are new. The Bridgetown Festival, for example, has booked a lot of bands that don't get booked at other festivals.

Linda: We've played that festival and were scheduled to play there again this year.

Gareth: I saw you and Whiskey Deaf playing there, but I wasn't that familiar with most of the bands. There are bands like the Skilletheads in Bend.

Linda: I love them.

Gareth: There are a lot of bands that are on the fringes. I look at that the same way I look at my radio show. Unless you're willing to try to have something there for them, and allow them to feel like they can be a part of this, and this is a place where they're not going to feel like outsiders, then you're never going to have an organization that's going to be able to sustain itself and evolve and stay strong. You need the youth, you need the folks who have been in the scene for a long time, you need trad, you need progressive. You need new blood. It's hard for the people who have been a part of it for so long to let go but that is part of life.

Linda: I know everyone appreciates all you do for our community.

Gareth: Well thank you Linda. I really appreciate that. I feel so blessed by having my music passions, my woodworking passions and my guitar-making passions, and if I can share those things, then my life is richer. And to be honest, if I didn't have those things, this lockdown would be so much harder. So many people don't have those things. They don't sing. They don't dance. They don't have interests that turn

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Gareth Jenkins: The Man Behind the Voice

them on. They watch TV. There's nothing wrong with that. But there is so much more for us to share.

Linda: I think the baking and gardening boom during this period may be part of a desire for folks to be part of something larger than themselves.

Gareth: Not if you're gluten free!

Linda: Maybe all of those people who've wanted to learn to sing or play an instrument will go forward with that. Now a lot of people have the time to listen and learn. Suddenly there are great players online offering concerts and lessons. This could turn out to be an opportunity for a lot of people. In a way, this is a rich time, as long as everyone wears a mask.

Gareth: I would imagine a lot of people who turned to Taborgrass went there be-

cause there were no other options to learn to play bluegrass with people and feel safe. It's a beautiful thing. It's been a long time since I've been to the String Summit. It's a beautiful festival, but there is little parking lot picking.

Linda: I noticed that at Telluride, too.

Gareth: You know, I have this wonderful memory of my daughter, Mara, who was maybe five years old. We were at the Northwest Service Center. The band Good Ol' Persons was playing and Mara was curled up under the pew in the front row, looking up at the stage. Kathy Kallick was singing and she kept having eye contact with Mara.

Linda: That sounds like Kathy.

Gareth: Those kinds of little memories from this music enrich our lives. The festivals are a safe environment for kids. Let's keep the music alive and the festivals

thriving so we can all get back to sharing music. Let's pick.

Linda: That's wonderful. Thanks so much for your generosity and time, Gareth. I can't wait to see what you do next.

Gareth Jenkins builds guitars in Sisters, Oregon. You can hear his bluegrass program on KBOO's *Music from the True Vine* every third Saturday, 9:00 a.m. until noon (90.7 FM). Gareth has voiced instruments for Tim Stafford, Laurie Lewis, Billy Strings, Molly Tuttle, Chris Luquette, Claire Lynch and many more. You can learn more about Gareth and Thompson Guitars at <http://pktguitars.com>.

Linda Leavitt is a Portland-area musician and teacher who performs with Mountain Honey. She teaches at Taborgrass and is the editor of *The Bluegrass Express*, the newsletter of the Oregon Bluegrass Association.

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