

Surgical Instruments

Shadyside surgeon Leo McCafferty enjoys a self-proclaimed obsession with guitars.

BY SARAH TUTHILL | PHOTOS BY MELODY FARRIN



Dr. Leo McCafferty at home, strumming one of his 63 guitars.

It's said that if doctors suffer from an ailment, they rarely admit it. But Dr. Leo McCafferty, an aesthetic plastic surgeon with a private practice in Shadyside, happily confides that he has G.A.S. "It's Guitar Acquisition Syndrome. It's a real thing," the doctor insists with a laugh. "Once you get hooked, you have to control yourself."

McCafferty presents with multiple symptoms—63 of them, to be exact. His collection of signature model guitars is one of the most extensive in western Pennsylvania and includes models signed by the likes of Eric Clapton and Sir Paul McCartney. While most are kept in a

humidity-controlled room in the basement of his home in the South Hills, he always has a few handy at his office in Shadyside Place on South Aiken Avenue.

"I like to have a few guitars around. I find it relaxing," says the surgeon, who is also a clinical assistant professor of plastic surgery at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. "And I'll play when we celebrate birthdays and other occasions here at the office."

McCafferty believes it is natural for a surgeon to take to this popular string instrument. "There is an interface between the two," he says, "something about the artistic

side of the brain that relates to both. I find it to be a two-handed process, just like surgery. You have to learn how to think for your left hand."

Though McCafferty grew up in a musical family—his grandmother was a concert pianist and his grandfather played the violin—he was more focused on sports than music lessons in his youth, as well as later while earning his medical degree at Temple University. So on the day he purchased his first guitar more than 15 years ago, he'd never played a single chord.

That day was September 11, 2001. McCafferty's practice, like many in the area, awaited victims of the crash of United Airlines Flight 93 to be transferred from Shanksville to Pittsburgh.

"As we all know, they never arrived," remembers McCafferty, referring to the absence of survivors. On the melancholy drive home, he found himself in front of a guitar store he'd passed hundreds of times. "I don't know if subconsciously I was thinking, 'Now is the time,' but I'd thought about taking up guitar for years and I figured 'Why not today?'" So he purchased an Alvarez classical guitar, sparking his current passion for both collecting and playing.

"I'm sort of self-taught," he explains, "but I got a lot of help from Frank Cappelli" of the Emmy-award-winning musical TV series *Cappelli & Company*, which aired on WTAE-TV for many years.

It wasn't long before Cappelli felt his protégé was ready for "a good guitar," so McCafferty's second purchase was a Martin, made by the Pennsylvania guitar manufacturer known to be one of the best and oldest in the world. McCafferty says that's when the obsession began. "I became fascinated. I started looking closely at guitars—at all the details and craftsmanship, at the different types of woods that are used on different parts of the guitar, and how they affect sound," he goes on.

McCafferty and Cappelli enjoyed getting together and went on to form a group called The Monongahela Duck Club Band, playing both rock and folk music. They have performed at venues in the Strip District and Shadyside, as well as at Shadyside Hospital's staff dinners and talent show. ("I think we came in second," he says proudly.) The band still plays from time to time.



Although McCafferty keeps a few guitars on hand in his Shadyside office, most are stored in the humidity-controlled environment of his home basement.



Each guitar case is labeled to identify the instrument inside. In the foreground are signature editions for Graham Nash and Johnny Cash.



This D-28 Martin with peace signs and spectacles commemorates the 75th birthday of the late Beatle John Lennon. It is one of only 75 released.



McCafferty's most prized guitar is the Epiphone Texan signed by Paul McCartney.

Performing aside, it is really the instruments, the musicians who play them, and the associated trivia that enchant this collector. For example, he cites McCartney, who “loves his Hofner Bass because the guitar is symmetrical. He was left-handed when he started, so it looked good whichever way he played,” McCafferty expounds. “Once you start learning all of this, it’s like a whole new world, a subculture.”

While many collectors focus on vintage guitars, McCafferty favors newer signature models like the D-28 Martin released last year to commemorate John Lennon’s 75th birthday. “This guitar was used while writing the Beatles’ *White Album*,” he notes. “They only released 75 of them, so I really had to finagle to get one.” Complete with a signature by the Lennon estate, the guitar can go for over \$10,000. “You can spend a lot of money,” he admits, “but unlike automobiles, their worth won’t depreciate.”

McCafferty acquires his guitars through reputable dealers like Acoustic Music Works on Murray Avenue in Squirrel Hill. “He has some exquisite stuff, some very rare instruments,” McCafferty says of shop owner Steve Miklas.

Because the Beatles top his list of favorite bands, it’s no surprise the surgeon’s favorite guitar at the moment is his Epiphone Texan, signed by McCartney. “It’s a reissue of the one he used when he played “Yesterday” on *The Ed Sullivan Show*,” McCafferty says. “In fact, McCartney pulls out that guitar every time he plays “Yesterday” in concert, because he has it tuned just for that song.”

Though he says his collection will never be complete, McCafferty has instituted a strict protocol to manage his G.A.S. “Now if I want to add a guitar,” he says, “I have to let one go.”

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