

West Virginia's 'Music Man'

6/9/92

Old instruments keep stringing Joe Dobbs along

By DAVE PEYTON
Of The Herald-Dispatch staff

6/9/92

Joe Dobbs may not be on the front lines of the fight to improve the U.S. balance of trade with Japan. But the dealer in used and antique stringed musical instruments is doing his part.

Hardly a day goes by that the fax machine in his St. Albans, W.Va., shop doesn't grind out a message or two from instrument dealers and collectors in Japan, ordering stringed musical instruments that Dobbs offers for sale in the newsletter he mails worldwide. Half of his sales are to the Japanese. He sells to people in Europe and the United States as well.

"It only makes sense when you think about it," says Dobbs, owner of the Fret 'n Fiddle at 809 Pennsylvania Ave. "America has been exporting its music to other countries since the minstrel show days in the late 1800s. It's only natural that the people overseas who like American music want American instruments to play it on."

His shop looks more like a museum than a music store. Hanging on the walls with the new instruments he sells are ancient banjos, guitars, fiddles, hybrid stringed instruments with no names and electric guitars.

Antique electric guitars?


A 1957 Fender Stratocaster electric guitar hangs on the shop wall. Early Fender electrics may be worth thousands, depending on their condition and whether or not they have all their original parts, he says. "A Stratocaster played by early rock 'n' roll musicians such as Buddy Holly would be even more valuable."

Dobbs admits that when most people think of antique stringed instruments, they think of Grandpa's old banjo or Uncle Fred's six-string guitar, the one he used to play at barn dances and beat people over the head with in bar fights.



"There are plenty of instruments like that in these mountains," Dobbs says. "In fact, that's the reason I can run a business like this here. Mountain people are musical people and a lot of people have them under their bed or in the

Please see **DOBBS/A2**



The Herald-Dispatch
Joe Dobbs stands amid the antique and used stringed instruments Albans, W.Va., shop, the Fret 'n Fiddle. About half of the old instruments goes to collectors, musicians and dealers in Japan.

➔ Dobbs

From **A1**

attic that someone in the family used to play but don't any more. But some instruments that really aren't that old can still be valuable."

For example, American guitar makers made some really excellent guitars in the 1960s and '70s for reasonable prices during the folk music revival, Dobbs says. While not that old, they're often worth more than what they originally cost.

Thus, the Martin guitar that Uncle Ralph, the hippy, used to strum while he sang war protest songs may be as valuable as Grandpa's century-old banjo.

Dobbs, 57, is a native of Louisiana who opened the original Fret 'n Fiddle in Huntington in 1976 as an instrument repair shop. In 1980, he took his business to St. Albans, where he began to sell new instruments.

It didn't take him long to discover the wealth of old musical instruments in the area that people wanted to trade and sell. About the

same time, the Japanese economy began skyrocketing and they began collecting all sorts of Americana.

Dobbs says he was in the right place at the right time and his business has flourished ever since.

In fact, he says, he sees nothing but a rosy future for years to come. More and more orders come from Europe as those countries become wealthier. That's why he's pleased that his youngest son, Scott, has joined the business.

"The fact Scotty is with me gives me time to do more public relations for the business," Dobbs says. It also gives him time to take vacations on his motorcycle, play his fiddle and mandolin at folk festivals and spend more time preparing for his show "Music from the Mountains," on West Virginia Public Radio each Saturday from 8 to 9 p.m.

Dobbs says he loves West Virginia "and I feel really fortunate I was able to find a business like that that has allowed me to stay in the state. It's a natural place for this kind of business, and I feel fortunate I can live here and do what I want to do."