



THE OBSERVER, DEWITT, IOWA

Observer Online

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Thursday, November 5, 2015

No job oompahssible for instrument repairman

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It isn't uncommon to see a drill press and a lathe in a repair shop.

It's less common to see them used by an accomplished tuba player - unless you're in Lee Stofer Music near DeWitt.

Music man: Lee Stofer of rural DeWitt has built a worldwide reputation in repairing tubas, his main business. But he also repairs all other brass and woodwind instruments, working with schools in the area.

Stofer, 58, has built a worldwide reputation as a tuba repairman, to go with a lifetime of actually playing the instrument.

And while tubas are his specialty, he also repairs other brass instruments and woodwinds for area school districts.

For a man who's made a life in music, he was something of a late bloomer. The western Kentucky native began playing the euphonium as a junior in high school and started picking up the trombone as well.

But "I was fascinated by the rotary valve European tuba," he says, switched to that instrument halfway through his first semester of college at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green "and never looked back."

He found he had a knack for the tuba. He was big enough to carry it, had enough

lung capacity and a good ear for pitch. And perhaps most importantly, he had the desire.

He ended up earning an undergraduate degree in musical performance, graduating in 1979. He requested an audition with the symphony orchestra in Jacksonville, Fla., but his college tuba instructor warned him how stiff the competition would be. When he finally tried out, "I was auditioning against 75 people for a job that didn't pay a living (wage)," he says.

He began checking into the military and, after being offered the best deal by the army - which had 48 bands stationed around the world - started at the Armed Forces School of Music, completing the six-month course in three months. His previous college education played a big part, although the armed forces school emphasized performance over the theory he had learned for his degree.

He did so well, in fact, that the staff at the school asked him if he could pick up electric bass as well, because there was a shortage of military bass instructors. He did that and ended up playing in three different ensembles.

Eventually, in a 22-year military career, Stofer played string bass, upright bass, trombone and - of course - tuba. He performed in 42 of the 50 states, on three tours of Mexico and, while stationed in Germany, nearly every country in western Europe.

It was spit-and-polish duty. "Our job was doing parades or appearing in front of the public," he says. "We looked like a recruiting poster."

Halfway through his military career, he met Debbie Hill of DeWitt, married her and began thinking about a family - and a career after the military.

As a professional musician, he knew that good instrument repair people were hard to find. He had grown up on a farm and already had the kind of mechanical skill that life breeds, so he bought a used tuba and, while stationed in Georgia, found someone he could apprentice with in Atlanta to learn the repair trade. During one of his tours in Germany, he did a two-week internship with Rudolf Meinl, a brass instrument maker that is world-renowned for its tubas.

In 1995, he talked himself into a position at the Armed Forces School of Music instrument repair shop. They were so in need of repair people that he was sent back from his German deployment four months early. He eventually rose to become head of the shop, overseeing a total rebuilding of it.

And he found his niche. "I am absolutely convinced the Lord was doing this to prepare me for what I wanted to do," he says. He learned virtually every aspect of

instrument repair, from the technical to the business end.

In 1998, toward the end of his army career, he was introduced to the Internet, including the website Tubanet. Eventually, "that website helped me become a presence in the tuba world," he says.

After his retirement, the Stofers stayed in Georgia for a few years before moving to DeWitt in May of 2006. They moved onto Debbie's family farm - Stofer notes with pride that their children are the seventh generation to live in the same farmhouse - and he opened his repair business in a barn on the property.

While he still does a lot of work for area schools, with cutbacks to arts programs that is not as big a part of his business as it once was.

"The school budgets have just fallen through the floor in the last several years," he says, to the point where if he had to rely on schools for most of his business "we'd probably be on food stamps."

He estimates that from 2008 to 2010, about 35 percent of his business came from schools. Since 2010, that proportion has dropped to about 15 percent.

But using the Internet - his own site is <http://tubameister.com> - he has built a clientele that spans the world, from professional musicians to tuba collectors (one of whom has more than 400; in the trade, folks like that are known as "tubaholics"). His farthest customer is from Namibia in southwest Africa.

And he's been called on for repair jobs that were, to say the least, challenging.

Among his toughest repairs was one done for a Los Angeles studio musician, who owned a York tuba made in 1938 - one of no more than 20 of that model ever made by that company. "It had just become too loose and unreliable to play," he says. And its age and rarity "guarantees you there were no replacement parts," he says. He eventually found a machinist in Atlanta who was able to fabricate the necessary parts.

That was unusual, though. Stofer himself often brazes metal cracks, creates patches and fabricates parts.

Even if parts can be found or fabricated, it can be expensive. Stofer once had to find a piston for the valve on an ancient tuba that ended up costing \$1,000.

Because he's working on instruments people often use to make a living, some of his client can be demanding.

One of his clients is a music teacher in Bettendorf who plays the trombone. He will sometimes bring Stofer an instrument with a problem that is barely perceptible - say, a hitch in the slide.

"He makes me a better repairman," Stofer says.

But as skilled as he is at fixing brasses and woodwinds in general, the tuba still is the most fascinating to him.

"With a tuba, I can play it and I can really get into the subtleties."

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