



# COMMUNITY THROUGH MUSIC

## THE STORY OF FIREWEED

Words and Photos: Teryn O'Brien

At first glance, Pueblo can remind one of the Wild West. Its history is shaded a little bit rough, a little bit tough—but don't be fooled by stereotypes and stories. As one walks along the red-stone Riverwalk framing the calm and peaceful Arkansas River in the downtown area, it's clear that Pueblo's culture is alive and vibrant. Tom Thornburg and Damian Rotolo, owners of Fireweed Music, LLC, reflect this artistic spirit of Pueblo so well. They are two tough ol' guys full of business savvy and creative input who are building an enduring musical community in Pueblo and beyond.

For some, retirement means the end of a career. For Damian and Tom, it was the start of a new entrepreneurial passion. After working at the Colorado Lottery, both men retired in December 2003. They then attended a cutting edge small business class, where they decided to pursue their love of music via a guitar repair business.

"[The class] talked about name recognition, and we're fairly well-known in Pueblo, so we just decided to use Fireweed as our business name, too," Tom said.

Name recognition, indeed. Fireweed, the band, started in Pueblo 27 years before at local jam nights.

"Half the people in town at one point in time played music with us," Tom said jokingly.

Through those jam sessions, Fireweed was gradually formed into a band of five core members—Tom plays the banjo, while Damian plays the standup bass. Fireweed has been playing at festivals, churches, pubs and other events for decades. They perform at venues all over Colorado, as well as other states.

"Bluegrass is just real friendly music that people love to share and people love to show," Tom said.

Case in point: Damien said when the band plays at a particular church every year, it's the most attended Sunday all year! Clearly, Fireweed's music is infectious.

It definitely made sense, then, to keep their name when they started Fireweed Music as a guitar repair shop. Tom went to Arizona in 2004 to attend a guitar repair school, while Damian ran the business for just more than five months

without Tom. Already proficient in woodworking because of multiple home remodeling opportunities, Damian honed in on guitar woodworking by watching a video series on how to repair guitars. They'd both tinkered around with fixing guitars over the years of playing, and the business came very naturally to them. Now, they're doing warranty work for well-known guitar brands like Taylor, Fender and Guild.

"[We] hadn't really intended to get too crazy in the business world," said Tom. "This is our retirement job. We're not advertised, we're not in the phone book."

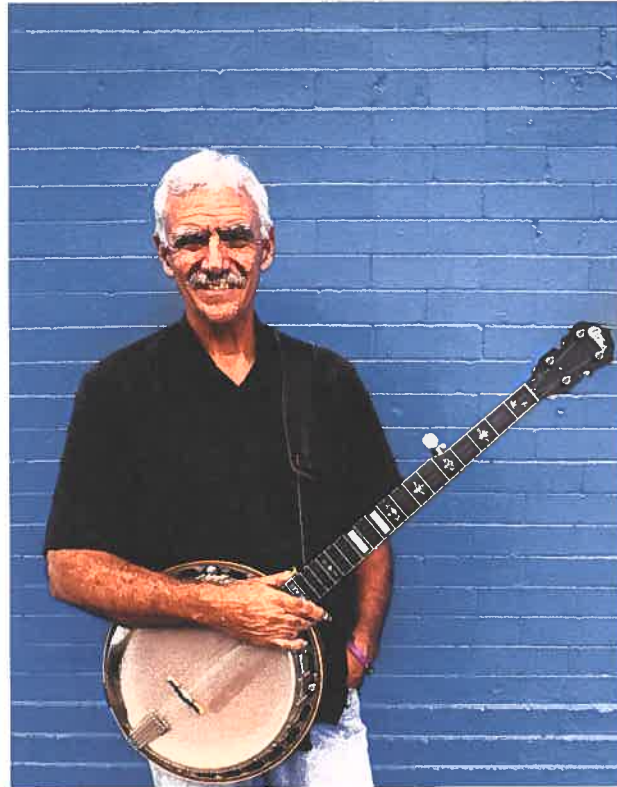
Fireweed Music doesn't have an official website for themselves, nor do they own their own building. They work out of the back of Elledge Music in Pueblo. However, their high quality work and natural business ability has kept the workload flowing ever since they started, and their business is listed on the sites of the celebrated guitar brands they work with.

Tom and Damian don't just repair guitars; they also make custom guitars. They've made everything from guitars designed by children, to a guitar consisting out of New Zealand wood that was thousands of years old, to a guitar fashioned from fiery orange Philippine Narra wood. Right now, Fireweed has custom guitar orders pending over a year and a half out.

"What we like to do is build acoustic guitars that sound really good," Tom explained. "We get to see them onstage, and people play them at these bluegrass festivals. That's kind of the rewarding aspect. You get to see them out there, people enjoying them. People that have good quality instruments, and all the sudden they're using ours and leaving the other [guitars] at home. So it tells you you're doing something right with them."

Tom said their custom guitars are in high demand because of the quality of the wood, the finish and the tone—which make their guitars stand out from the crowd. In fact, they've won "Best of Show in Woodworking" at the Colorado State Fair for multiple years in a row. They won again for 2015, and their guitar was displayed at this year's State Fair. The two men point out the array of ribbons hanging up at the shop to back up the statement.





The guitar building shop downstairs in the “dungeon” of the building (as they call it playfully) is a true treat. A variety of tools and machines help make every step of guitar craftsmanship seamless, smooth and technically brilliant. With true pleasure, Damian shows each and every machine and tool, describing their uses, holding up half-made guitars at different stages of the process. Typically, Damian said, guitars are made out of spruce and rosewood. It all just depends on what the customer wants. The workspace has a magical quality to it; the lamps burn warmly with the dust and hard work of countless masterpieces.

Even with all the business success, Damian and Tom are still very active in their band Fireweed. Fireweed has been attending the National Flatpicking Championship in Winfield, Kan., every year for the past 27 years. This festival has proven to be a great success for the group.

“Our mandolin player has won ‘Gospel Song of the Year’ and ‘Love Song of the Year’ at Winfield,” Damian said. “We’ve gotten to play on the main stage there because of those awards.”

It was attending the National Flatpicking Championship that inspired them to start their own local festival in Colorado. Bluegrass at the River was born, hosted by The

Greenway and Nature Center of Pueblo. After 23 years, the festival moved to the Colorado State Fairgrounds and was renamed Bluegrass at the Fair. The festival has grown to host more than 20 bands every year. It’s held annually on the weekend after Memorial Day.

“Sometimes we have a national act, if we get lucky and somebody’s passing through,” Tom said. “We’ve had the reigning female vocalist of the year, some guys from the Ricky Skaggs band. Michael Martin Murphy comes and performs.”

Tom is proud to point out that Bluegrass at the Fair has raised money for pediatric pulmonary hypertension, a heart disease that his eight-year-old granddaughter is currently fighting. The disease happens when the artery in between the heart and the lung continues to develop until it gets so constricted that there’s no oxygenation of the blood.

“We just felt like we couldn’t do anything about the disease, but we could help with the funding,” Tom explained.

For the past four years, the festival has raised around \$40,000 dollars to help research this life-threatening condition. Tom’s granddaughter is making great progress with the disease.



Fireweed Music gives back to their community in various other ways as well. They teach music lessons to anyone interested in learning, and they do a lot of fundraisers for people.

“Anything that we feel is a worthy cause—if we’re available, we’re there,” Tom said. “It’s just part of giving back to community.”

As for the music they play, Damian describes it as a mix of old-time gospel hymns and original songs that several of the band members write.

Over the years, Tom and Damian have created their own music community in Pueblo. Every Wednesday night, Fireweed continues to jam with people who come from places like Colorado Springs, Raton and Woodland Park.

“We’ve had a lot of bands that’ve been formed from people that’ve come down here and played music with us,” noted Tom.

From time to time, Fireweed Music has also apprenticed kids in repairing guitars. The kids they’ve taught have gone on to use those skills in places like Nashville.

“They find it as a means to supplement their income when they’re trying to be a songwriter or a singer,” Tom said. “If they can repair guitars and do that kind of work, then they can put food on their tables while they’re doing

it—and keep them in that music world.”

Damian and Tom say the most powerful thing about music is that it’s a truly powerful tool to communicate and build community.

“For me, it’s the ability to share,” Tom said. “When we have jams, we have kids and adults and seniors. For me, it’s going to keep me from being that crotchety old guy in the corner, because I’m not afraid of young people when they come in, because we have things that we can relate to.”

“I think it crosses boundaries between people of different generations, different lifestyles—just about different everything,” Damian agreed. “It opens you up to be able to communicate, to be able to share music ... and well, it’s just fun!”

As Tom and Damian played their instruments in the shop, the feisty, fast-strumming sound of banjo and guitar electrified the air. It is fun. It’s lively, and it’s definitely something worth sharing. ●

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