

MUSIC



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PRIZED POSSESSIONS: Guitar collector Henry Lowenstein, who is bringing the Newport Guitar Festival to the Miami Beach Convention Center in 2008, has a room full of vintage pieces.

Guitar lover picks up festival

■ A Miami Beach guitar fanatic has purchased one of the country's premier festivals celebrating the stringed instrument, and is bringing it to South Florida.

BY ELINOR J. BRECHER
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When Henry Lowenstein was 12, he saw Glen Campbell playing guitar on television and an obsession was born.

It began with a \$17 instrument in 1969 and peaked on June 1 when the Miami Beach lawyer — with business partners Ron Hill and Eric Garcia — bought the Newport Guitar Festival.

The 3-year-old Rhode Island event — a convergence of guitar builders, musicians and collectors — moves to the Miami Beach Convention Center in April 2008.

"I want this show to be my gift to the guitar-building community," said Lowenstein, who plays, composes for and collects guitars: handmade, vintage and factory-built instruments, acoustic and electric, dating to the mid-1800s.

The show will feature 15-minute mini-concerts by professional musicians playing vendors' guitars, and "quiet rooms" for test-playing instruments.

Lowenstein envisions the event as the Art Basel of the guitar world, with an educational component.

Part of the show "is about ecology and sustainability of woods," said Lowenstein. "Now we're harvesting woods planted 50 years ago specifically [for] guitar makers. . . . We are in a golden renaissance of guitar building."

The son of Ralph Lowenstein, dean emeritus of the University of Florida's College of Journalism and Communications, Lowenstein has been many things in his 48 years: teenage rock 'n' roller, proprietor of the now-defunct South Beach Music, duty-free shop mogul, international-trade lawyer, neighborhood preservation crusader and, as of May 30, operator of 13thfret.com, an online community for the guitar world.

He and wife Marcie Lowenstein, a Florida International University developmental molecular biologist, have four sons.

MANDOLINS, LUTES

One constant has been his passion for guitars. Fifty surround him in his home workshop along with assorted mandolins and lutes. Some instruments are earthy and unadorned and cost next to nothing on eBay; others, of refined provenance, dazzle like fine jewelry, and are valued accordingly.

Many top luthiers — guitar makers — charge \$25,000 for a custom guitar, Lowenstein said.

At least two in his collection are unique. Four years ago, Lowenstein approached Minnesota luthier Michael Keller at California's Healdsburg Guitar Festival and asked him to create his dream guitar.

Lowenstein wanted a work of art that would accommodate his hands, deteriorating because of an arthritis-like syndrome, something "so beautiful that if I couldn't play anymore, I could look at it."

Of Brazilian rosewood from Lowenstein's collection of exotic woods, it's trimmed with mahogany, ebony and Adirondack spruce and decorated with mother-of-pearl inlays that look like the patterns on antique hand-painted china.

MOST EXPENSIVE

Keller says it took three months and is the most expensive instrument he ever made.

"One-of-a kind is one of my fortes," he said. "But on a scale of 1-10, Henry was a 12 or 13."

He made a second, slightly smaller and less ornate guitar for Lowenstein last year.

"I like to call these 'modern vintage,'" said Lowenstein, strumming the dream guitar.

"What we're doing . . . for the first time is combining a show of modern luthiers with a show of vintage dealers" offering big-name classics from Martin, Gibson and Fender.

"Most of the time the two are very separate . . . We're trying to cross-pollinate the guitar-playing community."

Most aficionados will never get to play a "modern vintage" instrument, he said, because top luthiers "have five-year waiting lists, and you won't see [their work] in a music store."

Last year's festival generated about \$400,000 in sales, said Massachusetts luthier Julius Borges, who founded it in 2004 but wants to concentrate on guitar building.

He said that collectors came from as far away as Europe, Japan and Taiwan.

Borges likes the idea "of bringing vintage to a Newport-style show," because many old instruments are disappearing into private collections.

Lowenstein began playing in Columbia, Mo. His father, then a University of Missouri doctoral candidate, told him: "If you play for one year, I'll buy you any guitar you want," Lowenstein recalled. "It was easy for him to say that because my grandmother had a music store in Virginia. . . . This was 1969. I was taking lessons from every hippie, just crazy people. I learned ragtime. I learned folk, jazz, some classical. All these things were excuses for buying more guitars."

MIAMIHERALD.COM: CLICK ON TODAY'S EXTRAS TO HEAR AN INTERVIEW WITH GUITAR ENTHUSIAST HENRY LOWENSTEIN.

He's never stopped. "He is continually buying guitars and is madly in love with them," said South Miami luthier Paris Banchetti, 77, who has rehabbed some of the wrecks Lowenstein picks up.

Indeed, said Lowenstein,

guitarists more than most other musicians "develop a personal relationship with our guitars that transcends them just being instruments."

"I don't know if it's because they're shaped like women and they remind us of our mothers or whatever. But as many guitars as I have here, I've sold, and I can tell you every one of them and I still have pangs for every guitar I've sold, and I'm hoping they're in a good home."

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MIAMI-DADE

Fireman swiped debit-card data, co-workers say

■ A Miami-Dade firefighter is under investigation after four co-workers from his station complained he stole their debit card numbers.

BY DAVID OVALLE
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Miami-Dade police are investigating a firefighter who allegedly rifled through his co-workers' wallets, copied down their debit card numbers and used them to pay his own utility, satellite TV and cellphone bills — and buy from Ticketmaster's website.

Andrew Simmons, 27, who earns \$46,113 a year, has not been arrested, but could face charges of misusing personal identification, authorities said.

It was unclear when possible charges could be filed. A Miami-Dade Fire-Rescue spokeswoman, Liz Calzadilla-Fiallo, called the investigation "ongoing."

He has been suspended with pay pending the outcome of the probe, she said.

The allegations were revealed in a search warrant filed in Miami-Dade Circuit Court.

Simmons did not return a message left on his cellphone Monday. His home phone number has been disconnected.

Three firefighters and one captain complained to internal affairs about Sim-

mons, who shared bunks with them in Station 38, at 575 NW 199th St.

In all, investigators suspect Simmons made unauthorized purchases of nearly \$3,000 from them.

"All four victims shared a relaxed and trusting environment within the confines of MDRF station 38 with Andrew Simmons," Miami-Dade Sgt. Luis Mitjans wrote in his search warrant for the firefighter's station locker.

According to the warrant: A firefighter named Kevin Graff reported to Miami-Dade Fire-Rescue's internal affairs that he believed Simmons copied the number of his debit card, left unattended in his wallet.

Police say Simmons, a Miramar resident, used the card to make three electronic payments in February: \$159.93 to Florida Power & Light, \$65.40 to the city of Miramar's utility department and \$50 to Sprint PCS.

Another Station 38 firefighter, Jacinto Hernandez, complained about two unauthorized charges to his checking account debit card in April: \$218.66 to Direct TV and \$227.25 to Ticketmaster.

Simmons used an e-mail account with the name ladieslovedaeys to buy from Ticketmaster, a company fraud investigator told Mitjans. Simmons' computer IP address also was traced to the purchase.

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