Reader
SD WEEKLY

Calendar
MUSIC SCENE

Bows 'Til 3:00 A.M.

Chicago, says Gohde, is a great violin town.

INTERVIEW
STEVEN SHEPHERD

It began in Chicago. There he was born in 1953 and there at the age of 14 he first learned to play bass guitar. "There's always a need for bass players," says Greg Gohde, and by the time he was in college he was playing seven days a week with different bands.

College also brought a dispute. "I wanted to be a music major," says Gohde (pronounced GO-dee). "But my dad wouldn't hear of it. He said, 'You'd better go for bookkeeping.' We got in a big argument about it, so we had to compromise: I had to take half music courses and half business."

The music curriculum included a required class called String Instruments. Designed for future high school music teachers, the class involved learning to play the violin, viola, cello, and double bass — all in eight weeks. The premise was ludicrous, but Gohde loved the result. "This teacher comes in and says, 'We're going to learn to play simple songs.' And she gave us all a violin that belonged to the school — nothing great — but that's when I had my first violin.

"I was around 20 or 21. And I just fell in love with that violin. When I had to give it back, I really didn't want to. And it was at that point that I decided to play the violin." He first tried teaching himself, but soon began taking lessons, and that, he says, is when "I started to see how demanding it was and how mysterious — and I wanted to pursue that. So I basically quit playing the guitar and just started playing the violin seriously — three, four hours a day, sometimes more." Ultimately, he switched to viola, preferring its tone.

All this was in Chicago. Chicago, says Gohde, is a great violin town. Not only is it home to the world-renowned Chicago Symphony Orchestra, but it is probably the foremost place in the country after New York in terms of players, teachers, shops, and makers. Gohde began to enter this circle, and among the people he met was an older man he calls somewhat mysterious. His age is unknown — "He won't tell anybody," says Gohde — but he was probably then in his 60s. Gohde was 23.

August Olshovy was a violin maker who had come from Poland after the war. Gohde began hanging out in his shop — talking, watching, and having a good time, and Olshovy would show him the instruments he was making. The effect was intoxicating.

"I was inspired," says Gohde, "because I'd talk to him and say, 'Do you do this every day?' And he goes, 'Yeah, every day.' Seven days a week he gets up, goes to his workshop, and works on his instruments. It didn't matter if it was a holiday or not, he'd work on his violins. Because that was the main love of his life: He loved to make instruments.

"And I thought, 'Geez, that is a great thing. I'd love to be able to do that. To be into doing something where I could just get lost in it.' You start doing it and you can forget about a lot of things, and just focus on that."

But Gohde's focus was not yet sharp. He tried to learn violin making from Olshovy, but says his friend "was not a good teacher. He'd show me stuff and I'd go home and try it and he'd say, 'Oh, this is terrible.'" Then, in September 1980, the two made a road trip. Gohde was going to Minneapolis to buy a viola bow — he was frustrated, had acquired a day job (counterpoint to Olshovy's passion), and had decided artistically to give up everything else and concentrate on the viola. "I was tired of playing in bars and things. And I said, 'I'm going to just practice the viola and get good at it. I've got a nice viola, I'm going to get a nice bow.'" Olshovy went along to look for a cello bow.

They drove the ten hours to Minneapolis, bought their bows, spent the night, drove home, and it wasn't long after, says Gohde, that they were sitting around Olshovy's house, "eating dinner or something, and he says, 'You know, you should think about making bows.'" There were three professional bow makers then in Chicago, and Olshovy told Gohde, "You're more talented than they are. You could do better than them."

"And it just shocked me."

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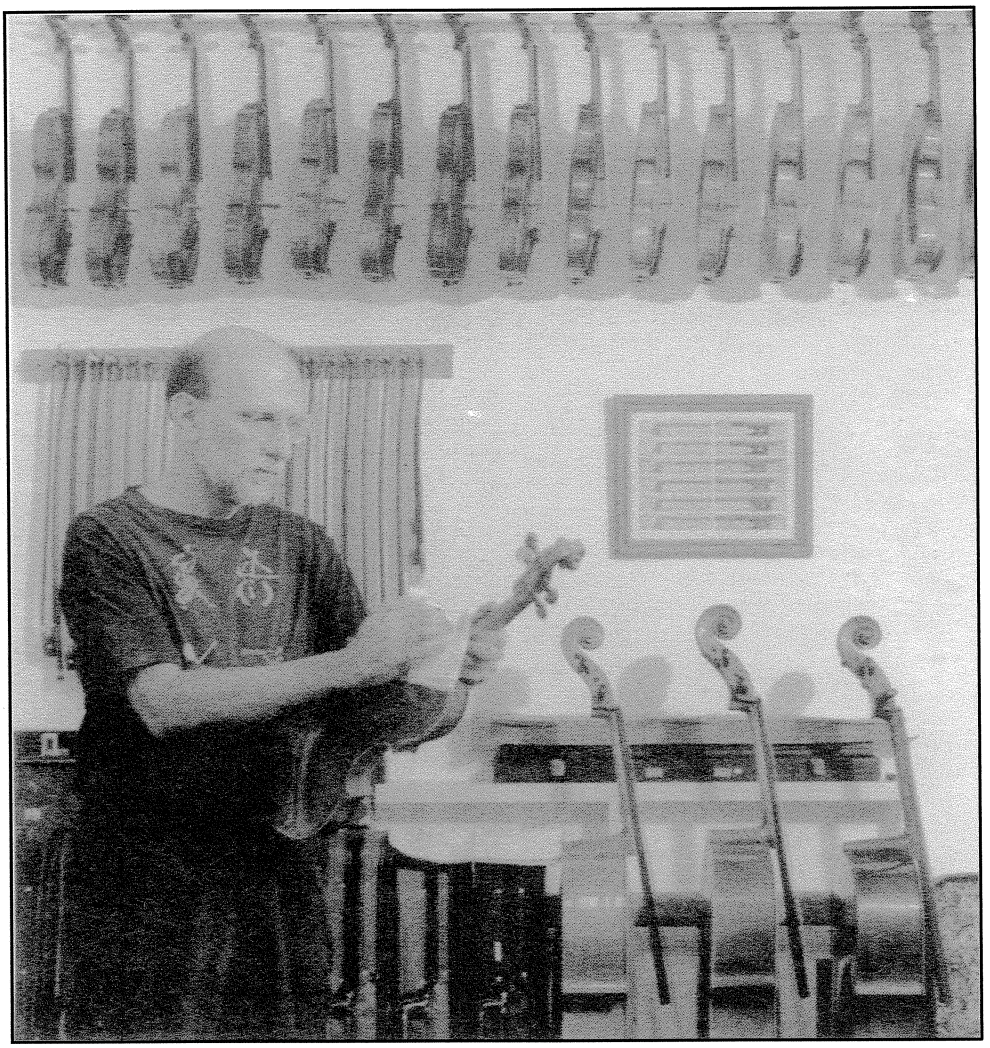
A bow is not an incidental part of a string player's equipage. Players will speak of a bow's ability to "pull a big tone," and ideally a bow will complement the instrument on which it is used — enhancing strengths while minimizing weaknesses: a mellow bow, say, for a too bright instrument. The bow, says Gohde, vibrates in harmony with the in-



Greg Gohde

strument. The vibrations pass through the bow hair and the stick, "And if everything's vibrating well, it makes the instrument much more lively." Moreover, it is through the bow that a musician expresses emotion. Anyone, said the 19th-century violinist Eugene Ysaÿe, could manipulate the left hand, but "the right hand is the artist." Gohde resolved to make the right hand's tool.

But it would not be easy. None of the makers in Chicago would teach him. "They just laughed and said, 'Get out of here.' They didn't want to bother." A year and a half he searched, and not un-til 1982 did he find a maker in England willing to take on a student. He had enough savings for a three-month apprenticeship, but before going he first had to arrange a leave of absence from his job in a hospital data-processing department. "I went and talked to the supervisor, and he said, 'I'd be a real asshole if I didn't let you go and pursue your dream. So go on. But let me know if you decide to stay, because I'm going to look like a real fool if you never come back.'

"So I went to England, to this little town. And there was this family that rented me a room, and I'd walk over every day to the bow-making shop and hang around and learn how to make bows, then go back home and read a book or play the fid-dle or something. So it was a nice relaxed summer, but the main focus was to go for these lessons."

At summer's end he returned to Chicago with

a new craft. But before he could practice it, he first had to make his tools. A bow is made almost entirely with specialized hand tools, and almost none can be purchased at the local hardware store. Gohde set up shop in his father's basement and spent a year and a half making tools. Many are near works of art themselves, meticulously made and still used daily by Gohde today. There are surgically sharp carving knives, their blades shaped and ground by Gohde, their handles smooth to the grip and made of exotic woods — teak or flame maple, "Made from an old violin neck." There are chisels, planes (milled by a friend from solid blocks of steel), wooden templates called spring boards (used to establish the curve of the stick), and a collection of brass cutouts that give the distinctive head shapes used by the great makers of the past — among them Tubbs, Peccatte, Pajoet, and François Tourte. (Tourte, 1750–1835, the most famous of them all, is to bows what Stradivari was to the violin. In 1988 a Tourte bow with gold and tortoise-shell fittings sold for $145,000 at auction — the most ever paid for a bow.)

Eventually Gohde put his tools to work, quit the hospital, and began making bows. But still he remained unsettled — moving in and out of his father's basement, in and out of studios and workshops in Chicago, and, in 1984 and '85, back to his old teacher's shop in England. There he made bows that were sold worldwide. And there he experienced one of his greatest early thrills as a bow maker.

He had made a viola bow for a friend in Chicago, and she in turn had sold it to William Schoen, a violist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and someone Gohde calls "a really fine musician — one of the big people that I admired." Schoen loved the bow, and when he found out who had made it he wrote Gohde a letter: The orchestra would soon be in England on tour; could they meet? — he'd like to look at more viola bows. Yes, said Gohde, certainly. So Schoen took the train to the town where Gohde lived, "to our tiny workshop," and he bought another bow. "And I was completely ecstatic. Because here was someone who was a big star in my eyes, and now he owned two of my bows. And he was just so pleased to meet me, I couldn't believe it."

It was probably also as a result of the Schoen bows that Gohde later made what may be his masterwork. He was back in Chicago, he says, when he got a call from one of the violinists with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. "And he came over and he says, 'I want you to make me a violin bow. Here's my Pajoet. I want one like this, but just copy the head. The rest of it just do whatever you want.'

"So I copied it, took some measurements, and made the bow. And I call him up, said, 'Your bow's ready,' and he came over, looked at it, paid me, took it home. He loved the bow. He took it to orchestra rehearsal — this is the Chicago Symphony rehearsal. Within 24 hours I got four more orders for bows. Everybody wanted that bow. I mean, every time the phone rang it was another musician wanting another bow. It was a lot like writing a hit song, because that bow was a hit. That was an exceptional bow. Everyone loved it and that's what they wanted — a clone of that bow."

But, says Gohde, nobody can clone a bow. Other than the new carbon fiber bows, bows are made of natural materials — mostly the dense, reddish, and increasingly rare pernambuco wood from coastal Brazil. Wood varies from stick to stick and each bow is a unique combination of form and materials — one of a kind. Neither Gohde nor anyone else could make that same bow again, and some of the players who ordered in that rush of enthusiasms were inevitably disappointed. But even so, says, Gohde, that bow "certainly put me on the map as far as the Chicago Symphony went. Be-cause after I made that bow a lot of people heard about me. It was a great bow."

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In 1986 Gohde had the opportunity to study with William Salchow, whom Gohde calls the "dean" of American bow makers. Salchow's reputation began in the late 1950s when he won a Fulbright scholarship to study the methods of Tourte and the other French masters in the French bow-making capitol of Mirecourt. Since then Salchow has made highly prized French-style bows in his New York workshop, and in the mid-1980s he began teaching the techniques he'd learned to American bow makers in a series of summer workshops in New Hampshire. By now, says Gohde, probably most American makers have studied with Salchow.

The diffusion of this training has no doubt contributed to what many agree is the superb state of American bow-making today. For Americans, says Gohde, "It is probably the best time." The makers are skilled and command good prices (most sell their bows for $1500 to $3000; Gohde's sell for $2600). They are young and likely only to get better. Moreover, says Gohde, many are friends: "A lot of the bow makers I know are about my age. They all seem to have come out of the '60s and the hippie generation — rock and roll and stuff — and a lot of these guys were into guitars;

maybe they made guitars, and that got them on the road to bow making. One of my friends used to make roach clips; that was his start in metalwork, and now he's a bow maker. Anyway, we're all pretty much on good terms" — and one result is that ideas and techniques spread freely.

Gohde estimates there are 100 full-time bow makers in the United States today. Of these, he places a dozen on the West Coast and half of those in the Seattle-Puget Sound area. "It's amazing how many great bow makers there are there. They're living on these islands and all these secluded places. And they're, like, 'I don't want to be bothered. If you want to come see me, make arrangements, but don't come knocking.'" Gohde knows of one bow maker in San Francisco and another in L.A. And there is one in San Diego — Gohde.

Gohde moved to San Diego in 1989 after having once again found himself in his father's basement. In 1990 he opened Classic Bows in Golden Hills, and today the three-room shop has much the feel of a classic European violin shop. In the front, violins and violas hang in windows and from the walls and ceiling. Cellos stand on the floor. A glass sales counter houses wooden parts for instrument repair — pegs and bridges, chin- and tailpieces, ebony fingerboards. A postcard display ranges from the comic to the erotic (a woman seated in shadow, cello upright between bare lighted legs, her hand drawing the bow — slowly, one imagines, pulling that big note). A wall rack offers Brazilian-made student bows, and the new Coda carbon fiber.

Everywhere, the walls are adorned with pictures, posters, and memorabilia, much of it collected during Gohde's many travels to the great violin- and bow-making centers of Europe: Mittenwald, Germany; Cremona, Italy; Mirecourt. And everything has a story. There is a poster of the *Messiah* Strad, so named because Stradivari is reputed never to have sold it, so great was the instrument's sound and workmanship, and long did the world await its coming. There is a photograph of Gohde dressed in coat, tie, apron, and hunter's hat, mimicking the Victorian bow maker James Tubbs, whom Gohde calls, "my bow-making idol. He was from London, very eccentric, and a prolific drinker — he was really pretty good at that." But he made great bows. And there is a photograph of a longtime violin-maker's shop in Prague, in which worked a man whose father had made a violin owned by Gohde. "I had a photo of it. And I went in there and he couldn't understand English, and I couldn't speak Czech very well, but I showed him a picture of his father's violin. And he saw it and his eyes lit up. He knew what it was."

In the back of Classic Bows is a studio, where prospective buyers try out bows and instruments. And in the middle is Gohde's workshop, his inner sanctum, where he has special lights and a special air filter and where, he says, "the only people that come in here are people that I allow to come in here." Here he keeps the hanks of white Manchurian stallion hair he uses for rehairing. Here he keeps the bows he himself has made. Here he keeps his tools. And here, against one wall, he keeps August Olshovy's old wooden workbench, brought from Chicago when the old man finally retired.

Also in this room, Gohde keeps a green accountant's ledger book — legacy perhaps of the path his father would have had him follow. In the book are row upon row of neat, handwritten codes and numbers. Together they describe each bow Gohde has ever made: its style and dimensions, materials, country of destination, price, and a unique identifier that tells the year the bow was made and its sequence of creation that year (1st, 2nd, etc.); the number is branded into the wood along with the name of its maker: G.GOHDE.

So far, Greg Gohde has made 213 bows. Lately his production has slowed, but it isn't for lack of work. It's because the other demands of his shop take his time — he does everything, he says, including sweep. These days, he opens the shop at noon, works till closing, walks home for dinner, then returns. "During the day," he says, "I'll work. But in the evenings is when I can really work. Because I don't get interruptions. Usually I work at least until midnight, but sometimes I'm here till three o'-clock in the morning, working."

He's not complaining, though. Like August, he is doing the work he wants, the way he wants to do it. "I would do this even if I wasn't paid for it," he says. "But since I can get paid for it, this is the way I can make a living. It just took a long time to figure out." ■