

Pasco repair shop keeps brass, woodwind instruments in tiptop shape

A shop owner's repair skills draw a chorus of serious musicians.



Brass and Woodwind Shop owner Steve Bockus loosens the keys on a clarinet in his Wesley Chapel repair shop last week. Photos by JAMES BORCHUCK | Times



By Arleen Spenceley, Times Staff Writer

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Steve Bockus used a Bunsen burner's blue flame to do battle with a stubborn, stainless-steel flute. • He lowered the woodwind instrument into the fire, then tested its keys. • Still stuck. So Bockus persisted. • It's his job as owner of the Brass and Woodwind Shop, where, at benches buried by all of his tools, his work — fixing brass and woodwind instruments — makes music possible. • His interest in music dates back to when he was about 10. From his bedroom window, he heard live big band

music from the fairgrounds near his house in New Hampshire. • "I was fascinated," he said. • So in fifth grade, he got a trumpet and joined the school band.

After Bockus, 56, moved to Maine and entered eighth grade, new band director Jerry Bates arrived to revive what had been a dying music program, Bockus said.

Had it not been for Bates, he said, he might have quit band. But Bates, 71, instilled what fuels Bockus' work today.

"The love of music," Bates said.

He lives in Blanchard, Maine, but stays in Homosassa each winter, and keeps in touch with Bockus on Facebook.

"He was a good, strong trumpet player," Bates said. "He learned that if he took good care of his instrument and kept it clean, it played well."

When Bockus wasn't playing, he worked as a dishwasher and busboy at a Howard Johnson's restaurant until he graduated from high school, then was promoted to the kitchen. While he cooked, he put thought into how he would make a permanent living.

"I needed a trade, because college wasn't in my future," he said, as his grades weren't good enough.

He decided to become a firefighter. Then Bockus learned a local music store needed a repair apprentice. He got the gig and learned the trade from the store's owner, who had 35 years of experience fixing instruments.

"Steve took that talent and carried it on," Bates said.

In 1980, four years after Bockus began his apprenticeship, he moved to Tampa, where he worked at Cutro's Music, downtown on Tyler Street, until 1984, when he opened his own repair shop.

"We opened on April Fools' Day on Fowler Avenue. Everybody thought it wouldn't survive," Bockus said. "The joke is on everybody."

The Brass and Woodwind Shop thrived, and Bockus moved it from its original location to Wesley Chapel 3 1/2 years ago, where you never know who will show up, he said.

Vicky Newcomb, who was a clarinetist and bass clarinetist for the Florida Orchestra for more than 20 years, is a customer.

Taking care of instruments for professional musicians is a "highly specialized niche," Newcomb said. "He gets it. A lot of repairmen don't."

Carl Fischer — a multi-instrumentalist for Billy Joel, a trumpet player for Diana Ross and a solo artist — has been a customer, too.

Fischer studied music from 1986 to 1989 at the Pinellas County Center for the Arts. As musicians and New Yorkers, he and his father sought a repair shop that reminded them of home.

"Steve's shop was highly recommended," said Fischer, 42. "My dad and I went there, and we felt like we were back in New York. We'd go there just to check out horns."

Back then, Bockus fixed horns for Fischer. Now, since Fischer is a Yamaha artist and clinician, Yamaha maintains his instruments.

But, "if Yamaha didn't take care of my stuff, he would take care of my stuff," Fischer said. "I wish him another great 30 years. He's a master at his craft."

Bockus has restored a flute that floated away from its owner when a tidal surge destroyed her house's walls in Hurricane Katrina. He has rebuilt a saxophone flattened by a car.

Student musicians, in particular, can be hard on instruments, he said.

"Kids drink Coca-Cola and eat Subway sandwiches, and all that goes through their horns," he said.

Adults can be hard on instruments, too.

One of the worst horns Bockus has seen belonged to a "monster tenor player (who) smoked a stogie all the time, (and) drank scotch on the rocks at the club," he said. "The inside (of his saxophone) was coated with dry, flaky tobacco juice and liquor."

Sometimes, horns need baths, Bockus said. Others have dents to bang out, or jammed keys. Woodwind instruments wind up with bent bodies, posts or keys, or with pads that leak or deteriorate.

"A lot of it's just maintenance," he said.

Without that, a musician's performance suffers. So musicians of all skill levels bring their brass and woodwind instruments to Bockus.

"These instruments are their babies," he said.

After he sipped his coffee, he put the parts of somebody's "baby" back together — a clarinet. He played a set of scales.

"Another one done," he said, carefully returning the instrument to its case.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd end up fixing instruments for a living," Bockus said. "I absolutely love it."

Contact Arleen Spenceley at aspenceley@tampabay.com or (727) 869-6235. Follow @ArleenSpenceley.

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