

# Carbondale blacksmith moves west, moving up

## Works at 46-year-old forge

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Axel Stewart has arguably hit the big time: His handiwork will soon be seen by multitudes. He's making a living as an artisan without having to wait tables or take on a "day job." And his colleagues have taken to calling him "The Wizard."

Stewart's wizardry is performed on metal. A local who grew up in Carbondale, graduated from Yampah Mountain High School in Glenwood Springs and attended Colorado Mountain College, Stewart now lives near Lake Tahoe.

Stewart is affiliated with Mountain Forge, a family-owned blacksmith shop that is located in Truckee, California, where it has been turning out architectural and ornamental metal works since 1968. A couple of months ago, Anton Josef Standteiner, one of the owners of Mountain Forge, asked Stewart to lend a hand with "The Band."

"It's really his baby," Stewart explained. "I was called in to forge instruments for a jazz band — a sculpture of a jazz band. It's a piece of art that will be at the base of a big new skyscraper." The metallic sculpture depicts an abstracted jazz ensemble, and each "band member" in it will measure four feet wide and 10 feet tall. Once installed at 535 Mission Street in San Francisco's trendy and growing South of Market area, it will be surrounded by public seating — thus, Stew-

art's musical instruments will be seen by thousands each day.

### Blacksmithing start

Stewart began to learn blacksmithing here in Carbondale, which like the town of Tahoe City where he now lives, is a hot spot for artisans who find clients in a nearby, high-end resort area. Stewart took a beginning blacksmithing class from the late Francis Whitaker at Colorado Rocky Mountain School, and then later apprenticed to one of Whitaker's students, Jonathan White, who owns the Royal Forge here in Carbondale.

Along the way, the Carbondale Council for Arts and Humanities awarded a grant to Stewart. "That grant bought my plane ticket to Europe," Stewart recalls. "I went to Germany for six months and I worked with three different blacksmiths. I learned a lot, that's for sure. The blacksmiths in Germany are connected to an ancient trade, passed down for generations. That was a very good experience."

Stewart's relocation to Northern California came about accidentally. "I had a friend who moved out this way and offered a home to stay in for a visit. I jumped on it and cruised out here, not planning to move," he recalled in a telephone interview. "I was ready to get away from the valley, and I was offered a job here. I worked for that shop, Hunter Metal, for about two years."



*Axel Stewart learned his first blacksmithing lessons from the legendary Francis Whitaker, and then later studied in Germany before bringing his talents back to the Roaring Fork Valley. These days, he can be found at Mountain Forge in Truckee, California. Courtesy photo*

Continuing, Stewart said "I feel like more often I'm a craftsman than an artist. Craft has sort of been lost, but it's making a comeback. It has to do with making things with your hands, things that are functional and can be used. Things that are not made in China, but are made in our own back yards. That's a valuable thing. If you know people who do that, and you can take advantage of it, you should."

Stewart says he has drawn ideas from working with other blacksmiths and from looking at the work of famous metal workers. "It sometimes comes from talking about ideas or from taking an idea giving it your own twist. You're trying to copy it, but you're also trying to style it in your own way."

"That's where the craft comes in. A craft is art that has been around for centuries. It's a craft that they figured out a long time ago, and to continue doing that craft is a commitment to past blacksmiths. The art side of it is to make it original."

"I guess I get the most satisfaction out of making smaller items, gifts," Stewart added. "I make little sculptures and knives. I make a lot of my own tools too. I will make a hammer and then use it to make something else that's really neat."

And what about the nickname he has acquired? "They call me The Wizard around the shop," he muses. "I just work magic on metal. I don't know ... I guess maybe they call me that because whatever it is, I can figure out a way to make it happen."