

The story of Arthur's Music, like the story of rock and roll, is about one generation passing down to the next.

Family Act

BY MIKE REDMOND



In the mid 1960s, Frank Dean was a kid with a monkey on his back. He was hooked on guitars, and Arthur's Music on South Shelby Street was where he got his fix.

On the Saturdays when he could find a way to shirk his chores (which was most Saturdays), he'd be on a bus from Broad Ripple—hair combed in the requisite Beatle bangs, pant cuffs falling three inches above his standard-issue penny loafers—for the long ride down to Fountain Square. There were other music stores in town, but they were primarily places that sold band instruments, with a guitar or two on the side. For a music-addled kid jonesing for a six-string, only Arthur's would do.

"Because Amos Arthur was a guitar player, Arthur's was a *guitar* store," Dean says. "He had every model of Fender, in every color. Besides the Fenders there would be Gibsons, all the Gibson electrics. Gretsch. Mosrite. Epiphone. Vox. They had so many guitars ... man, you didn't want to leave. You just knew there would be something you missed."

Dean wasn't alone. Arthur's Music at 931 Shelby Street has figured large in the lives of untold numbers of Indianapolis guitar-players over the last 54 years: If you play, chances are Arthur's had a hand in your musical history. It's where your parents bought you your first instrument. It's where you took lessons. It's where you traded up for that shiny new Stratocaster. It's where you and the other guys in your garage band told lies about how good you were while buying your strings and straps and picks. And it's since become the place you take your kids (or where your kids take their kids) to buy that first guitar and start the cycle all over again.

Which is appropriate, because the story of Arthur's is a generational story that, like rock and roll, keeps reinventing itself. It starts with Amos Arthur, a machinist and Big Band guitarist who founded the store with his wife, Leola, in 1952, and then moves to his daughter, Linda Arthur Osborne, who guided the store to its 50th anniversary while juggling two other successful businesses; it continues today with Linda's 29-year-old punk-Goth-kid-turned-classic-rocker daughter, Amy, who is gradually taking over responsibility for the store. It's a story of change offset by the constant of Amos Arthur's business philosophy: Sell what you know and be fair—it makes the customer happy, and it will make you happy, too.

IT IS A SATURDAY afternoon in January, and it seems that everyone who had a reason to visit Arthur's Music decided that 1:15 p.m. would be the perfect time to do it. Kids are coming and going from their music lessons. One guy wants a new mandolin, and another guy has decided to buy the set of drums he's been eyeing. Two more bring in a bass that needs repair. A father buys a shiny new electric guitar for his children.

MUSICAL HEIRS Linda Osborne (left) runs her father's guitar shop—an institution—with help from daughter Amy.

Back Home Again

Trying to keep up with their customers, Linda and Amy Osborne swoop and glide around each other like dance partners, in a choreography of business they've practiced over hundreds of other busy Saturdays, hustling from customer to counter to cash register and back again, and working off each others' strengths.

"I'm a project manager at heart," Linda says. "I love the details and the logic of finance and organization. Amy is a natural salesperson and a natural musician. We've each gotten parts of what Dad possessed naturally."

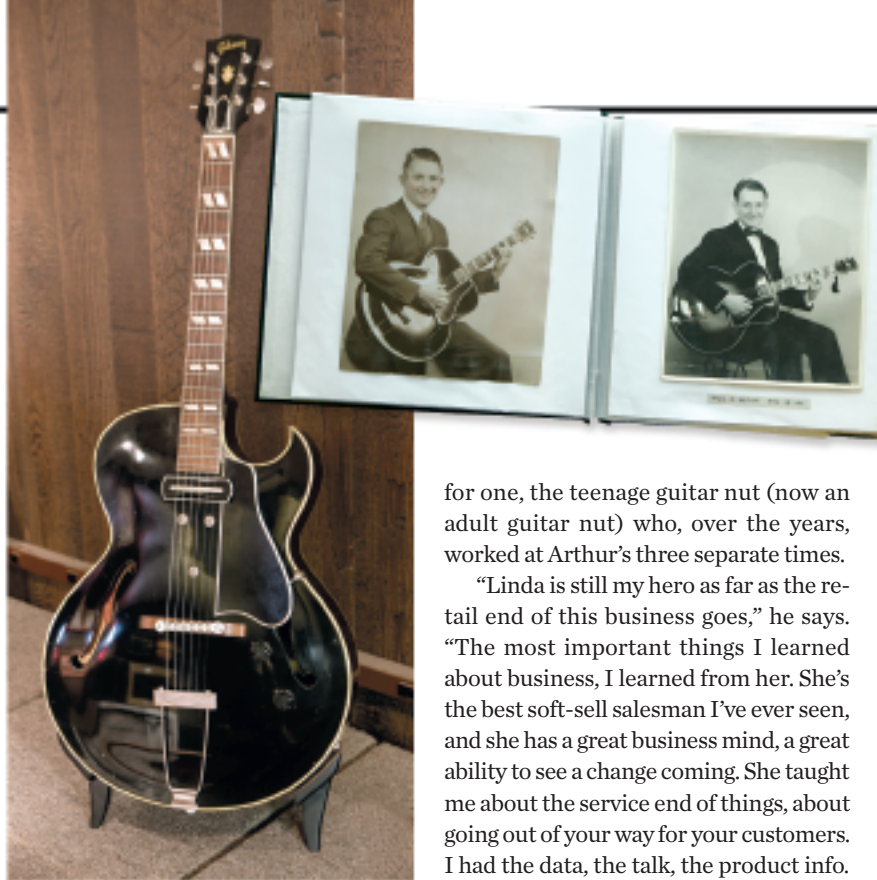
Amos Arthur died late last year at the age of 88. Those who knew him mourned the loss of a remarkable man with the soul of a musician and the precise brain of an engineer. (He invented several mechanical teaching aids for learning to play the complicated pedal steel guitar.) "Amos was old-school," says Dean, now a respected songwriter and musician, and co-owner of Dean Traylor Guitar Co. in Franklin. "He played better than anyone in town. He had that jazzbo thing going on, and he was a dead-on sight reader. But he was cool with the rock-and-roll guys, too."

So cool, says Amy, that when she wanted to learn Motley Crue's "Without You" on the pedal steel guitar at age 13, "he listened to it, figured it out and taught me how to play it."

Motley Crue, a heavy-metal act not exactly known for its sophistication, from a man who studied at the Jordan College of Music at Butler University. Such is the love of a cool grandfather.

TWO PHOTO ALBUMS, prepared for the 50th anniversary of Arthur's Music, offer glimpses of the store and the family through the years. Faded black-and-white prints, the little square ones that used to come back from the drugstore, show a little girl with an accordion, or seated behind a Hawaiian guitar. That's Linda, taking the first steps on her career path.

She was still a teenager when her parents decided to open a second Arthur's in Broad Ripple. (The company also had a store in Speedway for a while, before consolidating everything back in Fountain Square in the late 1970s.) Linda and her



GIBSON GUY During the latter half of his life, Arthur (above right) played a limited-edition 1959 Gibson guitar, still in pristine condition at the shop.

sister, Elizabeth (now Elizabeth Gibson), managed the second shop.

"If [my father's] hair hadn't already turned white, it probably would have during that time," Linda says. "He made suggestions and helped if we asked for it, but he never interfered. I realize now how difficult that must have been."

Her own daughter, Amy, is taking a greater role in the business after working in the store as a youngster, and then breaking away from music for a while to explore other careers—among them, working at a Harley-Davidson franchise. Longtime Arthur's customers remember her as the kid behind the counter whose black attire with skull-and-crossbones accessories (a look she still favors occasionally) were sharply at odds with her sunny personality. A personality that has become a formidable sales tool.

"There are guys who will tell you not to look her in the eyes," says her mother. "If you look her in the eyes, it's over. It's a sale."

Amy, her mother adds, also has repair and instrument knowledge gleaned from past Arthur's employees—Frank Dean,

for one, the teenage guitar nut (now an adult guitar nut) who, over the years, worked at Arthur's three separate times.

"Linda is still my hero as far as the retail end of this business goes," he says. "The most important things I learned about business, I learned from her. She's the best soft-sell salesman I've ever seen, and she has a great business mind, a great ability to see a change coming. She taught me about the service end of things, about going out of your way for your customers. I had the data, the talk, the product info. Linda taught me that this is about families. This is about kids learning to play."

Indeed, it's easy to be moved by what is a common occurrence at Arthur's: a kid comes into the store with a guitar bigger than his body, ready to plug in and learn to play a little AC/DC. It happens often at Arthur's, yet it continues to choke Amy up to see it.

"It just makes me feel good," she says. "I love that music, and when I see these little guys learning it, and I think that they could still be playing it 40 or 50 years from now ... I just love that."

LINDA OSBORNE SPENDS ABOUT 20 weeks a year out of the store attending to her other businesses: ExecuPrompt (a teleprompter service that counts U.S. presidents, captains of industry and Hollywood stars among its clients) and Castings Artistic Finishers (scenic painters for media and business). "Having multiple businesses has kept me from becoming stagnant and complacent in the music business," she says. "Each business gives me experiences and insights that offer ideas I can apply to the music store."

But, she counters, when Amy, an only child, was younger, she found herself feeling guilty for being gone so much. She talked it over with her mother, Leola—once partner with her husband in run-

ning the guitar shop. “She said she always felt the same way about devoting so much time to the business, but that Elizabeth and I turned out okay and Amy would probably be okay as well.”

Indeed, Amy has been working alongside her mother and shepherding the store—a building that’s really four houses joined together over the years—through a new round of physical change. Gone is the old 1970s-era barn-style storefront; in its place, a sleek aluminum-and-limestone facade. But Amy is mindful of preserving the store’s character inside the building: warm, comfortable, the kind of place where a teenage guitar nut can come in and gawk—and not at all like the gleaming big-box music stores of the suburbs. “It’s always going to be Arthur’s,” she says. “We don’t want to change much on the floor. We want people who used to come here to come back and see things where they remember them.”

Those who knew Amos Arthur know that he didn’t start a music store because he loved being a businessman; he did it because he loved music. Those who know his daughter and granddaughter can say the same about each of them. “I’d much rather sell you the guitar that’s perfect for you than sell you the most expensive thing on the wall,” Amy says. “We focus on music and musicians instead of people and their money.”

For years, Linda says, industry peers have told her she could run a much bigger and more successful business, “if I just did things the way everybody else does.” But Linda shrugs off the advice.

“My dad passed on several generations of happy customers, and I’m quite satisfied to keep doing business the same old trite way: Be fair, treat everyone well and have fun.” ●