



Bethel musician Spencer Lewis, 50, plays guitar next to a stone wall that he built himself with rocks he found on his property.

VALLEY NEWS — EDMUND FOUNTAIN

## Bethel Resident Spencer Lewis: Fashioning a Life of Music and Stone

BY TOM HILL  
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WHETHER YOU KNOW IT OR NOT, you've probably heard the soothing, acoustic tunes of Spencer Lewis. Not on the radio, not at any major music festivals. But the soft-spoken guitarist and fiddler from Bethel — who has released 14 CDs on his Quartz Recordings label — is a ubiquitous presence in a couple of dozen neo-rustic retail outlets in Vermont, New Hampshire and upstate New York.

The Vermont State Craft Center in Windsor, the Unicorn in Woodstock and Fool on the Hill in Quechee are the closest places where Lewis' music adds to the ambience. His "listening stations" also can be found at the Vermont Country Store in Weston and Rockingham.

"I always knew that if I could get headphones on someone's head, if they hear, they'd buy," Lewis says, hunkered in the small, funky shed that serves as his studio. Deep in the woods, close beside his comfortable home on a winding dirt road and cluttered with recording gear, Quartz Recordings won't be the subject of an MTV documentary anytime soon.

"In the end, the music sells itself," Lewis says, noodling on a Taylor acoustic guitar. "I always had the knowledge that in 15 seconds, someone's gonna tell if they like it or not. So you've got to be able to get it to 'em."

This he does, at sophisticated displays from Blue Mountain Lake in New York to Zeb's General Store in Conway, N.H.

"The cool thing about running your own business is, it's as creative as any song you might write," says Lewis, who will open for Carol Noonan tomorrow at Middle Earth Music Hall in Bradford. "You know when people say to musicians, 'Oh, you guys are creative; we're not'? I don't buy that. I think it takes a lot of creativity to sweep a floor. It takes inspiration to sweep a floor."

Lewis' newest release, *Song of Stone*, is a departure from much of his earlier work, most obviously in that for the first time he fronts a trio with a name: The Thruftrers — "a band,

Lewis says, "that never plays a song the same way once." (A thruftrer is a stone set into a wall to hold other stones together.) Mandolin player Dan Haley and bassist Scott Paulson had backed Lewis on *The Healing Distance* (2001); he formalized the ensemble to better realize his vision of "baroque folk music" in a "classical-slash-folk chamber group."

Though he composed the tunes on *Song of Stone*, he credits Haley with creating many of the melodies and Paulson with "really dynamic bass parts."

"The trio is a really cool," he says. "It's different than a quartet, and they're different than duos. There's kind of a bouncing energy."

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Born and raised in New York City, Lewis struggled with classical violin as a child. He first picked up a guitar when he was 13, and was drawn to traditional, Appalachian-style picking. He was never a technical prodigy; sitting around campfires at a traveling environmental school, he "learned the art of being invisible."

"The main key is learning to do with what you have," he says. "I know there's guitar players and violinists who can do circles around me, but it's all in how you put it together that makes something work."

After high school, he ambled up to Vermont, where his parents had connections in Wilmington — home of Mount Snow, a ski town full of bars. Well-versed in the oeuvres of such singer-songwriters as John Prine and Kris Kristofferson, Lewis was able to find steady work.

After a couple of years of that, he decided he wanted to find "the real Vermont." Heading north, he wound up in Waterville, in the boonies northeast of Burlington, "where I lived for 10 years, and befriended all the locals — the natives, and the old guys, and ended up getting a draft horse, cutting firewood," Lewis says. "When I look back, I realize that in a way it saved my music," he reflects. "You always have that impulse to say, 'I've got to make a living playing music; I've got to get in every bar I can get into.'"

Through the '70s and '80s, "I just embraced cutting wood,