

LIFE

Amplifying life

By JOHN FOYSTON | THE OREGONIAN

“At work I have to have technical justification and documentation for everything I do. Here, I don’t have to justify a thing, and I don’t have to plan, either.”

Niels Nielsen

Doubtless there are excellent reasons why Niels Nielsen and members of the Valiant Vacuum Tube Collective sometimes wear fake-fur fezzes and affect Eastern Bloc accents, but after a couple of hours with him, you realize that this is a fine time to be a little less linear.

“This is great,” said ringleader, bass player and longtime Hewlett-Packard engineer Nielsen (his name is one of those on the earliest patents for the disposable thermal inkjet print head) as he met us at the door of his Corvallis home.

“You know how stuff falls into old pianos and organs over the years? Well, look what we found in an organ we just took apart.”

He held out an age-yellowed index card besmooched with two voluptuous lipstick prints. “Is sign from Didi!” he said in his best “Borat” accent. “Most valiant!”

That would be Didi Gospodinova, the vanishingly obscure Bulgarian pop singer who has a shrine in Nielsen’s garage, two songs on a Bulgarian pop cassette called “Songs of Tryavna” and no known photos.

“Oh, I Google her name every month, but I’ve never turned up an image,” said Nielsen. He’s wearing a black leather cap with earflaps and a red star (and has dozens more hats in the house, as well as the makings of several new fezzes — and a handwritten registry, with serial numbers, of all those who have been given fezzes).

“It’s just as well, really. This way we can imagine her as 170 kilos of Balkan joy.”

Meanwhile, you’re trying to imagine what that long, low, covered shape in the yard might be — and whether those really are Sidewinder missiles peeking out from under the tarpaulin. (Mere replicas, as it turns out; turn signals for the Aero-Trike, a motorcycle-powered three-wheeler Nielsen is building using the fuselage of a crashed experimental airplane.)

We haven’t even gotten into the garage yet. It’s there that he stores the components — amplifiers, preamps, tone generators, speakers, wire, capacitors, switches, plugs, chickenhead knobs, fuse holders, tube sockets and



Niels Nielsen builds great-sounding amps with tubes and components scavenged from old organs. Vacuum tubes are cranky anachronisms in a digital world, but they still reign supreme in guitar and harmonica amps — solid-state amps sound cold, dry and lifeless compared with the bourbon-and-honey warmth of a great tube amp.

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vacuum tubes — he reassembles into artful guitar amplifiers built into old console radios and vintage luggage.

The parts are harvested from bulky old electronic organs, record players and other obsolete electronica in operations he calls organ flensings — summer days when Nielsen's driveway is filled with several donated organs and collective members armed with chain saws, electric screwdrivers and joyful abandon.

Nielsen describes the Collective as the most informal of groups, "from all walks (and some crawls) of life who share a passion for cheap, do-it-yourself thrills involving glowing tubes and high voltages."

Pastor Mitch Bourgeois of Lebanon is one of Nielsen's informal acolytes. "About three years ago, I bought one of his amps," Bourgeois said. "Then I decided, 'Hey, I want to build one myself.' Now I've got an organ in my garage in an advanced state of disassembly."

It can be worse, said collectivist Lorne Bradshaw. "One of the signs that you have a problem," said Bradshaw, "is when you find yourself pulling tubes out of an organ dumped in a farmer's muddy field."

Especially when the local nickel paper advertised at least one organ — presumably not dumped in a field — for free, Nielsen said. Which still leaves the threat of Organ-Induced Divorce Syndrome, which is when a spouse cannot open the car door in the garage without hitting a stack of electronic gear. It happens: Nielsen's wife now requires that two pieces of gear leave the garage for every new piece that arrives.

But the anarchic joy of fiddling with quirky analog technology in a streamlined digital world is just as real to these guys as it is to the John Deere enthusiasts up the road at Antique Powerland or the volunteers who keep Portland's huge steam locomotives purring like 435-ton cats.

"I spend my days fussing with inkjet printers where you need a microscope to see what makes them work," said Nielsen, as he hefted a toolbox-size tube amp scavenged from an old Hammond organ.