



Music City morphs into Guitar Town

By Paul Erland

When the Guitar Town Project came looking for artists, Harold Kraus found his heartstrings being plucked again.

Guitar Town is a public arts project featuring 50 giant fiberglass Gibson guitars – 25 Les Paul models and 25 Chet Atkins Country Gentleman models – on display in front of selected Nashville landmarks and businesses. The sculptures were created by local artists – some of them, like Kraus, nationally and internationally acclaimed – for the benefit of various charitable organizations.

"It's an honor, yes – and a tremendous amount of work," Kraus says. "They're fortunate to have artists generous enough to participate in these events."

The Guitar Town event, which matches celebrity artists and corporate sponsors, is being administered by the Gibson Foundation, a division of Gibson Guitar, which is dedicated to the support of the arts, education, health and welfare and environmental causes. The first set of ten-foot guitar sculptures was unveiled in downtown Nashville April 1 (no fooling!) at a special ceremony at Gaylord Entertainment Center, with luminaries Steve Cropper, Lee Roy Parnell, Big and Rich, Mayor Bill Purcell (big) and Gibson CEO and Chairman Henry Juskiewicz (rich) in attendance.

The guitars will remain on display for a year, then sold at a Gala Auction, with the proceeds going toward ten non-profit causes including the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, United Way and The Downtown District. A similar campaign in Cleveland raised \$1 million.

Cropper and Parnell are serving as musician liaisons to Music City's entertainment community. Tracy Lawrence, Dierks Bentley and Troy Gentry of Montgomery Gentry are three of the celebrity artists who painted guitars.

Harold Kraus is another. His guitar sits outside Loews Vanderbilt Hotel, where Kraus has a gallery exclusively devoted to his original paintings. (See box at end of story.) Nina Kuzina-Farr, the gallery's director since its inception five years ago, was instrumental in finding the location and building the clientele, and she's an energetic promoter of Kraus's work, as well as an avid collector of it.

"I can't buy another piece of art, I'm so passionate about his," she says.

"I am a colorist," is how Kraus describes himself and his work. He paints in oil with a palette knife (although the Guitar Town guitar was done in acrylics, as specified by the committee), and his splashes of pure color animate such humble objects as shoes, teacups and wine bottles. His self-proclaimed artistic mission is to dramatize the depth and range and magnificence of color for those starved of it or obtuse about it. The obtuseness of some people, in the matter of soliciting donations from artists, can raise the color in Kraus's countenance, at times.

"It's overwhelming," he says. "We (artists) are the only professionals that people ask to give away for free what we do for a living."

Maybe that's because art belongs to all of us, we feel – it is a birthright and a claim, like freedom, or the air we breathe. Or maybe it's because we really don't, as Kraus says, appreciate the artist, for the reason adumbrated by an ancient author: "Art is but imitation of nature."

The first set of Guitar Town sculptures was unveiled April 1. The sculptures are on display at various locations throughout Nashville. Another set of guitars will be unveiled June 9, during the CMA Music Fest. For complete information, visit www.nashvilleguitartown.com.

Featured Artist: Harold Kraus

Harold Kraus (see main story) grew up in Wisconsin, where the cherry tree blooms and blows, and much of his work is an homage to those roots. As a former florist – he owned several stores back home

- he loves flowers, particularly roses, those exemplars of color.

Kraus works on Masonite board with sand and texture background. He mats and frames each painting himself. Each work is an original - he does no reproductions - and many are on display at his private gallery inside the Loews Vanderbilt Hotel.

"Our clientele is international, and new every day," says Nina Kuzina-Farr, the gallery's director. That clientele has included George and Laura Bush, Julia Child and, on a local level, several Tennessee Titans coaches and players.

Kraus worked for a month on the colorful guitar on display outside the hotel. He's busy catching up on private commissions, as a result. Kraus will visit a client's house, look at the space and background color, then choose his subject - in the grand tradition of the artist being free to pursue what he sees.

Kraus Gallery, in Loews Vanderbilt Hotel, 2100 West End Ave. in Nashville, is open 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Mon.-Fri., 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sat. and anytime by appointment. Call 615-321-0500.

Featured Artist: Manuel

Mexican artist and "designer to the stars" Manuel contributed one of the first two guitars in the Guitar Town Project. The work was a collaboration, as are many of his projects, between Manuel and his interns.

Manuel (born Manuel Arturo Jose Cuevas Martinez) learned the value of cooperation early on, as one of 12 children growing up in Coalcoman, a poor village in Mexico. He started sewing before he was ten years old ("My brother taught me how to make pants," he says), and when he moved across the border at age 21 he found work right away - and not Manuel labor, but a gig with famed designer Nudie Cohen.

Over the years Manuel has made clothes for Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, John Wayne, Linda Ronstadt, Dolly Parton, and that ultimate clotheshorse, Elvis. He made the suit Glen Campbell made famous as Rhinestone Cowboy, and he claims it was he who talked Johnny Cash into wearing black; but millions of us should revere him for the role he played in establishing an icon of our youth: he created a set of clothes for one Clayton Moore. (Did he dare to pull on the mask of the ol' Lone Ranger?)

An exhibit of Manuel's works is on display at the Frist Museum through May 22. You can get in touch with Manuel by calling 615-321-5444.

Featured Artist: Rob Hendon

"In Dreams" might have been the theme of Rob Hendon's participation in the Guitar Town Project. Asked to contribute a work in memory of Roy Orbison, he met Orbison's widow, Barbara, and was

granted access to the vault where Orbison's guitars are stored. He got to play some of them, and otherwise immersed himself in the music of the artist who was his grandfather's favorite./

Hendon painted a guitar in the style of an Orbison original – a black and white and silver version with the name down the neck, sunglasses in front and a cross insignia on the volume knob. His creation sits outside the Gaylord Entertainment Center, a signal honor, says Hendon, as “a lot of people can get their hands on it.”

Hendon has been passionate about the guitar ever since he first got his hands on one. A professional musician since the mid-'80s, he started painting as a stress release, and took as his subject – what else? – the guitar. His guitars on canvas struck a chord with others - - he hooked up with Gibson to do paintings of their guitars, nine of which are on display at the company's sales offices in Nashville. You can also see his works at B. B. King's downtown, at the Sunset Grill and at Local Color Gallery in Nashville.

Contact Rob Hendon at 615-665-7095 or via email at robhendon@comcast.net.

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