

# Strumming to success

## Guitar repairman gets rave reviews from musicians

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Shy and modest, guitar repairman Mike Koontz doesn't like to brag about his work. Bespectacled and sporting a mustache, Koontz stands in his Ferndale shop and shrugs off any sort of compliments.

Sure, he's worked for a few, you know, sort of well-known musicians — Kiss bassist Gene Simmons and Sponge guitarist Mike Cross — but nobody that big, he says in his "gee whiz" tone. Amongst a smattering of black and white autographed band photos lies a gleaming gold record awarded to Koontz from Detroit rockers Sponge.

"I've been having him work on my guitars pretty much since I started working in the music business 10 years ago," said Cross, an Oakland County resident. "We make it a point to bring all our work to him."

Chris Flanagan, a Bishop Foley High School graduate who grew up in Troy, calls Koontz "a magician."

"He's a consummate perfectionist. There's nobody better. All he's ever done for me is a fret job and he does it perfectly every single time," said Flanagan, who co-owns Street Corner Music in Beverly Hills, Mich., and plays with the local surf band The Volcanos.

But to Koontz, owner of Koontz Guitar Repair in Ferndale, all those comments are unnecessary.

"They all lie," Koontz said with a shy smile. "I just try and bend over backward and try and give them what they want. I try and do the best that I can," he said.

His best has pushed Koontz to the forefront of the trade.

### Self taught

Koontz spent the first 12 years of his life in what was then the "rural area" of Seven Mile and Middlebelt roads in Livonia. His family moved to Redford where he graduated from Thurston High School in 1968.

He honed his guitar chops playing in garage bands during his years at Thurston.

"It was not very good; the rest of the guys were better than me," said Koontz who lives in Warren with his wife and family. "The more I play, the worse I get. I leaned more toward the technical aspects of guitar. That's what I do to try to make up for a lack of talent."

He couldn't afford the expensive guitars so he made due with what he had.

"I was always trying to get something to play right. All I could afford was junk so I tried to make it work. I started working on stuff myself. Even if there was somebody around to fix things, you couldn't have afforded them anyhow — especially back then as difficult as it was just to get money for regular stuff," he explained.

His DIY ethic led to a 20-year career. Koontz's resume includes Savannah Guitars and Pyramid Guitars, the Guitar and Drum Center, and Gus Zoppi Music Center at 17 Mile and Dequindre roads in Warren.

It was at the Guitar and Drum Center that he forged a relationship that would last a career.

"When I met him I was teaching guitar there. I was 18. I found him to be the most thorough person," said Sponge's Cross, whose band is tentatively scheduled to release its third album on the Beyond label on April 4.

"He's the best in the business. I trust him all together."

Six years ago he opened Koontz Guitar Repair where he repairs guitars and bass guitars.

Koontz is modest when talking

■ **'There's nobody better. All he (Mike Koontz) has ever done for me is a fret job and he does it perfectly every single time.'**

**Chris Flanagan**  
musician, co-owner,  
Street Corner Music,  
Beverly Hills

about his clients. Over his shoulder is the gold record that Sponge gave him. Nearby are autographed pictures of Country Joe McDonald and Jack Scott.

"I've done work for a lot of people. But most of the time the records end up bringing stuff in so I never hardly meet people," he explained.

To pique his memory of his clients, Koontz reaches into an old gray file cabinet. From a small file, he pulls a receipt signed by '60s folk star Donovan, and autographs of Larry McCray and Fleetwood Mac member John McVie.

"I run into a lot of people. Some of the people are kind of noteworthy. It's all by word of mouth. Everything that I do is by word of mouth. Just recently I worked on some of Gene Simmons' stuff — a couple of his basses," Koontz said as he showed photos of Simmons' bass.

"Usually it's an emergency situation. Generally, you set the other customers' stuff aside and put up with the screaming and everything else that goes along with that. It's one big great juggling act. There's a lot of people that play guitar."

The most challenging jobs, Koontz explained, are paint jobs and structural repairs on acoustic guitars.

Perhaps the most gratifying, however, was repairing a guitar for the family of a musician who had died in a car accident.

"There was a kid who had a Gibson SG guitar. He was in a car accident and he was killed. The guitar was in the car with him and the guitar was — the accident must have been really bad — the guitar was completely shattered. I mean it was in pieces," he said.

"His parents and his sister bought it for him. His family members came in with this guitar. I was able to put it together and get it all back playable and everything, just like it never happened. When they saw that, they cried. I mean they literally cried when they picked it up. That was probably the most rewarding repair I've ever done."

Koontz still finds the most challenging aspect of owning Koontz Guitar Repair is making money.

"There's times that it's like any other service job. It depends on when everybody come in and pick up repairs. The nature of the business is strictly on what type of work comes in and whether it's picked up quickly. Sometimes if people don't pick things up then you can have several bad weeks or several bad months," he said.

"Your customers are your life blood. That's when the juggling act really starts to happen. If you get a big job in here that somebody doesn't pick up and you're expecting that kind of money to come in, then you have to hurry and scramble and do all these other little things and make less money in order to try and make up for what wasn't picked up."

"Success is not a matter of money. You can't measure suc-

cess in this business by money. A lot of musicians even have to pay to play. Nobody's getting rich off this unless you own a music store and you're selling near wholesale. There's no way you can make money off the music business, unless you're a musician with some really big hits."

It doesn't matter if the client is a professional player or a hobbyist, Koontz said he makes sure the job is top notch. He has one employee, Ramo James who also works as a repairman at Wonderland Music in Dearborn. He comes in a couple times a week.

"I'm here sometimes very early into the morning. Sometimes I'll go home and come back and be here until 3:30, 4:30 in the morning; whatever it takes to get the job done. I've never put in a 40-hour week, never."

Some of those late nights have been spent on the "troublesome" five-string fretless bass owned by Steve Vilnius of the local pop band Brilliant.

"I didn't spend my early musical career in Michigan but I quickly found out that if there was one guy to fix it, one guy to turn a saw's ear into a silk purse, it is Mike Koontz. His otherwise known as god and he is truly the lord when it comes to stringed instruments," said Vilnius whose band will release the single "Tell Me" / "The Weight of

vision program on Trinity Broad-

## BELIEFS & Values

### COMMUNITY MESSENGER

Community Messenger features announcements from Oakland County religious institutions. Write: Community Messenger, c/o Beliefs and Values Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspaper, 805 E. Maple, Birmingham.

### 50TH ANNIVERSARY

Greenfield Presbyterian Church, 2312 Greenfield Road, Berkeley, is beginning its 50th anniversary celebration on Sunday, Feb. 14, with an 11 a.m. worship service, when the church will be presented with a certificate of recognition from the General Assembly by the Moderator of the Detroit Presbytery and a 4 p.m. production of "Love American Style," featuring songs from the 1940s, and performed by a trio made up of Grace Ward, Jim Wilking and Cecelia Mac-Smith.

For more information, call the church at (248)544-1800.

### ZION HOSTS EVANGELIST

Zion Evangelistic Temple, 3668 Livernois, Troy, one half mile north of Big Beaver Road, will hold a service with guest The Rev. Jesse Duplantis of New Orleans, La., at 7 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 11.

Duplantis has been a full time evangelistic minister since 1978. He has a weekly 30-minute television program on Trinity Broad-

casting Network and other stations, and has become a popular guest speaker at church meetings, conventions, seminars, Bible colleges and Christian television programs across America.

Doors will open at 6 p.m. A free will offering will be taken. For more information, call (248)624-2400.

### VALENTINE'S ENTERTAINMENT

Nationally recognized comedian Jeffrey Allen will appear at a 6:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 11 Valentine Dinner Celebration sponsored by Faith Lutheran Church, at the San Marino Club, 1685 Big Beaver, Troy.

Allen has numerous club and television credits to his name. His witty commentary on "Happy Wife, Happy Life" is his unique and hilarious perspective of life in the 90s.

Tickets are \$20 per person. Dinner is at 6:30 p.m. For tickets and more information call Faith Lutheran Church at (248)689-4604.

### EILU V EILU LATTE & LEARNING

Issues relating to marriage will be the topic at the next Eilu v Eilu Latte & Learning series at 10 a.m. Monday, Feb. 15, at Borders Books and Music, 30995 Orchard Lake Road, Farmington Hills. The topic will continue

Feb. 22.

The eight-part series, which ends March 1, is led by Rabbi Aaron Bergman. Each session is self-contained and may be attended independently. Tuition is \$5 per session for members of sponsoring organizations and \$7 per session for others. Advance registration is not required. For more information, call (248)398-4580.

The Eilu v Eilu Adult Jewish Learning Project is sponsored by the conservative movement of metro Detroit.

Everyone is welcome to attend programs, regardless of affiliation, background or Jewish study. For information on Eilu v Eilu programs, call (248)737-1931.

### BETHANY

Bethany Rochester meets from 8-10 p.m. every Wednesday in the lower level of St. Andrew Parish Center, 1234 Inglewood, Rochester.

Bethany is a Catholic non-profit organization and is part of the ministry of the Office for Family and Youth of the Archdiocese of Detroit. Bethany provides spiritual, social and educational assistance to divorced or separated Christians through peer-to-peer ministry.

Bethany has no formal membership or yearly fees. One need only attend functions to be a member. Contact Judy (248)309-7486, or Mike at (248)652-3860 with questions.

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## Koontz Guitar Repair facts

Koontz Guitar Repair is located at 600 Hilton St., at Jewell Street, east of Woodward Avenue, in Ferndale.

The phone number is (248) 545-5460.

Mike Koontz repairs guitars and bass guitars. Repairs range in cost from \$7.50 to \$500.

The average turn-around time is three to four days.