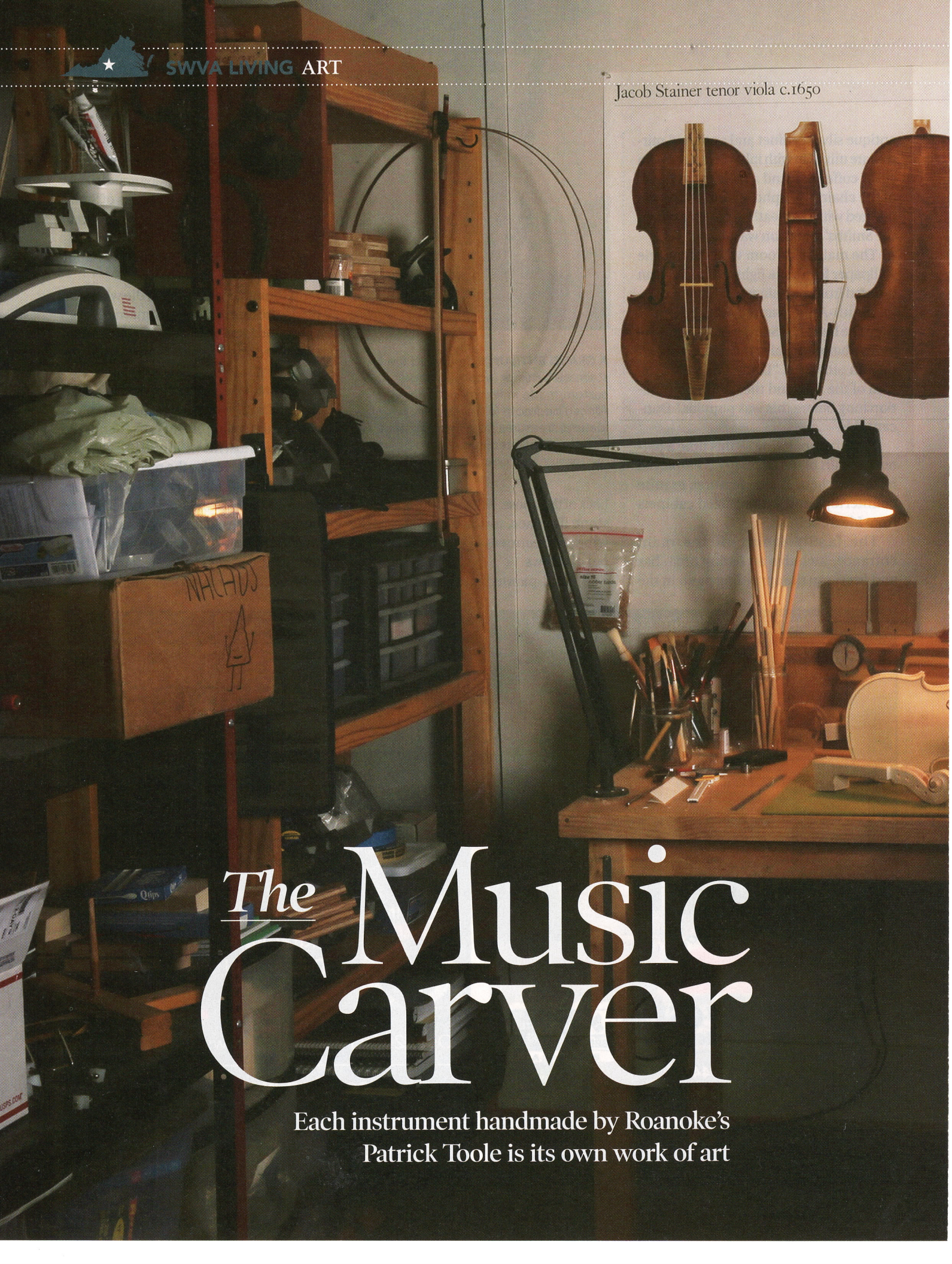

The Music Carver

Each instrument handmade by Roanoke's Patrick Toole is its own work of art

CRAFTSMAN OF NOTES
Patrick Toole makes each of his violins, violas and cellos by hand. Even the varnish is his own recipe.

Story by CHRISTINA NIFONG | *Photography by* STEPHANIE KLEIN-DAVIS

Patrick Toole reaches for the exact gouge from the stair-step collection perched atop a hand-hewn workbench. He scrapes a perfect trough, then another, curls of soft, European wood collecting on his table.

Half a morning, he will work this way. Two task lights are trained on his carving while the rest of his basement studio stays dim. The hum of the humidifier, the patter of his favorite podcast are the only sounds aside from artist sculpting scroll from block.

Toole is a maker of violins, violas and cellos. He creates elegant instruments played by up-and-coming musicians up and down the East Coast. And he does it entirely by hand — every curve, every cut, every bend and every hue are rendered by his chisel, saw, mould and brush. His varnish is stirred from scratch.

As such, he is a member in a worldwide fraternity, hundreds of years old, where mastery is passed down to maker, where practice makes perfect, where an instrument can command tens of thousands of dollars — or more — but a tiny error can affect its very purpose: to be one with its player, producing the finest sound the two of them can make together.

To be a luthier is to be a perfectionist, to value precision above everything. It's a calling that suits Toole.

"He's a natural," says Holly Toole, Patrick's wife, who has known him since their first weekend of college. "He is meticulous about quality. Such a detail guy."

Books have been written, films produced about the art of instrument-making. It's a practice trapped in time, dependent on trees of a certain species, using techniques nearly 500 years old, requiring exquisite skill and incredible dedication.

Toole takes around 200 hours to make a violin, from the moment he planes his piece of wood until he coats it with a molasses-thick varnish.

Then he hand delivers his instruments to shops in North Caro-

CALLED AWAY FROM CODING In college, Toole left computer science for fine arts, where he fell in love with woodworking. Later, he enrolled in violin-making school in England.

lina, Maryland and New York, where they sell for $9,000, $12,000, $24,000.

Toole crafts stunning sculptures, yes, but the shaped wooden box must also sing and bend and sway with its player.

Yet while Toole's mother was a voice teacher, while he has played the saxophone, penny whistle, mandolin and tenor banjo for most of his 35 years, while he shows up each Monday night at Lews Restaurant in Roanoke to perform sessions of Irish music, Toole does not play any of the instruments he creates.

LEARNING HIS TRADE

For Toole, it was not music but wood that made him a luthier.

He grew up in tiny Liberty, South Carolina, at the knee of his grandfather, Glenn Scales, a World War II U.S. Air Force mechanic-turned-banker. Though he lived 40 minutes away, Scales took Toole into his woodworking shop and taught him to saw and carve and lathe.

"We would set and whittle cedar. I can't remember not doing it," recalls Toole. "He's the one that got me working with my hands as a very young child."

Toole entered Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina, intending to be a computer science major, but quickly switched to fine arts. During the next years he tried his hand at drawing, silversmithing, blacksmithing, frame-making.

Somewhere in the swirl of uncertainty of what to do with his life, Toole intuited that he'd rather dance with wood than dominate metal. That he preferred process over creativity, precision over philosophy. He determined he'd like to make tools, but the kind that were a work of art themselves and would be used to produce beauty.

So he entered The Newark School of Violin Making in Nottinghamshire, England.

"I pretty much spent all day, every day at the workbench," he says.

BEHIND THE MUSIC Toole's workbench is lined neatly with the tools he needs to practice his trade. A peek through an f-hole on the front of the violin offers a view of the violin maker's signature.

He was at school with a hundred other students from around the world. Together, they mastered the building of bridges and scrolls and fingerboards, the application of glue and varnish and strings.

"The violin makers would sit around and look at each other's instruments and say, 'I would take a quarter of a millimeter off here,'" recalls Holly. "I mean they would literally talk in fractions of millimeters."

The Tooles returned to the States for Holly's job as a lab research assistant at Rutgers University-Newark and for Patrick to repair instruments at a big shop in New York. There, he made valuable contacts, collected real world experience, and learned he'd rather work for himself, following in the footsteps of his father, a phamacist who owned his own business.

So when Holly was accepted to the Translational Biology, Medicine, and Health Program at Virginia Tech, Toole phoned Roanoke artist Ann Glover, who found a studio for him in the same warehouse where she worked. And he opened Toole Studios, specializing in repairs, restoration and instrument-making.

TALENTED AND TRUSTED

It's rare to find a violin maker in a city of Roanoke's size, even one with Southwest Virginia's affection for fiddle music.

"You don't expect to find someone of his skill level," says Leah Wiley, a voice instructor and professional singer, wife of Roanoke Symphony Orchestra musical director David Stewart Wiley and mother to two musicians.

Wiley was one of the first folks Toole met when he moved to town. She eased his entrance to Roanoke's classical music scene, introducing him to a respected cello teacher in Blacksburg and inviting him to speak to the Roanoke Symphony Orchestra.

She has taken many of her family's instruments to Toole for maintenance and repairs.

"Your instruments are like, you know, they're like your children," Wiley says. "You wouldn't trust them to just anyone."

Toole has relocated to Aurora Studio Center in downtown Roanoke and is limiting his repair orders to give him more time for instrument-making. It's a sign of his success.

Toole is quiet. Matter-of-fact. Plain-spoken. He's an aw-shucks kind of guy quick to tell you it's not that impressive what he's doing. But in his guarded, understated way, he does let on how pleased he is with the way everything is turning out.

Sitting at one of his two workbenches, looking up from the scroll he is carving, he says simply:

"When you do something like this," he nods back at his table, "it's all you care about doing." ★