



MUSIC

Guitar fanatic

Chipper Thompson and Larry Bell share an evening of 'Songs, Stories & 12-String Guitars'



Musician Chipper Thompson, left, is photographed with artist Larry Bell at Bell's Taos studio.

COURTESY KIM TRIEBER-THOMPSON

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Taos artist Larry Bell loves 12-string guitars. He relishes their full sound and is captivated by their resonating wooden bodies. As a visual artist, Bell also appreciates their aesthetically pleasing appearance. Bell's passion for the 12-string guitar has blossomed into a stunning collection of the instruments.

A few of Bell's 12-string guitars are featured in the current Harwood Museum of Art exhibit, "Larry Bell: Hocus, Focus & 12." The exhibit is on view through Oct. 7.

Taos musician Chipper Thompson has been friends with Bell for around 25 years. They met when they lived in the same Taos neighborhood and bonded over their shared passion for collecting instruments. Saturday (Sept. 8) at 7 p.m., the Harwood will present "Chipper Thompson & Friends, 12 On 12: An Evening Of Songs, Stories & 12-String Guitars" in conjunction with the Harwood Museum show "Larry Bell: Hocus, Focus & 12."

Thompson plans to play 12 songs on 12 different 12-string guitars with time for stories about the songs and the instruments. He will be accompanied by Taos musician Kim Treiber-Thompson on bass guitar and harmony vocals. The two are a married couple.

"The 12-string guitar is an amazing thing," Thompson said. "They're kind of benign monsters in a way -- sometimes insanely hard to handle but producing this huge, yet warm sound that is irresistible."

Thompson will use four of his own 12-string guitars for the concert, and eight from Bell's collection.

"It was real fun matching songs to guitars," Thompson said. "There were songs that I wanted to do, and it took three or four tries before I found a guitar the song sounded really good on. Or a guitar would suggest a song ... so I would change my list accordingly. We came up with the list that way."

Some of the guitars Thompson will play were made by American manufacturers Martin and Gibson. One was made by local luthier (guitar-maker) Patch Rubin. A few specialty instruments include a Tex-Mex bajo-quinto and a blend between a guitar and a Middle-Eastern oud.

Bell was born in Chicago in 1939 and grew up in California's San Fernando Valley. His work is exhibited in museums and galleries across the U.S. and the world. He moved to Taos in 1973. Bell has art studios in Venice, California and Taos.

Bell said he started playing guitar around the age of 15. His father rented him a large orchestra guitar, which he tried to learn to play. However, he was hard of hearing and it was difficult for him to hear the guitar.

Bell recalls he ran out of patience as did his teacher. It was about a year or two later when Bell walked into a pawn shop in downtown Los Angeles.

"I came across a pawn shop that had the strangest looking guitar I've ever seen in the window," recalled Bell. "I went in to ask what it was. It was a 12-string guitar. ... I strummed it and I heard it beautifully, so I talked my pop into buying it for me. It was all of \$30 or something. That changed everything. I not only could hear it. I could feel it."

From then on, 12-string guitars seemed to call out to Bell. He bought a second one. Then on a 1962 trip to Mexico, he bought another. Sometimes he would find two or three at a time in unexpected places. Over the years, Bell has also commissioned luthiers to build him guitars to add to his collection.

Bell's favorite tunes to play on the guitars were children's folk songs. He listened to the children's folk music sung by Tex Ritter, Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives and Bell's favorite, Leadbelly. As a young man, Bell found a job where he could play his guitar.

"I had always liked folk music," Bell said. "I got a job in a coffeehouse in Hollywood where they played a lot of folk music and I did whatever was needed - everything from passing out menus and seating people to mopping up the toilet if somebody threw up in it. They let me sit in the back patio and play the guitar. It had sort of a bohemian atmosphere at that time."

While he doesn't play them like he used to, due to pain in his hands, Bell enjoys surrounding himself with the physical beauty of his guitars. He has made a series of two-dimensional works inspired by their shapes. Some of these works are on display at the Harwood Museum as part of the exhibit "Larry Bell: Hocus, Focus and 12."

Asked if the sound of the guitars also inspires his visual art, Bell responded. "Sure. But, I don't know how to express that in two dimensions. Sound is something for me that is very personal. The reason I like the 12-string is because there's so much resonance in them that they vibrate in a very particular way that I can hear. If I take these hearing aids out, 40 percent of the audible spectrum disappears, so it was more of a catharsis than a musical relationship, really. I just liked the way I felt when I was playing my favorite kind of music -- children's songs."

Bell's abstract style has been called "light on surface." He deposits vaporized metals and minerals on glass. His work includes constructions, glass boxes, standing wall glass panel sculptures, collages on paper and canvas and bronze figures.

Admission to the Saturday program is \$15, \$12 for museum members. Call (575) 758-9826 or visit harwoodmuseum.org.