

The Register-Guard

SECTION **G**

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Team Editor • Mark Johnson
38-2468 • mjohnson@guardnet.com

Oregon Life

Books • Travel

Walk on the wild side

Cancun and the Riviera Maya have much more to offer than beaches and parties. **65**

Inside

The Writer's Art **64**

Best-sellers **64**

Weddings **67**

Birth To Three **67**

TV Daily **68**

A craftsman keeps the rare art of shoemaking alive in Eugene



KEVIN CLARK/The Register-Guard

Rick Roman works on a shoe in a shop set up in the garage of his south Eugene home. He also teaches tango and yoga in a living room that he converted into a dance studio.

Sole proprietor

By MARK BAKER
The Register-Guard

The last comes first. It's an old shoemaker saying. It's the block of plastic or wood, the last is, shaped like the inside of the shoe that's going to become one with your foot. And Rick Roman has a bunch of them in the garage-

turned-shoemaking shop of his south Eugene home, an entire "last library," from sizes 7 to 14, in widths from 3A to 3E. "Having a last that fits you is like having a block of gold," Roman says. "You know it's going to fit. Then you can really focus on making a quality shoe."

At age 55, Roman finds himself doing something that screams Old World, some-

thing he never imagined himself doing. Something, perhaps, no one else in Lane County is doing alone: making shoes.

And not just any old shoes — sturdy, high quality, stylish shoes you'd pay a small fortune for in, say, Rome. Not that Roman's are cheap. If you want a pair, be prepared to shell out at least five Benjamins, as in \$500. But the few customers who

have bought his shoes since Roman started this risky venture a couple of years ago say it's well worth it. Especially if you tango.

Happy feet

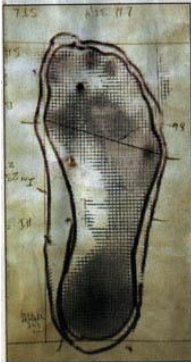
"It was totally worth it," says Nolle Rainbow of Newport, a retired art teacher, of her custom-made, black, high-heeled tango boots. "They're just perfect. My feet are happy."

Roman's operation is called Romango Shoes, a combination of his last name and "tango." An avid Argentine tango dancer since his mid-40s, Roman's

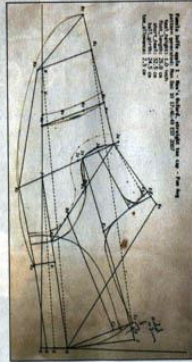
Please turn to SHOES, Page G2

ROMANGO SHOES

What: High quality, custom-made dress and dance shoes
Contact: www.romangoshoes.com; 968-2441; rick@cotse.net



A pedagraph shows the shape of the foot and where the weight lands.



A master pattern is used in creating the geometric design of the shoe.



A pattern piece is placed on the leather to mark the area to be cut out.



A last is a form that can be customized in making a fitter's model.



A powder outline marks the area to be cut out of the leather.



This completed oxford made with water buffalo leather.

G2

THE REGISTER-GUARD OREGON LIFE SUNDAY, JANUARY 27, 2008

Shoes: Craftsman believes there's still a need for handmade footwear

Continued from Page G1

interest in shoemaking can be traced to the sexy South American dance, he says. Shoes are important to dancers — the fit, the look, the performance.

"Dancers are always talking about their shoes and their feet," says Roman, who teaches tango and has converted his living room into a dance studio with hardwood floors and a floor-to-ceiling mirror. "They have a hard time finding good shoes, and they want sharp-looking shoes, too."

First a chemist and then a computer programmer at west Eugene biosciences company Molecular Probes for 13 years, Roman says he became less and less fulfilled in his work there, especially after it was sold to California-based Invitrogen in 2003. He began to look for something else to do. "I didn't want to be hunched over a computer the rest of my life," he says.

A friend and fellow tango dancer, Greg Estes, gave Roman a copy of "Handmade Shoes for Men," by Hungarian shoemaker Laszlo Vass. The book describes the art and craft of shoemaking and the few artisans worldwide who still practice it.

"That kind of piqued my interest," Roman says. Then he took the risk. He quit his job. He now supports himself by teaching



Creating high-quality shoes is a far cry from Rick Roman's previous jobs as a chemist and computer programmer.

says. Just don't call him a cobbler. The correct term for a shoemaker is cordwainer. Cobbling refers to a shoe repairman, or someone who

he'll take a full cast of a foot and then add material to turn the cast into a last by taking a polyurethane sock and filling it with plastic cast material.

cess that can take days to get just right, he says.

Roman has bought several used pieces of equipment to build his homemade operation. He found a 1940s-era

for the man. Next to the pedagraph is a shoe pattern with markings that say "heel height" (1.0), "foot length" (26.25), "short heel" (32.5), "ball

I'm not trying to make a million dollars here I'm just trying to do something I feel good about."

RICK ROMAN
CORDWAINER

Seal Rock is another fan of Roman's shoes. His wife bought him a \$900 pair of burgundy and blue oxford wingtip dance shoes for his birthday last March. VanCreveld uses them only for dancing.

"They're great," he says. "They look good, they fit me well. And I dance better in them."

He often gets comments about them in tango class. "My shoes are the talk of the town," says vanCreveld, who has extra-wide feet, as in 4E. "It's tough to find shoes that don't pinch my feet."

Before he became a cordwainer, Roman says he was mostly a guy who wore sneakers. In fact, he still does. But his appreciation for fine shoes has grown. Immensely.

Once, he says he may have asked himself, "Who would buy a \$900 pair of shoes?" Now, if he walks into a store and sees such a pair, he thinks: "Oh, my God, this is such a beautiful shoe."

"I just enjoy the intellectual part of it," he adds. "It's

KEVIN CLARK/The Register-Guard

tango and yoga, and doing some occasional contracted computer programming. He began making shoes a couple of years ago after attending the Shoe School for a week in Port Townsend, Wash. That's where Roman made his first pair, a "crude pair" of casual shoes, he says. Burgundy and black leather, it — the one he has left — looks like a bowling shoe. He's not sure what happened to the other one, he says, laughing.

Deborah Healey, a long-time friend who bought one of the first pairs of shoes Roman made, says it's been inspiring to watch the process he's gone through.

"It's a leap of faith," says Healey, the director of the English Language Institute at Oregon State University. "It's just been such a neat thing because he so enjoys it and it's so different than what he was doing."

After studying with a couple of master shoemakers in the Netherlands, and with noted bootmaster D.W. Frommers II in Redmond, Roman has now made an estimated 60 pairs of shoes and sold about 10 of them, most of which have been dance shoes for women.

"I also make a lot of pairs of shoes for myself so I can vet the fitting process," he says. He's also made shoes for his partner, Pam Joffe, whom he lives with, and his daughter, Zoe, a University of Oregon student.

It takes him a couple of weeks to make a pair, so he figures he could do a couple of pairs a month, or about 25 a year.

"I'm not trying to make a living," he says. "I don't have huge (financial) requirements."

Men's dress shoes, oxfords and derbies are now becoming his specialty; shoes with heavy-duty construction, meant to last 20 years, he

clumsily cobbles something together.

"There was a time when it was an insult to call a shoemaker a cobbler. I'm not insulted," he says, grinning. The term cordwainer has its origin in the word "cordovan," which was a reddish leather produced in Spain. Hence, one who worked with cordovan was a cordwainer.

Made in Eugene

Shoemaking was one of the most common occupations of a young America, but the industrial revolution of the mid-19th century brought an end to that. By the mid-1800s, mass production of shoes by factories that could do the stitching — once done by hand — put many cordwainers out of business. American shoe manufacturers today are few. In 1968, 21 percent of U.S. shoes were made overseas. Today, it's 98 percent, according to the American Apparel and Footwear Association. And 84 percent of U.S. shoes are made in China.

Factories make cheap shoes with rubber or plastic bottoms, says Roman, who believes there's still a need for quality, handmade shoes that will last years.

For people with unusual foot sizes, buying shoes is difficult because manufacturers make a limited number of sizes. Consumers tend to have a lot of trouble getting a good fit buying in a store, Roman says. The shoe industry uses standard sizes or widths, and profits are maximized by making common sizes — but most feet fall somewhere in between those standard sizes.

After selecting a last that fits the foot as closely as possible, Roman then adjusts it by adding or subtracting material from the last — for which he charges \$150, included in his \$500 base price — until it's customized to the foot. In difficult cases,

A "titter's model," a pair of test shoes, is then made from the last in a few hours. This confirms the fit is correct.

"At that point, I get pretty confident I can just adjust the last," Roman says.

Next, the style and leather are selected. He orders cow, calf or water buffalo leather from distributors all over the country. The leather is cut and the edges decorated and folded.

The upper parts of the shoe are sewn together on a sewing machine, a process called inseaming. The insole is made from thick, moisture-absorbent vegetable-tanned leather. It's formed to the bottom of the last and the upper part is stretched over the top of the last and attached to the insole in a step-by-step process that ends with hand stitching the upper part to the insole.

A steel shank is attached to the bottom of the insole to make the back portion of the shoe solid. The outer sole is glued and sewn on.

The heel is made by stacking pieces of leather, typically four pieces, with "butt" leather, Roman says. That would be the derriere of a cow. It is soaked in water so it's pliable, then hammered so it's nice and hard. The heel is finished by placing a "top lift" piece that has been ordered from Italy. That's why many of the bottoms of his shoes say "Made in Italy." His few customers know better — they know their shoes were made right here in Eugene.

Or maybe "Made in Garage" would be more appropriate?

The talk of Seal Rock

Roman sits on a stool and stretches leather over a last that sits on an inseaming jack. This is the most time-consuming process of making a shoe, a five-or-six-step pro-

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