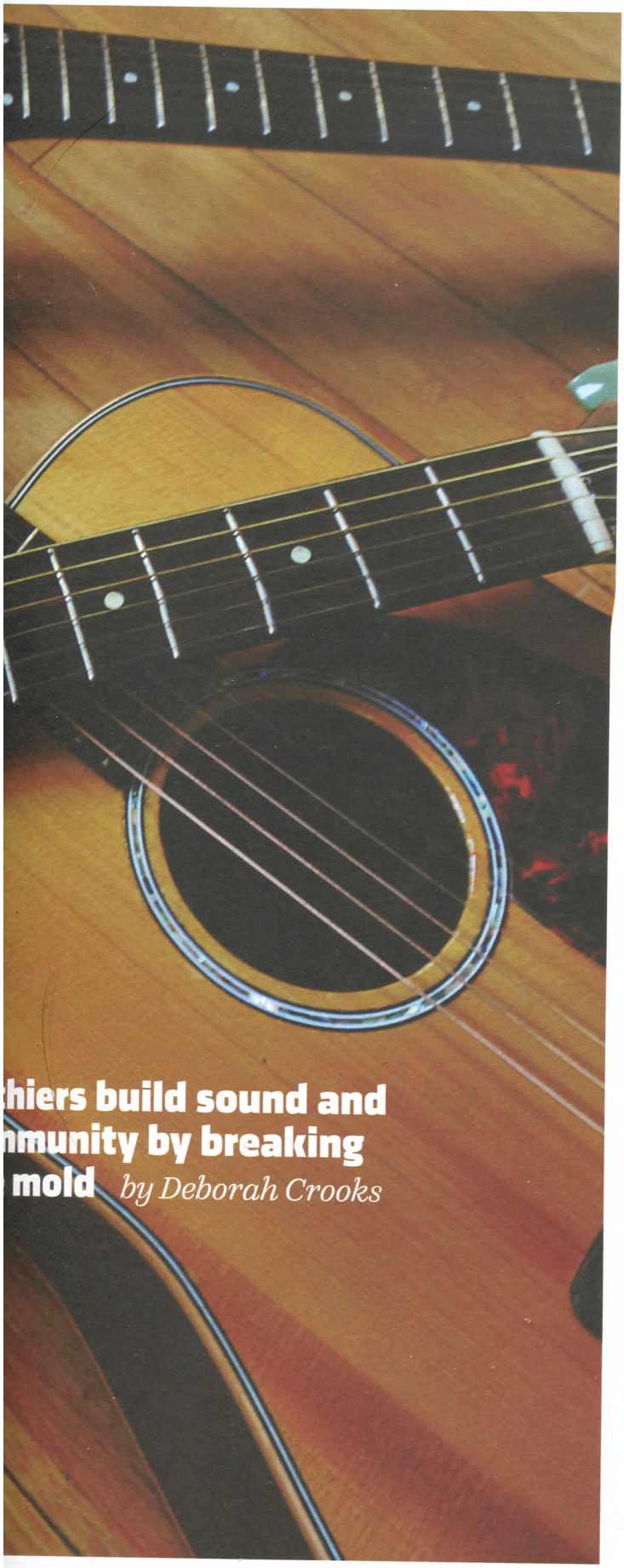

hiers build sound and nmunity by breaking mold

by Deborah Crooks

ON A TYPICAL DAY IN HIS MISSION District live/work studio, Peter Whitehead reaches for one of the dozens of lutes, lyres, fiddles, and "canjos" he's made to start the long work of writing music. Meanwhile, across the San Francisco Bay, luthier Mario Desio cuts the soundboard for a new guitar he's building in his East Bay home and workshop. While Desio and Whitehead create vastly different instruments — for very different musicians — they're each motivated by a wide-ranging curiosity about sound and a penchant for handmade, homemade things. And, in the process of building instruments, the two have helped forge, inspire, and strengthen their local music communities.

Both of these men came to California from elsewhere. Whitehead arrived from England in 1981. Since then, he has assembled a dynamic career at the confluence of instrument building, composing, visual arts, choreography, and performance. When he isn't composing music for renowned choreographers like Mikhail Baryshnikov, scoring for film, and building his handmade instruments, Whitehead might be singing Leonard Cohen songs with the 30-member men's a cappella group Conspiracy of Beards, readying a short solo set for an art

opening, or improvising with his instrumental folk-jazz trio, Closer to Carbon.

Desio, meanwhile, moved from New York in 1977 to pursue music, and has, for the past six years, built guitars for a diverse who's who of Bay Area songwriters: country-noir crooner Maurice Tani (77 El Deora), folk-rock strummer Jeff Pehrson (Box Set, Further), brainy troubadour Ira Marlowe, and noted lead guitarist Shelley Doty among them. Also, like Whitehead, he is in constant communication with his musically minded peers. He takes a break from sanding and shaping wood in his workshop to have lunch with fellow musicians like Tani and Grammy- winning electronic music innovator Roger Linn (most famous for inventing the LM-1 Drum Computer). He posts photo albums of works in progress on Facebook and plans gatherings for people whose guitars he built.

'I Got Into Sound'

Before he started building instruments, Desio spent many years immersed in the San Francisco music scene, penning acoustic folk songs and playing in a wide range of projects, from the bands he fronts — Mario Speedwagon and the Secret Identities — to theater and hardcore rock bands. All the while, he worked as a contractor to pay the bills. He met many of his current clients early in their careers, when he and they were playing at bustling songwriter nights at San Francisco's Owl and Monkey and Bazaar cafés or at the Freight & Salvage in Berkeley.

"I got into sound," says Desio during a recent interview, describing his lifelong love affair with the guitar. It began when he was a youth listening to the Beatles and followed him to the West Coast unabated.

"All the different sounds," he exclaims. "I wanted more sounds to play with. I loved my first Martin D-35. That was a great guitar. As time went by, I realized Gibsons have a great sound. So I went and bought a Gibson. ... Then I started going crazy. I got a Strat, then I got *a better* Strat. Then I thought I had to have a Gretsch because they have unique pickups."

By the early aughts, Desio was a new father, and his house was filled with nearly 30 instruments. That's when his wife put her foot down. "After 28–29 guitars, she said, 'That's enough, no more guitars!'" Desio laughs. "Our house was small and it was getting expensive."

Shortly before he exceeded his home's carrying capacity for instruments, Desio took his Gibson to respected luthier Alan Perlman for a fret job and a new bridge. "He fixed it, and I mentioned I'd like to build a guitar," Desio remembers. "He said, 'You understand wood, you can do it.' And I realized this is my loophole: I can't *buy* any more guitars, but I can make them."

Still, Desio's entry into luthiery was riddled with fits and starts. He started building a Django Maccaferri copy. Reaching an impasse, he abandoned it to try building two flat-top guitars. But he put them all aside when he heard that his old friend, Los Angeles-based folk-pop songwriter David Grossman, had his Gibson Hummingbird stolen.

"All my memories of him are with that guitar," Desio recounts. "So I put everything on hold and built him a replacement. I started it in January 2011, and finished it by [the] end of March."

It was the first acoustic guitar he completed. Buoyed by the instrument's reception and the accompanying interest from his Bay Area songwriting community, Desio began taking commissions from more of his musical friends and building in earnest.

In the years since, he has made a practice of using reclaimed or repurposed materials for many of his guitars. His ever-developing curiosity about the sounds and tones different woods yield led him to experiment with materials outside the mahogany, maple, and Brazilian rosewood trinity that many luthiers consider ideal for their craft. These days, Desio's shop is filled with pieces of walnut and cocobolo, Indian rosewood, reclaimed redwood, and remnants of vintage spruce pianos.

Tani, San Francisco songwriter and bandleader Pam Brandon (of Belle Monroe and Her Brewgrass Boys), and Berkeley musician and podcaster Vanessa Lowe all have Desio guitars with soundboards made from recycled piano (the fret dots of Brandon's parlor guitar are made from old ivory piano keys), hinting at an emerging signature of their builder.

"I'm chasing something," Desio admits. "I've read that [piano top] is not going to be any better, [because] you end up with a four-piece top, which [supposedly] isn't right ... the glue can come unglued. ... But the glue is Hyde glue and it held the piano together for 100 years, so it's not going to fall apart." More important than whatever Desio is chasing, the people who own his guitars are pleased. "I don't really know if it makes a difference," notes Tani, whose guitar's top comes from a 100-year-old upright piano. "But I figure a billion notes have already been played through it, so it's got to sound good."

Finding the Music

Growing up in England, Whitehead's early inspiration also included the Beatles. Like Desio, his first instrument was a guitar, but he was also deeply influenced by Brian Eno, Robert Wyatt, and Frank Zappa. As an adult, his extensive travels throughout Southeast Asia further expanded his ear.

During a lengthy trip to Vietnam, when he had nothing to play, Whitehead constructed his own instrument, based on a traditional East Asian folk instrument. "I loved the rebabs, [which are] basically a two-stringed fiddle," he says. "I loved those in Indonesia and in Mongolia ... in the Middle East. Two-stringed instruments are all over the Arab world."

He wanted to capture that sound, but he was wary about appropriating the culture. "I thought if I make my own version, with my own particular style, I could find my own music," he says. "I basically copied the form of [the rebab], but used my own materials. I didn't know how to play it, so I had to learn how to play it."

When he returned to the States, Whitehead began building more instruments, everything from "canjos" (banjos built from baking tins) to harps made from eucalyptus tree branches and wooden spoons. But he wasn't interested in building instruments simply for the sake of making a weird or far-out object. He was chasing the best sounds.

Whitehead met other instrument builders, including Oliver DiCicco, with whom he cofounded the Mobius

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Mario Desio

Operandi ensemble, which composed and performed music on all-original, homemade instruments. He contributed to Beth Custer's Vinculum Symphony, which combined chamber musicians and experimental instrument builders. And he connected with the thriving San Francisco modern dance community, scoring numerous pieces and collaborating on live performances.

At a spring appearance in a San Francisco art gallery, Whitehead peformed two differently textured arrangements of the same song, choosing instruments from a selection containing one of his first versions of the rebab, whose body utilized the wooden part of an ice bucket. He also had a balloon flute fashioned from a bit of pipe, a loop pedal, and a Yamaha FG180 guitar.

"The instruments I'm really focusing on now have to do with harmonics," he says, "and they're all really simple. The flute — there are no finger holes. One has a ball in it that slides up and down to change the pitch. The fiddle only has two strings and no frets. But I play conventional instruments as well, and I like using electronics."

Community of Creation

For both Desio and Whitehead, going with and against the grain has resulted in their work rippling through and beyond their own communities. At the same time Desio is mulling placing a few of his guitars in local venues to be used as house instruments, he has a patent pending on a new structural design for guitars. A few months ago, Whitehead was preparing to fill a gallery with a smorgasbord of his instruments and lead a musical mini-marathon performance as part of the 2016 San Francisco International Arts Festival. "[My plan is] to have a roomful of instruments and work my way through them," he says. "Guitars as well as weird acoustic things, electronic fiddles and flutes, and then maybe I'll use loops.

"I'm interested in [an instrument] becoming an access [point] to a language, to expression, to finding a voice," he continues. "One of my favorite things is being in a studio on a weekday, with dancers, making something. ... Dancers exist in this very physical world and music is invisible, intangible. They too get inspired by sound. You can see it. It changes what they're doing."

Desio has begun to host semi-regular showcases of his work, called "A Night of Desio Guitars," often at the Bazaar Café or the Monkey House, Marlowe's Berkeley listening room. Like the glue he uses, his guitars have served as a community reinforcement for the musicians who came up in the San Francisco Bay Area, many of whom are now too busy playing their respective shows to see each other play often. On one such evening, a dozen acoustic guitars — a baritone, a koa J-45, a semi-baritone, a sunburst dreadnought, a parlor — are waiting to be utilized by their fingerstyle-playing, Grateful Dead-interpreting, funk-grooving, and bluegrass-picking owners. The instruments make an impressive display against the wall, like an art exhibit.

Aside from the opportunity to hear such a diverse group of accomplished musicians in one place, the bonus of getting all the guitars together is to find how many of them are now also related by wood as well as maker. Brandon's cocobolo truss rod cover was made from the wood leftover from Doty's guitar. My own Desio parlor guitar is made from the same Indian rosewood as my husband's semi-baritone.

Between jamming and comparing each other's instruments, Desio talks about the process of building each guitar before introducing its associated performer to play a song. At the most recent gathering at the Bazaar Café, Brandon debuted her new Desio: a piano-top parlor guitar built in part from the leaves of a 19th-century mahogany dining room set that she salvaged from a 2011 house fire that destroyed most of her possessions. She'd bought the table years earlier at the estate sale of a renowned San Francisco madam named Auntie Doris.

Sitting down with her Desio instrument for the first time, she told how she'd learned the madam had once entertained jazz artists and civic leaders at her brothel's table. It was fitting, then, that the pieces of storied mahogany that survived the fire could be given new life as a guitar. ■