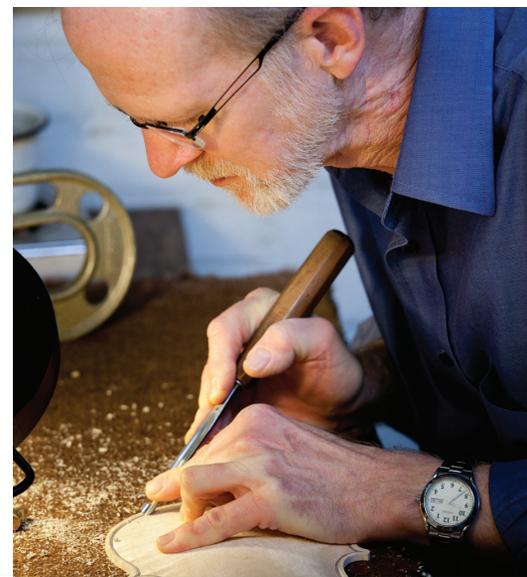


# WILLOW MAKER



# THE SHOP *on* Hillsborough Street

**John Montgomery  
and the Making of Masterful Violins**

by Arthur Ryel-Lindsey

*Let's face it: Hillsborough and West is not the most flamboyant corner of Raleigh's Hillsborough Street. A cozy, neatly shaded block cut into a wedge by the uphill union of Edenton Street to Hillsborough, the area is hardly as historic as the point just four blocks to the east, where the street runs into the old State Capitol building. Nor is it the bustling hub of college life several minutes to the west, past a newly installed traffic circle that serves as launching pad to the North Carolina State University campus.*

Sure, at Hillsborough and West, trendy marketing and design firms have settled in beside a storefront fitness outfit, sign shop, Exploris school and, farther down, the historic antebellum home resplendent in eaves and wrap-around porches that is now Second Empire restaurant. But that is looking the other way. On this block, between West and Edenton, is a closed formal wear store and an architecture firm whose lights are off and door locked on a sunlit Tuesday afternoon, plus three empty storefronts. Between them sits a simple, plain, brick-and-glass storefront, the racks of beginner sheet music inside barely elaborating on the simple message in gold-leaf on the window: "Violin Maker."

"The one positive thing," says the shop's owner, John Montgomery, of this somewhat lonely location, "We have all the parking in the world."

He sits on a stool in the store's long back room, a white-walled, L-shaped space, sunlit by skylights, violins and bows hanging high all the way down the long outer wall while John and his assistant of nineteen years, Charley Nelson, tuck themselves

behind sturdy shop-room tables. John wears jeans and a pastel blue, button-down shirt, wide glasses on his nose and an easygoing smile across his face. This space and host could have been pulled straight from a PBS handyman show, and indeed, he operates with a carpenter's knowledge that putting the object together correctly means, ideally, a lifetime of appreciation for the owner.

"Violins have amazing stories," he says. "The earliest violins are mid-16th century, and these violins are still being played today. People say 'what's the longevity of a violin?' Well, we don't know. We're not even close to knowing."

You would not think of it to look at the block, the store, the man – and perhaps you would not even think to look for it in Raleigh, North Carolina – but John Montgomery is among the country's leaders in violin making and restoring. Admittedly he operates in a highly specialized field: the American Federation of Violin and Bow Makers, of which Montgomery has served as secretary, has 160 members in the United States, an additional

nine in Canada and six around the world. Only five members live and work in North Carolina, though four of them, including Montgomery, are in the Triangle area.

Nevertheless, you would be hard-pressed to find a violin maker, anywhere, who could compete with Montgomery credential for credential. In 2010, Montgomery completed a yearlong restoration of John Philip Sousa's first, quarter-sized violin for an exhibit at the National Museum of the Marine Corps, reminding us in the process that the handleader and master of the march was first a gifted child violinist. Often sought out as an expert on violin construction, he recently worked with Bruno Frohlich, a research anthropologist at the National Museum of Natural History, to convert Frohlich's scientific data on some fifty rare and expensive violins into a form that can be used and replicated by current violin makers. He repairs instruments for the Smithsonian and Library of Congress and has taught the subject at Oberlin College. Plus, he just makes very good instruments.



## ...If I'm going to build a violin, I've got to build it so that I know it's going to be here in 400 years...

R. Marshall Johnson, a thirty-six-year veteran of the North Carolina Symphony's violin section, has played a Montgomery violin at the Symphony's indoor concerts for twenty years. "I got it hot off the press," Johnson says of his violin, finished in April 1991 and purchased the same month. "It's a great instrument, great tone quality and compares to any other modern instruments."

Montgomery is the first to admit that his output of new and original instruments is a "smaller amount relative to people who don't have shops." While, by his own estimate, he could produce twelve violins a year if he made building his sole focus, he prefers to have a downtown presence that allows him to be part of a community and work with local musicians ranging from young students and amateurs to the professionals of the North Carolina Symphony. The location is "pretty much part of our identity, and people know about us," he says. "Many people come in and say, 'I've been meaning to come in for ten years,' because we've been here that long."

Raleigh was hardly the obvious choice for Montgomery, but then again, neither was violin making. Born in California to parents without musical training, he spent his high school years in Ridgewood, New Jersey, developing an interest in biology. He majored in the subject at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, before traveling to Europe on an Edison Fellowship, first to study French folk music as an ethnomusicologist. His research eventually focused on a specific French instrument, the hurdy-gurdy.

Hints of this rigorous scientific background are almost unavoidable in speaking with Montgomery,

whose precision in finding the right words to express his thoughts hints at the deeply analytical mind within. To him, violin making – and music in general – go hand-in-hand with scientific study, the search for patterns and repetitions, ordering by numbers, the ability to break an object down into its components and rebuild it. Sounding every bit a researcher defining the scientific method, he says of his work, "We're able to use our past experiences, look at what's been successful and then come back and try to describe it in a graphic way, and then look at new materials or methods or volumes and compare those, also graphically. Before you finish, you say 'I know what this is going to sound like.' Then you finish, you play it and wow, it sounds just like you thought."

This close parallel between music and science, he says, makes it common in his profession and among the members of the Symphony and its audience to find a large number of scientists and medical professionals, former and current. It was also crucial in his choosing Raleigh. Realizing the American market for hurdy-gurdy manufacturing was small, he enrolled at the Violin Making School of America in Salt Lake City, then as now the most prominent trade school in the profession. After an apprenticeship in New York, he sought a community in which to put down stakes. He saw in Raleigh "the seeds for a real strong cultural community," noting, among other factors, a high rate of Ph.D.s as a result of the area's research universities. "That yields a lot of people who are encouraged and interested in the arts," he says, "and so I thought I was making the right bet, and it, of course, turned out to be an excellent bet."

Montgomery moved to Raleigh in 1983 and worked out of his home in Oakwood and later Boylan Heights before, in his words, "having a child kicked me out of my workspace." He moved into the Hillsborough Street location in 1987, putting the words "Violin Maker" on the window from the beginning. Very little has changed since. After all, as Montgomery is quick to say, the focus has always been on quality. He has quite a yardstick against which he measures himself: "I've got 400-year-old violins sitting in my shop right now, so that throws down the glove. If I'm going to build a violin, I've got to build it so that I know it's going to be here in 400 years also."

He remains vigilant in the search for the best possible materials, some of which have been used in violin construction since the 16th century: maple, spruce, ebony, rosewood and boxwood. On the wall in his shop a bundle of horsehair falls like a frozen firework, the necessary item for bowstrings and one that has never been synthesized for this specific purpose, despite years of trying. The bundle symbolizes the balancing act facing Montgomery everyday, on one hand relying on well-established techniques that were perfect 400 years ago and, on the other, putting his own stamp on his product.

"The violin I make today is never going to replace the Stradivari," he says. "What you have in the Stradivari is historical and cultural and irreplaceable. What you have in a Montgomery is the same thing. It's not so historical, but it's unique. It's the uniqueness that you're looking for."

For proof, see another North Carolina Symphony musician's violin. Assistant Concertmaster Rebekah Binford met Montgomery when he first came to Raleigh, though she would not let him do extensive work on her rare 1736 Sanctus Seraphin violin until the summer of 2006. Giving in to his persistent requests, she loaned Montgomery the instrument to make a bench copy, a precise rebuilding of the instrument with the original consistently alongside for reference.

"It's great," she says of the copy, which she bought and uses for the Symphony's pops, education and Summerfest performances, admiring its more far-reaching sound. "He included the aging marks, all the bumps and bruises. Other musicians can only kind of tell the difference. It's very close."

Montgomery continues to maintain both instruments for Binford. She "trusts him totally," she says, and though she could go to Chicago or New York, "to have someone this amazing in Raleigh is rare." Montgomery laughs at the notion that he could find a bigger or more prestigious clientele if he moved back to New York. First, for him, he could not ask for a better place to work. "When I talk to my colleagues in major cities, they're so incredibly jealous," he says. More than that, he sees no reason to move. His model support staff of Charley Nelson, Brian Kelly and Freda Kerr has been in place for well over a decade, "which just shows what a good employer John is," in Nelson's words, and with his store's proximity to downtown, with its growing foot traffic and well-regarded professional symphony, he just smiles at anyone who brings up relocating. Hillsborough Street at West may not be the most exciting spot, but to Montgomery, "it's where you expect a fine violin shop to be."