

Sergei de Jonge, Guitar-Making as a Way of Life

by Catherine Joyce

Ever since the de Jonge family moved into the old MacDiarmid farm on Ramsay Road the hills have come alive with the sound of music. With their six children, ranging in age from 28 down to 11, each one hand-crafting guitars with their father, world renown luthier, Sergei de Jonge, the family has established a vital presence in the community.

Their annual Labour Day music festival showcases local talent while their School of Lutherie draws guitar makers from around the world to learn the intricacies of making classical, acoustic guitars. Each year two or three apprentices come to live with the family, working alongside Sergei eight hours a day in the shop and enjoying Devora's hearty vegetarian meals. What the de Jonge family promotes through their holistic approach to guitar-making is a way of life, a philosophy of life, based on hard work, exquisite craftsmanship and simple, ecological living.

It all started with Sergei, born in the Hague in 1949, then raised in Toronto from 1952. His father had been a drummer in a jazz band, the Dutch Swing College Band in Holland, and Sergei grew up playing the violin. It wasn't until grade 13 that he began studying classical guitar. "My teacher had a beautiful guitar, handmade by Edgar Monch, the German builder. I wanted that instrument but at \$800 it was too rich for me. A year later, when I was in teacher's college, I met Jean Larrivee, who had worked with Monch. I remember he invited me to his shop on a Tuesday. I never went back to school."

Sergei stayed with Larrivee for a year, then apprenticed to Patt Lister, a 65 year old master up in Collingwood. Camping in a tent on nearby Wasaga Beach, Sergei would walk the 20 minutes to Lister's shop each morning in his bare feet – through rain, shine, ice or snow. He still walks barefoot in all seasons, just as he swims early and late in the Gatineau River, a discipline that mirrors the rigors of his craft.

And so began the nearly 40 years of guitar-making that would gradually become the de Jonge Guitar Company. In a long evolution – interrupted by much travel and disparate money-making gigs to support his growing family – Sergei built on his experience making concert classical guitars with Larrivee and Lister, going on to create acoustic guitars that have set a new standard in the steel string guitar world. When he started in the late 60s there were only a handful of guitar-makers in Canada. Now of the top 20 Canadian artisans, Sergei is the acknowledged master with dealers in Japan, Britain, Europe and the States.

From the age of 11 each of his children has learned by osmosis, working with Sergei to master the craft. Whenever they are home from their travels, they gravitate to the shop. Now at 28, Joshia has long since established her own reputation and become an integral part of the company.

Sergei observes, "When I was young, my initial motivation was to create one beautiful guitar. I am still at it but I see it more as a spiritual discipline now. Making guitars is my field of practice, something I can share with my family, my community and the world. It is the lifestyle – that sharing around the dinner table and in the shop – that means the most to me, a way of life that I believe can change people's lives."

First published in the *Low Down to Hull & Back News*, January 10, 2007