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RETROFRET VINTAGE GUITARS I BY ALEX HARRELL

# D FINDS, REVIV

t's early afternoon on a Thursday and Steve Uhrik is driving back to Gowanus, Brooklyn, empty-handed.

The owner of Retrofret Vintage Guitars had spent about 11/2 hours browsing through a retired traveling musician's basement in search of particularly noteworthy fretted finds. The previous player had contacted Uhrik via his contractor to see if he had any interest in purchasing her 1930s, Hawaiian-style instruments.

And though Uhrik didn't buy anything to add to his shop's growing inventory, the trip which was only three blocks away from his home - was well worth it.

"I'm always out there hunting for stuff," Uhrik said. "If it's a good instrument, we'll look for it."

#### **GUITAR SAFARI**

hese types of outings — what he calls "going on a guitar safari" — are the norm for Uhrik and his business, though this wasn't always the case. The former violin repair apprentice actually began in the 1970s with a restoration store. New York String Service.

"People used to come to me and ask, 'I'm selling this pre-war Martin, do you know anybody in your clientele who may want it?' So to have three



## **How Retrofret's Steve Uhrik and his crew** select, service and sell vintage guitars

or four instruments for sale was a big deal," Uhrik recalled. "It got somewhat out of control; we have somewhere around 500 instruments now in our shop that are for sale."

As his collection grew, Retrofret Vintage Guitars was established in 1983. The repair shop evolved into a destinationlocation of sorts for guitarists and other fretted instrumentalists.

It's why — partially, at least - Retrofret is leaving behind its current home — which happens to be the first American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals headquarters — for a larger location.

around 4,000 square feet with three separate spaces. There's a large, open area on the second floor connected via an outdoor walkway; it used to be apart of the dog run for the ASPCA.

"You don't really want to be dragging some Gibson Lloyd Loar Mandolin across an open walkway when it's pouring out, you know," Uhrik said with a laugh.

So Retrofret is moving into a similar, nearby facility — just one that's a bit more planned out and includes about 1,700 more square feet.

"We're really going to expand the repair shop," Uhrik continued. "The staff is super cramped and we're so backlogged; it might be possible to bring yet another technician."

#### **REPAIRS & RESTORATIONS**

ourrently, the repair team consists of four full-time technicians who tackle neck sets, refrets, structural repairs, touch-ups, cosmetic work, setups, fretwork and fabrication.

"We're all pretty passionate, it's a super crew of people," Uhrik said of his team - which is made up of eight individuals in total. "It's one thing as a business owner to attract interesting guitars; it's another thing to attract interesting employees."

While Retrofret isn't the place The prevailing shop is to do intricate electronic modifications or major refinishing, Uhrik continued, the repair staff can tackle complex projects such as restoring an old Gibson with a broken headstock that's not playing right or a 100-year-old harp guitar that's in pieces.

"I'm really lucky to have some women technicians who contribute enormously to what we do," Uhrik said of his repair team. "It's a little bit unusual, certainly not intentional. You just try to bring in the best and the brightest, as they say."

Along with more aesthetically based modifiers such as having a spray booth for finish lacquering, customers also won't find any instruments that have been aggressively altered.

"It's not that an instrument that's been customized is evil or something like that," Uhrik clarified. "But I like to stand behind everything that we're going to sell, so we're really careful."

More notably, shoppers won't find anything new, either. In fact, Uhrik never even had plans to become a retailer. It's just not where his passion lies, he explained.

"As a little kid, I used to take apart old phonographs — old guitars smell like old phonographs to me," Uhrik laughed. "So that's where the draw is for me; I love putting things back together."

#### SOCIAL STARS

he repair shop acts as the some of the store's best advertising.

"A lot of people come in for repairs; sometimes major restorations, sometimes relatively simple adjustments," Uhrik said. "And they get to see a lot of cool guitars."

Posting on social media is important, too, for Retrofret's advertising outreach. The shop recently redesigned its website to be more responsive and mobile-friendly. Retrofret also puts out an electronic newsletter about once a month that reaches nearly 10,000 subscribers.

But what's really big for Retrofret isn't rooted online.

"The word of mouth thing is huge

for us," Uhrik said, explaining that the store doesn't have the type of curb appeal that attracts the masses.

"So my reputation, the reputation of the shop and everyone we've worked with, is really the strongest effort we tried to make in terms of outreach."

As a result, nearly half of Retrofret's clientele and sales are generated by a personal referral. Over the past few years in particular, the shop's local traffic and customer base has expanded dramatically. In terms of revenue, over half of the business is from local musicians or customers actually visiting the shop and purchasing directly from it.

It's all about creating what Uhrik refers to as a "buying environment."

"You come in, you get excited," he explained. "People don't pressure you; you want to take something home." MI

