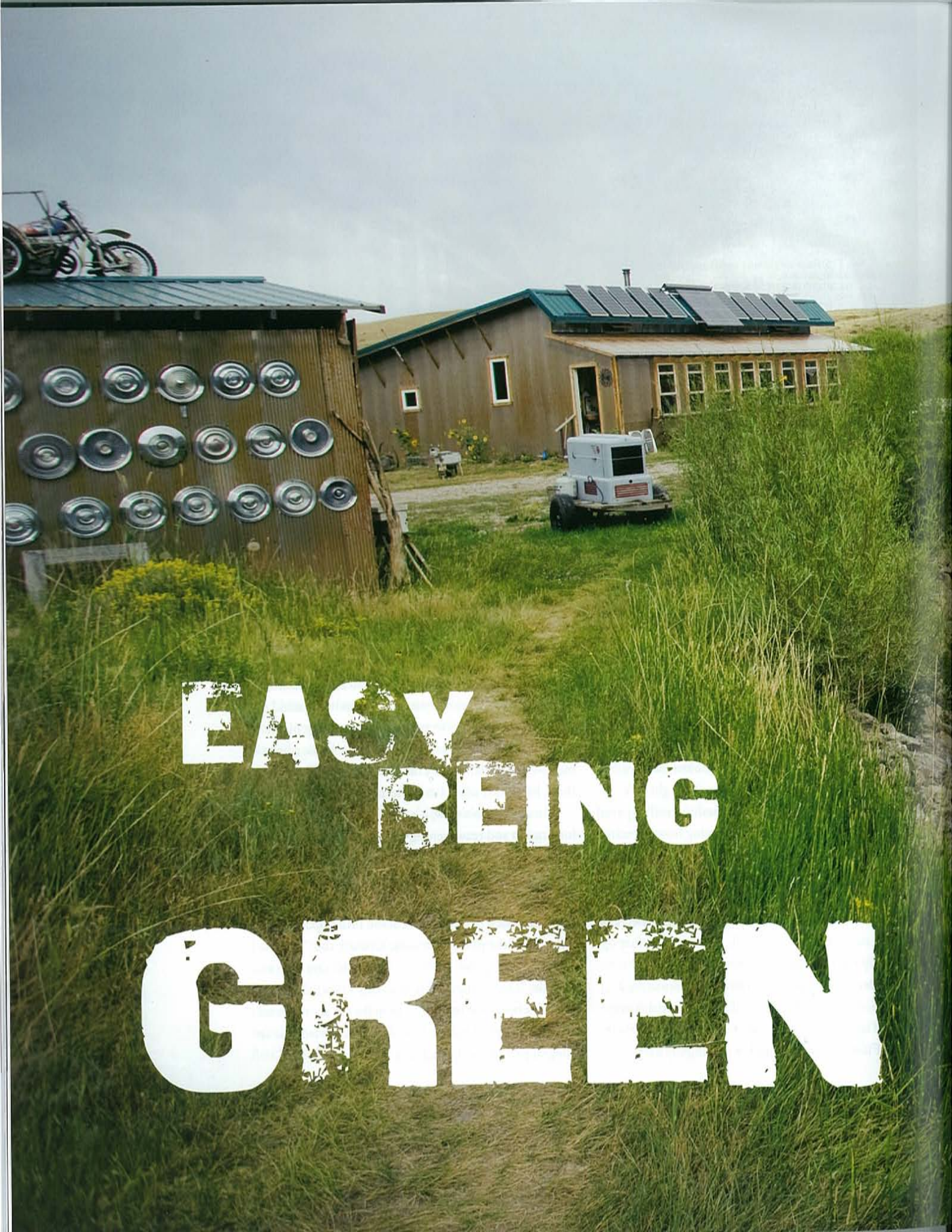
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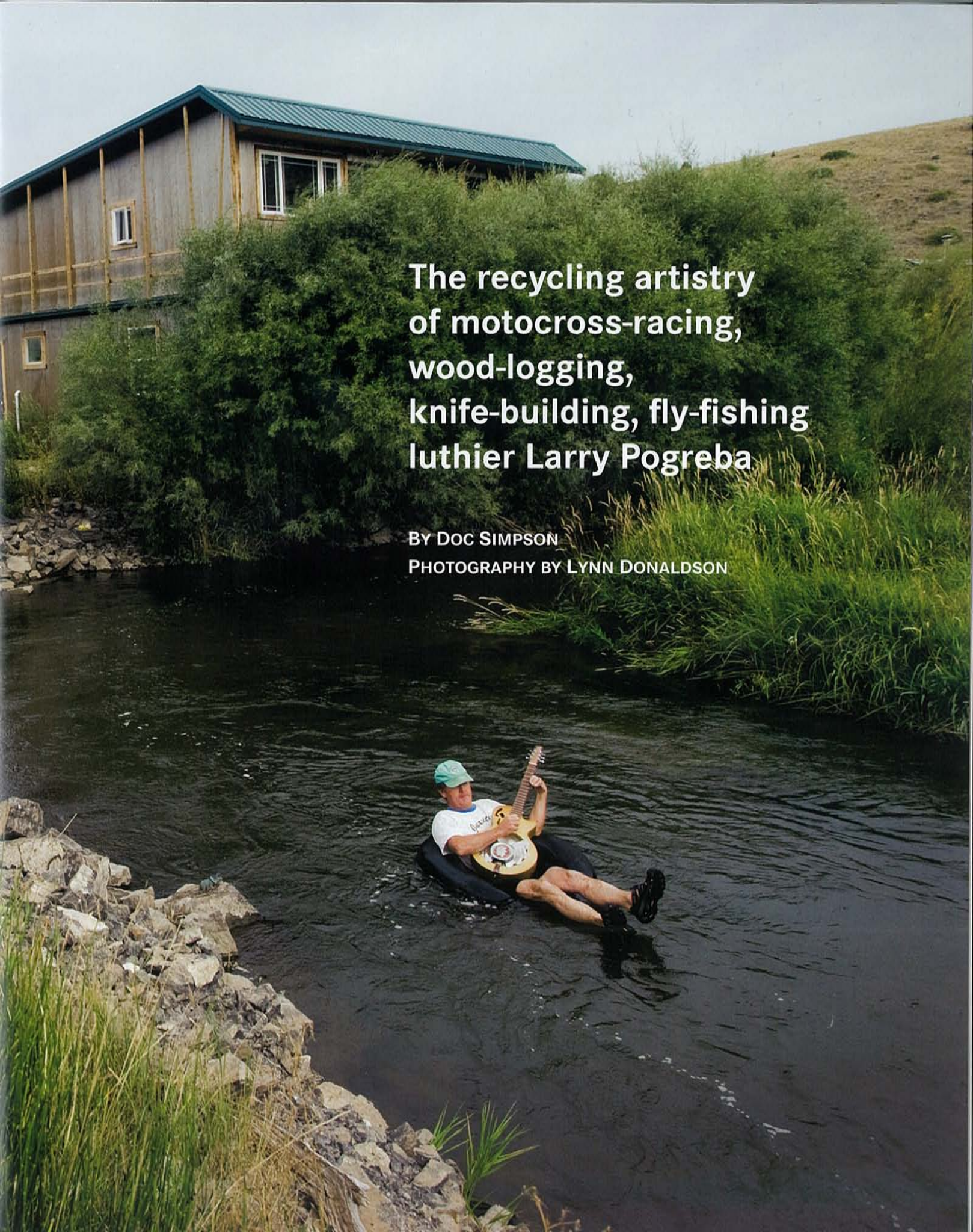

The recycling artistry of motocross-racing, wood-logging, knife-building, fly-fishing luthier Larry Pogreba

By Doc Simpson
Photography by Lynn Donaldson

"I made the headstock overlay on this guitar out of a beaver tail," Pogreba says. "We had a few beavers moving in and eating up all of our trees. There's no convincing a beaver to go someplace else once they decide to move in, but we made sure that we used every part of them that we could."

Opening spread: Larry Pogreba taking a break on Willow Creek. The motorcycle on the roof of the shed is a Yamaha 650 with a sidecar. "We won the sidecar motocross Nationals on that in 1976 and 1978," Pogreba says. "I retired from racing in 1979 when I hurt my back."

I **TURN MY CAR** down a gravel road just outside of Willow Creek, Montana, and cross miles of beautiful rolling hills and farmland. Soon, I pass a homemade black powder cannon with Cadillac Eldorado hubcaps sitting silently on a hill.

I'm getting close.

Further down the road, I see the wreckage of a small plane — its nose buried into the terrain, tail and wings shooting out of the ground in a spectacular fashion.

Almost there.

I pass over a cattle guard with plastic dinosaurs sitting atop two gateposts, and the dirt road narrows to a single winding lane. When I drive by an ancient abandoned barn and come around a hill, I am greeted by a 1970s motocross bike mounted on top of a small building.

This must be the place.

Welcome to the fantastic, eco-friendly imaginarium of Larry Pogreba. Pogreba and his wife, Donna, meet me with a warm greeting and invite me inside their home. Built from salvaged materials, it brims with whimsical touches. The walls of the main room are decorated with brightly colored South American art. Sawed-open guitar bodies are stacked with CDs. Light sconces made out of old hubcaps give off a soft glow. In the back of the room is an open kitchen; above the stove is the hood of a Studebaker, with working fan and lights.

The Pogrebas have been living in ecological harmony with the earth since long before going green became cool. They built their homestead completely off the grid, and the three buildings are constructed of recycled materials. Each one, including Larry's

workshop, is powered by the sun and, only when absolutely necessary, a gasoline generator. The Pogrebas draw their water from a small stream that winds its way through the property. There are no electric wires or phone lines that connect them to the outside world. They don't own a computer, and they have to go stand on a hill to get cell-phone reception.

It is here, far removed from the blaring noise of a multitasking society, that Larry Pogreba quietly invents and creates. Some years back, after a local bowling alley went out of business, he set about building himself a cannon. "I managed to buy 400 bowling balls and 300 pairs of bowling shoes at a ganga price," he explains. He used the rear axle of a Cadillac Eldorado for the wheels, which explains the hubcaps. Today, in the wide, open spaces of Montana, Pogreba hosts cannonball parties; everyone sports bowling shoes, while he lobs bowling balls two miles into the distant hills. The cows are not amused, but everybody else is.

Pogreba (pronounced Po-gree-bah) drives a car he built himself from the parts of several discarded vehicles. He calls it the Pogrebamobile. It sports a chrome trout hood ornament and looks like a very hip British racecar. Even the startling plane wreck that greets visitors was recycled from a local airstrip; now, the surplus old aircraft makes for dramatic yard art.

In Larry Pogreba's hands, old stuff becomes new once more, which pretty much describes how he goes about building his highly prized hubcap resonators, Weissenborns, acoustics and electrics. It's been a weird, snaking journey, for sure.

Sneaking Through the Woods

Pogreba's father was a fighter pilot in the U.S. Air Force. That meant Larry and his two younger sisters grew up in a variety of countries and cultures. During second grade, his family was stationed in Georgia.

"There was a plantation right off the base," he recalls. "Me and my friends would sneak through the woods and listen to black gospel singing at night. I was just knocked out by that music. I had never heard anything like that."

About 1954, Pogreba discovered his first true musical hero. "We moved to our next base, in San Antonio. As we're driving across the country, I was playing Ray Charles on the jukebox every chance I got. Dad was afraid we were going to get beat up."

"WHEN ALL OF YOUR MOTOCROSS BUDDIES THINK YOU'RE CRAZY, YOU KNOW YOU'VE CROSSED THE LINE."

During junior high, his father transferred to the Royal Air Force in England. "I went to English school — you know, with a little beanie hat and blazers." Then they moved to Germany for his high school years, where his interests blossomed. He began racing cars, studying martial arts and playing guitar.

"The first guitar I had was a Hofner archtop, " he remembers, "which my dad bought me. I didn't realize how hip it was until years later. He also bought me two records, Joe Pass and Django Reinhardt, which were completely over my head, since I was into old country blues and folksy stuff."

Tragedy struck in 1965, when his father was shot down over Vietnam. Rumored to be a POW, his father was never seen again. Larry Pogreba was 18.

He married right after high school. "That marriage didn't last very long, but I have a great daughter, Laurie." From marriage, he moved on to college. "In those days, there were no computers to keep track of people, so I would just take whatever classes I wanted to. I'd sign my [advisor's] and dean's names to my schedule. I went from taking writing to philosophy to fine arts. I mainly focused on fine arts." He learned to work with wood, metals, ceramics and resins — skills that would serve his creative inspirations for years to come.

In between classes, he cultivated his love of driving fast machines, and his specialty became sidecar motocross. "It was kind of the lunatic fringe that did sidecar motocross," Pogreba says. "When all of your motocross buddies think you're crazy, you know you've crossed the line." It became more than a hobby; he won Nationals twice.

Pogreba, it turns out, was also logging wood on the side. "The motocross racers would have jobs during different times of the year to support themselves. At the time, I'm living back and forth between Colorado and Kansas. I had a little place in Colorado, where we would cut firewood and then sell it in Boulder. Other parts of the year, my friends and I lived in Kansas. I had a little sawmill, so I would saw walnut, ash and oak. I built a wood splitter out of an old Cadillac. You could split three cords of wood an hour on it and still drive it around the yard."

His love of music grew, and he was starting to play a bit of guitar in local bars. "I actually got up the nerve to get in front of people and play folksy, bluesy stuff." As his guitar playing improved, he became more interested in the guitars themselves and how they functioned.

"In those days, there were no schools. The only book was the [Irving] Sloane book [*Classic Guitar Construction*], and that was on classical-guitar building. So I would just take an old guitar apart and put it back together. Then I got some wood and built a couple guitars. It was just kind of a hobby from the late 1960s until the mid-1970s, but when disco hit, I lost interest. Everyone was spending all of their money on polyester and cocaine. Acoustic music almost died."

Freight and Salvage

Pogreba continued his nomadic life until he met and married Donna, in 1976, and they settled in Colorado. With a new marriage came a new passion: building knives. "I had gotten interested in martial arts in high school. I was aware of the old Japanese tradition of making swords. I made my first laminated steel knife in 1976. In 1980, I heard there was a Japanese sword maker working for a knife shop there in Colorado." This was the legendary Japanese swordsmith Kuzan Oda.

"I went and met him; we hit it off and ended up sharing a shop together a few years later. He was very traditional Japanese. His family was, like, 600 years of samurai. When he was 12 years old, his family turned him over to a samurai master, who taught him how to make swords, jujitsu and all the standard samurai stuff. After his apprenticeship was over, the old master gave him a new name and kicked him out."

Now, Pogreba had a part-time logging business and pretty much a full-time job making knives. He would go to knife shows around the country and do fairly well. He also intensified his love for fly fishing, which he had been doing all his life. In the early '80s, he started going to Belize to do saltwater fly fishing.

"At that time," he notes, "they had a pretty backwards little country. Most villages had no electricity or running water; there was little by way of paved roads. Everybody drank beer and smoked pot. Now, they have cappuccino bars, internet cafes and hard drugs."

On one trip to Belize, an ocean storm forced them to make an emergency port, and they took some time to explore the surrounding jungle with their local guides. Pogreba noticed they kept walking past stumps where huge trees once stood. "The third one of these great, big stumps went by, and I asked, 'Is that mahogany?' They said, 'Oh, yeah,' so I cut into one of those stumps. It was good, sound wood. Next time, I took some big chainsaws down with me and I showed these guys how I wanted these stumps cut up."

These were mahogany trees that had been harvested a century before. "The stumps might be 12 feet tall, because they had been cut above the taper point. Sometimes, there were tops four feet in diameter. We got one tree that was left over from a forest fire. It was just a burnt-off snag, but was 45 feet tall, five to six feet in diameter and 10 feet into the ground. The wood was all cracked the first couple of inches, but after that, it was excellent wood.

"I built a lap electric for Darrell Scott out of that. I left some of the char marks and cracks showing on the back of the guitar where it didn't really matter. I just finished over them. There's the proof that it's salvaged wood."

The headstock overlay is made from rosewood burl. The hubcap coverplate come from a circa 1953 Mercury.

"I sometimes buy a large lot of hubcaps to get the three or four I need for guitars," Pogreba says. "These are a few of the hubcaps that don't work on guitars. I'm sure I'll find something fun to do with them one day."

His previous profession of logging firewood blossomed into a full-fledged South American enterprise. For the next 10 years, he coordinated with the locals to salvage wood from mahogany stumps and have it brought to the U.S. He also reclaimed exotic woods like granadillo, jobillo, nargusta, my lady, bullet tree, bastard rosewood, billy web, and "some things I had never heard of."

The venture was a financial success. "You can always turn good wood into money," he says, "but you can't always turn good money into wood." He salvaged wood from Belize until mahogany went on the endangered species list, in 2002.

big windstorm sometime in that 200 years can create 'ring checks' inside the tree. My experience has been instrument-quality wood is about one tree in 1,000."

Hubcap Heaven

Pogreba began experimenting with various woods, in part to find an alternative to rosewood. "The Belizean rosewood is very similar to Brazilian; I think it might even be better. The ingrain is denser, so I think it holds frets better. Some of the Honduras rosewood is pinkish — it's so light — but

"YOU CAN ALWAYS TURN GOOD WOOD INTO MONEY, BUT YOU CAN'T ALWAYS TURN GOOD MONEY INTO WOOD."

Meanwhile, back in the States, Pogreba was recovering from the disco disaster of the mid-'70s and started building guitars again in the early 1990s. "I always knew I would get back into building someday. One of the reasons I quit building guitars in the 1970s was because people were so stuck in tradition. If you were building acoustic guitars at that time, you were going to build Martins. Even Gibson copies were considered weird in those days.

"But in 1992, I saw Danny Ferrington's book on guitar building. Here he was, creating some pretty innovative stuff for most of my musical heroes. So that was when I realized that I'd probably get back into guitar building. The first half-dozen were flattops, just to get my chops back."

His 30 years of harvesting wood paid off. "That whole time, I was putting aside wood. When I was logging in Colorado, I would, on rare occasions, find a spruce tree that was good enough for guitar tops. They are not nearly as common as people might believe. Spruce trees tend to spiral while they grow, and then they are subject to all kinds of environmental damage. Anything big enough to be a guitar top is a couple hundred years old. Even a

the Belizean is not *Dalbergia stevensonii* [Honduras rosewood]. It's actually a slightly different wood than the Honduran stuff. It's darker, closer grained and has inky black streaks running through it."

Soon after he began building again, he started making resonator guitars. "I was putting a little popup camper in the roof of my Suburban. When I cut the sheet metal out of the roof, I had this nice, clean, flat piece of metal. I just cut it up and welded up a guitar body and made a nice resonator that weighed about 20 pounds. It actually didn't sound too bad. I built maybe two or three more out of sheet metal. But the sheet metal that was thin enough to produce a 10-pound guitar was a pain in the ass to weld.

"Then I realized I could make them out of aluminum. Aluminum is a third of the weight of steel. And you can get a much lighter guitar at 50 thousandths of an inch as compared to 30 thousandths of an inch with steel. Because of that extra thickness, you don't have the warping problem when you're welding it. Any cutting you need to do, you can just do it with a band saw. The soundholes I cut with a regular router. Any woodcutting tools handle aluminum just fine. So now I had this five-

MYSTIQUE

Jerry Douglas meets Larry Pogreba

I met Larry Pogreba after seeing his first guitars hanging on display at an early RockyGrass bluegrass festival back in the early '90s. While they piqued my interest, mostly because of their folk-art appearance, I didn't bite – even though I really wanted one. He uses real vintage hubcaps for cover plates on his resophonic-type guitars. Next thing I know, David Lindley is singing Larry's praises to me. I get more interested.

An old friend, the late, great Charles Sawtelle, was telling me about a buddy of his up in Montana who had built a cannon that used old bowling balls for ammo. Turns out it's Larry again.

Years later, I was leaving Merle Fest after a weekend of great music when Fender guitar A&R man Donnie Wade came up with this crazy, beautiful baritone-sized guitar that was a combo of National metal-body and Weissenborn. I had to have it. It sounded huge, and the 1954 Chevy hubcap and fingerboard covered with ancient coins, Smokey Bear and Elvis medallions beckoned to me. I've used it on records by Elvis Costello, Alison Krauss and Union Station, Sam Bush and others who never suspected it. All they knew was it sounded different than what they were expecting me to use and it was unique-sounding, adding a mystique needed in their song.

Larry invited me up to his ranch for a little cannon fire not long ago. He said the gophers were getting hip to his attack because of the whistling noise the bowling balls made with the three holes drilled into them. You can't win 'em all.

– Jerry Douglas

pound guitar, and you could anodize them these wild colors."

Pogreba's resourcefulness was only beginning. "People had always referred to resonators as hubcap guitars. The nickname was an inspiration. I thought, Why pay 40 bucks for a resonator cover that is exactly like everybody else's? So I started looking around and realized there were about a half-dozen hubcaps that were the right shape to be a resonator cover: the '54 Chevy, '54 Packard Clipper, '55 Olds, '62 Rambler, '55 Chrysler New Yorker and '53 Mercury."

In his quest for hubcaps, he would search out old garages along highways across the country. "One time, my wife and I were driving through Kansas. We drove into this place. It was a warm day. A guy walked out of a trailer — no shirt, barefoot. His big belly had pushed his pants down far enough that you could see about two inches of pubic hair. He had the same number of teeth and fingers. And then his son came out behind him, looked just like him. My wife said, 'I'm staying in the car.'

"Turned out, the guys had this great, organized pile of hubcaps. They had them separated by make and year in piles. They were two bucks apiece, cash. I was like, 'Wow, I'll take that pile and that pile… ' They couldn't believe their good fortune, but I was able to buy a whole pile of '55 Olds hubcaps for two bucks apiece."

The hubcap resonators sounded good to Pogreba; he just had to figure out the neck angle. "The tension on a resonator is pretty critical," he explains. "You want to get a balance between fundamental tone and harmonics. The neck angle is a real subtle thing. You can tip it back very slightly to get more volume, but you might lose some of the harmonics and even the bass response."

Pogreba prefers koa for the biscuits and Belizean rosewood for the saddles on his resonator guitars. "I've tried a lot of different materials, and I always go back to that. I used to put screens over the ports in the body, and then at one point, I could see one of them was loose, so I poked it out while I was playing the guitar, and I immediately heard a better bass, so I quit putting screens in."

Further Exploration

Though perhaps best known for building resonators, Pogreba has done a lot of experimenting along the way, including a few 30-inch-scale archtop baritones. "I like the note separation you get with an archtop," he says, "as compared to what you get with a flattop. But a flattop is just a warmer-sounding guitar, so I would X-brace these archtops, but do a regular acoustic-style pin bridge. You get a big, warm baritone guitar that still has good note separation, and then you tune it down to an A, and that long scale gives you a chimy quality, almost like a piano. Darrell Scott has one of those."

He's also expanded into building Weissenborn-style acoustic lap-steels; he uses antique coins for fret markers and sometimes carves the bodies into whimsical shapes — including that of a woman's derriere.

"I have a baritone Weissenborn that is amazing," says David Lindley, who calls Pogreba one of his favorite builders. "Koa top and back and rosewood sides. It sounds like a big piano that can slide. I have one baritone that is two guitars in one: a baritone on one side, flip it over, and it's a regular-scale Weissenborn on the other. So it has two soundholes, and you can see right through the instrument. It sounds like a normal guitar, even with a soundhole in the back."

Pogreba has been building electric guitars for a while as well. When he first got back into the building business, he was, like a lot of acoustic-guitar builders, kind of an acoustic-guitar snob. "I didn't really have a very high opinion of electric guitars. But then I got interested in old tube amps, so I built a few electric guitars and plugged them into an old tube amp. And for me it was, 'Wow, I get it now.'"

When it comes to electrics, he notes, "I'm not trying to build the best Stratocaster. I do neck-through guitars with spruce bodies. They are lighter-weight guitars that are a lot more resonant, but because of that, you don't get the real clear, fast single notes that you want for playing leads. But they're great slide guitars. Plus, it only weighs four pounds; you don't even know you're wearing it. It's not going to be everybody's first choice, but it fills a niche. And that's all I need to do. I don't need to sell a hundred of anything. So if I can sell five electric guitars a year, that's as many as I want to make."

As with most of his creations, Pogreba takes an eco-friendly approach toward building guitars. His use of recycled materials gives a rough-hewn aesthetic to his creations. He re-uses strap pins, and pickups come from beat-up, old flea-market guitars. He also incorporates horns, bones, shells and teeth that he picks up off the ground. When he was still building knives, he made several pieces out of meteorites. He saved up the excess shavings and later melted the metal into slide bars for his resonators. Once, he bought an old kitchen table at a yard sale and got 20 necks out of it. Pogreba admits that it would be cheaper for him to buy his parts new from a supply shop, but taking something old and giving it new life is clearly his passion.

There is no question that Pogreba's creations reflect superior quality and original craftsmanship, but he makes no effort to hide the welding seams or the hammer marks created when pounding a back arch into shape. "Everything I build shows speed. Most custom-guitar builders today get 10 grand for a guitar. I still sell electrics for a thousand dollars and resonators for two thousand." Each Pogreba guitar requires roughly 30 to 50 hours to build. "Like I said, my stuff shows speed; a good-sounding, good-playing instrument with a serviceable finish."

Pogreba's recycling bug has led him to restoring old tube amps. "Back in the early 1990s, you could buy a tweed [Fender] Deluxe for 300, 400 bucks. Obscure tube amps were going for $100." A guy just outside of St. Louis wanted one of Pogreba's resonator guitars, and he traded about 14 old tube amps for it. "They were weird, off-brand stuff. About half of them were really good. And that's what got me interested. Then, the vintage thing started to kick in. All of a sudden, a tweed Deluxe went from $300 to $700 to $1,000. And I was thinking, That's a lot of money for that old amp. Now, they're $3,000, $4,000.

"Leo Fender was building out of the same RCA

tubing that everybody else was building out of. So you could buy these old tube PAs at second-hand stores for $5, then bring them home and realize it had the same circuit as a tweed Pro. So, you can sell your tweed Pro and keep your $10 amp that sounds just like it. I started farting around with those — the PAs and the more obscure amps."

Pogreba points to a shelf packed with old amps. "Like that little Oahu up there: You could buy that amp and the lap-steel it came with for $100. Now, that amp would probably bring around $800. That's just crazy."

Discovery

The first guitar hero Pogreba sold an instrument to was Johnny Long, a Denver-based blues guy; the first internationally known was Keb' Mo'.

"I was driving through Boulder and I heard he was going to be on the radio," Pogreba recalls. "I had one of my guitars in a music store, [Robb's Music]. I went by, grabbed the guitar and went to the radio station. I walked in just as he was walking out. He sat down and played it, liked it and said, 'My wife's going to shoot me if I bring home another guitar.' So I said, 'Well, you can trade me for her gun.'"

Not long after that, Bonnie Raitt played on an album with Keb' Mo, and during the sessions, she was admiring his newly purchased Pogreba resonator. "I heard through the grapevine that she was interested in one," Pogreba says, "so I talked with people who knew her and just went ahead and built one for her. I found out what her preferred neck shape was, what gauge strings she played, her favorite color. While I was setting things up, I was listening to her records, just to help get the right vibe. So I built a guitar as near as possible to what I thought she would like. It was a smaller body, kind of a purplish blue. I used a '62 Rambler hubcap, 'cause that's got a big 'R' on the front."

To accommodate the height of the hubcap, Pogreba cut a circle in the top of the guitar's hard-shell case and covered it with another hubcap. He gave the neck a bit more of an angle, because he knew she plays .011 to .050 strings, then anodized it blue and gave it a "quick dip in the purple pot."

"This blue guitar was painted by a friend of mine who paints Harleys for a living," Pogreba says. "I found the pickup at a garage sale on a homemade guitar made out of a two by four. It's really microphonic – you can actually sing through it – but it sounds great."

"This hubcap is from a 1956 Chevy," Pogreba says, "This finish is the result of an anodizing experiment that didn't work so I added some paint to make it look I meant to do it that way."

"I sent it to Bonnie," he says, "and she liked the guitar. She's not a guitar junkie; she doesn't have 30 guitars. I think she has her old Guild, that old brown Strat of hers and a couple of purple Fender Bonnie Raitt models and maybe a Gibson electric. But she doesn't have a lot of guitars like you might expect. She took it on the road and gigged with it for a week before she decided she wanted to buy another guitar.

"There are plenty of people who could give her a guitar; she could have hundreds. But she is not going to take advantage of somebody who wanted to give her a guitar. She bought that guitar. She just wanted to be sure that was what she wanted."

Eventually, Raitt ended up with three of Pogreba's guitars, and the word about his craftsmanship spread. Jackson Browne, Jerry Douglas, Martin Simpson and Sonny Landreth each got on board. Emmylou Harris plays a guitar that features a Nash Rambler hubcap — made, of course, in honor of her band, the Nash Ramblers. Darrell Scott has ended up with eight Pogrebas. As it happens, Pogreba had just showed Scott a couple of guitars a few days before my arrival.

"One that I liked the best was strung up with light strings," Pogreba explains. "The other one was a bigger, stiffer guitar with mediums; I thought it was a little more work to play. And that was the one that Darrell picked up and liked immediately. He is just a much more powerful player.

"You've built this guitar; you have it around for a couple of weeks; you're playing it, doing the setup — you think you know what it sounds like. Then you hand it to someone like Darrell Scott, and you're like, 'Oh, my God. It never made that sound for me!'"

David Lindley bought four for himself and got one for his daughter as well. Lindley was once trying out some different Pogrebas during a small bar gig when he picked up a particular beauty. "He said, 'Wow, look at the way this thing focuses.' And he was just aiming it at people around the room, and they would turn their heads when he aimed it at them. And I was like, 'How did he know that?'"

Future Stock

Reflecting on the road ahead, Pogreba suggests that he's ready for a change in direction.

INSPIRED WHIMSY

For Bonnie Raitt, it's hard to separate the man from his instruments

What I love about Larry's guitars are qualities that stem so much from his uniqueness as a person. He's thoroughly delightful to interact with, and his passion, originality, deep connection to the materials he uses – the absolute unique design and sound of each one – make his guitars truly original works of art. I have three that are each so different from my other guitars and very dear to me.

The most showcased publically is the purple cutaway "National" resonator guitar, fashioned from recycled aircraft aluminum, salvaged wood on the neck and fretboard and a '51 Nash Rambler hubcap with an "R" for my last name as the pie-plate cover. It has two pickups and controls that allow you to switch from an all-acoustic to electric sound or mix the two. I use equal parts of both and, on my last tour, played through my compressor and Bad Cat amp to help it cut through with the band. If I'm playing it alone, I just go through a DI [direct input].

It plays like a dream, sounds great and looks totally badass. It's like driving a custom hot rod, and I was delighted when he surprised me with it. Jackson [Browne] loved mine so much, I think he had Larry make him a similar one.

The other two guitars Larry made for me are beautiful as well. One is a very light electric made of bamboo and spruce; the other is a new parlor acoustic made of mahogany, koa and jobillo woods. Both are portable enough to be perfect bus and living room instruments to play for fun and writing. The electric sounds great on slide or regular-tuning songs, and the acoustic similarly has a sweet, sensual feel and warm, intimate sound. I can crank the electric up loud on the gig, and it sounds just as mighty and funky as I'd like as well.

I love that Larry is so conscious in picking and recycling the wood for his instruments. Like a great artisan and sculptor, he lets the materials tell him how they want to be shaped. There's as much inspired whimsy as there is deliberate craftsmanship in his guitars. And I love who he is, and where and how he chooses to live, as much as I do his instruments.

It's an honor and a delight to play his guitars.

— Bonnie Raitt

The coin inlays on the neck of this koa Weissenborn-style all date from the 1800s.

"I'm sort of tired of the metal-bodies," he says. "The guy who was welding them for me, he was tired of welding them. The guy who was thinning the resonators had a heart attack. The guys that were doing the anodizing were having some health problems. You know, with the resonators, it's just kind of over; I've built enough of them. I've got three, four more aluminum bodies that I'm going to get to some of my guitar heroes. I'm going to build mostly acoustic guitars. I'll still build a few electrics, because I like them. I'll build some wood resonator instruments."

And the inventive explorations for Pogreba will continue. "There's this archtop idea I have with fiber rods. I got carbon-fiber rods that are connecting the neck block with the tail block. This keeps the guitar from collapsing from string tension, but it also supports the string tension that pushes down on the top. Because of that, I would be able to carve the top very thin — with a top that worked like a speaker cone.

"[KEB' MO'] SAID, 'MY WIFE'S GOING TO SHOOT ME IF I BRING HOME ANOTHER GUITAR.' SO I SAID, 'WELL, YOU CAN TRADE ME FOR HER GUN.'"

"The normal archtop is a quarter-inch thick under the bridge and maybe an eighth of an inch thick in the re-curve area, but this one is about an eight of an inch under the bridge and about a sixteenth at the re-curve. I'm going to try cutting it just a little thinner." His experiment seems to be working; the carbon fiber rods are doing their job. "The action hasn't changed at all, which tells me the top is still staying at the right height, so there may be some promise in that."

Pogreba doesn't indulge in glossy finishes or elaborate inlays; he just wants to, in his words, "provide a good tool." At 64, he seems intent on building fewer guitars — and on trying to play them a little more — but he won't quit building them, he stresses, because he loves doing it and he believes that luthiers of today are particularly well equipped for the job.

"We know more about guitar building, and the techniques are better," he explains. "In the 1930s, they had better material, but I think, in 20 years, we're going to look back and realize some of the best guitars ever built were being built today."

Living off the grid during Montana winters can get rough. There are weeks at a time when the Pogrebas can't get to civilization. To compensate, they've just finished constructing a home in New Mexico (out of recycled materials, naturally) where they will spend the colder months. Donna passes her time as a weaver, and Larry pursues sculpting and songwriting. But the inventor in him never tires. (He is currently working on creating a "low-head hydro unit" to create power from streams and is exploring ways to improve wind machines.)

One of the marks of true brilliance is the ability to see the extraordinary within the ordinary. Driven by a unique vision and passion, Larry Pogreba takes common pieces of wood and metal and shapes them into uncommon instruments. Keep that in mind the next time you're driving in the backcountry of Montana, and you hear the whistle of a bowling ball flying high overhead or you see the tragic wreckage of a crumpled airplane. Don't worry: You've simply entered into the backyard of a green genius.

TAILPIECE

PHOTO BY MARK JOHNSTON

PLENTY OF ACOUSTIC GUITAR BUILDERS WILL PROMISE TO BUILD YOU A "CANNON," BUT LARRY POGREBA MAY BE THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN FULFILL THAT ORDER.

FROM SOMEWHERE DEEP IN MONTANA, WITNESS DOUG PICKERING WRITES, "IF YOU LOOK IN THE SMOKE YOU CAN SEE THE SMALL TUPPERWARE BOWL THAT HELD THE GUNPOWDER. ABOVE THAT, THE LARGER BLACK OBJECT IS BURNT PAPER PLATES USED FOR WADDING. FURTHER UP IS A SMALL BLACK OBJECT, WHICH IS THE BOWLING BALL."

WE'RE TOLD THE BALL FROM POGREBA'S CANNON WILL ULTIMATELY LAND ACROSS THE PASTURE ON THE FAR RIDGE... PAST THE PLOWED FIELD YOU SEE.

IN GUITARS AND IN LIFE, IT'S ALL ABOUT PROJECTION...

— JV