

# The Michigan Daily

## Herb David: Crafting Ann Arbor's Music Legacy

By Whitney Pow

Senior Arts Editor On January 14th, 2009

“You know who Thurston Moore is, from Sonic Youth?” Charlie Lorenzi, the manager for Herb David Guitar Studio asks. It’s almost a rhetorical question. Thurston Moore, one of Rolling Stone Magazine's "Greatest Guitarists of All Time" and founder of Sonic Youth, the groundbreaking noise-rock band of the '90s?

“Well, he bought a Ron Asheton signature guitar from us yesterday,” Lorenzi says, as if it was an everyday occurrence, as phenomenal as a kid buying a Snickers bar. “And Jack White, from the White Stripes, he buys stuff here when he comes to town,” Lorenzi adds.

Herb David himself, white-haired and garbed in a turtleneck, is sitting in an office chair nearby, engaged in the conversation. He nods in agreement. “People of the '60s who hung out here were Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell, Sun Ra, Phil Ochs,” he says, listing off names as if these legendary music icons were old friends he bummed around with once upon a time. Which is actually pretty much what happened.

“Bob Dylan played here once, and we all thought that he wrote good songs but he can’t play worth a darn and he smelled bad,” David admits, chuckling. “He was trying to be like Woody Guthrie, a wanderer,” he says, suggesting that Dylan’s smell was the result of his itinerant habits and inability to get a good shower once in a while.

Lorenzi and David are talking in the unseen recesses of Herb David Guitar Studio, in a loft with angled wooden ceilings and walls lined with shelves piled high with lumber for guitar-making. It’s dusty in here, but in a way that suggests loving use — the room is filled with hand-crafted lutes, broken mandolins and works-in-progress still hanging around the workbench.

David’s guitar studio has been in Ann Arbor since the 1960s, a vital place and time for the cultural and musical revolution of that seminal decade. David himself was a central figure in the burgeoning music scene. “Music was our life, our literature, our politics — free from conformity,” he said. “(It was) a big deal in the '60s. That’s the way we felt. Music was going to change the whole world.” People came to David’s shop not only for the Ann Arbor scene, but to hang out with David, a local celebrity himself.

“Newsweek did an article about me, and I was on the front page of a lot of newspapers across the country and other magazines,” he said. He says he has been written about in The Washington Post, and he’s made appearances on popular TV shows including “The Today Show.” After all that press, word quickly got around about David and his workshop — the then-central hub of the music revolution that once met in an Ann Arbor basement.

The city hosted a completely different scene back then. Jimi Hendrix played at the Fifth

Dimension, a now-defunct club that used to be at Huron and Main Street. The Grateful Dead put on shows at Crisler Arena. Frank Zappa played at Hill Auditorium. And the Canterbury House, the recording location of Neil Young's newest live disc, used to be in Nickels Arcade. It's hard to imagine these legendary names being attached to real flesh-and-blood twenty-somethings you could pass while walking down the street.

David looks through his notes, trying to place Hendrix's Ann Arbor on the Ann Arbor we know today. He reads from a yellow notebook page that contains graphite scrawls in his loose, loopy handwriting: "The scene of State Street, Saturday night, April 1964. Never been more music anywhere or any time or any place. People on their way to catch some jams, the streets crowded."

"There were long-haired punks in tight black leather pants — and they had to be tight — beatniks, hippies, some in orange robes hung with beads ringing cymbals and gongs, chanting mantras: 'Om padma, padma om.' There were folkies in penny loafers, bell-bottoms, chinos, hair cut short, combed back neatly. Others in suits and dresses."

This is the same street most students walk down every day to get to class, the site of textbook-buying and burrito-eating, which seems too far removed from the 1960s Ann Arbor where "music was accompanied by drugs, speed and LSD and sex in the streets," David said. He quoted John Sinclair when he added, "(it's) power to the people through music" ... and other things, risky or otherwise.

The Herb David Guitar Studio was more than a hangout for celebrity musicians. David is an accomplished instrument maker and repairman who has done projects for Jerry Garcia, Eric Clapton, John Paul Jones and Carole King, among many others. His skills are so adept he was able to completely re-piece a smashed guitar for Clarence White, the guitarist for the Byrds.

"He ran over his guitar and he brought it to me on Monday, and it was all a box of cornflakes, it was all shattered up," David said. "He said 'I've got a gig on Friday — a recording session in L.A. Can you put it back together?'" David ended up re-piecing the guitar in two days without using any new wood to fix the structure of the instrument. "Wednesday I handed the guitar to him. I fit (the pieces) together, and you couldn't even tell it had been shattered. I did it pretty good. And he recorded with it."

David's instrument-making ability can be seen all over the shop in the form of custom-made instruments with intricate woodcarvings and etchings. His desk is piled high with copies of "The Fine Art of Woodcarving" volumes 1-8 and intricately carved wooden flutes. His office is decorated with wall hangings containing the first instrument he made — a mandolin crafted out of a log he hollowed out — and a lute with a "Not for Sale — Made by Herb David" tag woven between the strings.

He has taught his woodworking trade to others as well. "Most of the musicians around town worked at the Herb David Guitar Studio at one time or another, teaching or helping in the store," David said. One particular person was a guy named Dan, a guitarist for a popular R&B band called The Prime Movers.

"Dan lived ... down the hall from me — my first studio was on the second floor of State Street, after I moved out of that basement," David recalls. Dan had a roommate named Jim, and, as it turns out, "the guys were Dan Erlewine, who was a guitar player in this band, and Jim Osterberg, who was the singer. Dan worked for me, Jim was a nice guy." David describes Osterberg as just another guy, then adds, "And Jim Osterberg — that's Iggy."

“Iggy” meaning Iggy Pop, who later quit the Prime Movers and moved to Chicago to cement his identity as a rebellious music icon. “Jim became known as Iggy Pop because he formally started a band called the Iguanas — the Iguanas created the Iggy part, and Pop because he had a friend called Jim Pop with no eyebrows,” he said. “So Iggy shaved his eyebrows and became Iggy Pop.” Later the “nice guy” Osterberg ended up becoming “scary and unpredictable” Iggy, who helped to usher in the American punk movement.

Ann Arbor was an active place of change in the '60s, where the changing mainstream music sounds reflected the changing social situations of the '60s, including the Civil Rights Movement, the Stonewall Riots and the Vietnam War. The '60s were a time when people realized that the personal was political, that music was more than just entertainment; it was a mentality, a way of life. Musical innovators like Hendrix and Iggy Pop were playing “industrial-strength music — it had to be loud, fast, mind-shattering,” David said. “Ann Arbor was the political center of the country ... and they came to my studio.”

Printed from [www.michigandaily.com](http://www.michigandaily.com) on Wed, 22 Apr 2009 12:27:01 -0400