

## Northern Exposure : How many guitarists can fit in a nook north of the Panhandle?

- [Sam Whiting](#)

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Michael Fiorentino discovered the guitarists' nook north of the Panhandle when six members of his New Jersey rock band, plus dogs, were sleeping in the parlor of an 1893 Victorian.

Close quarters broke up the band, but Fiorentino, 36, stayed with the house and he now has the parlor to himself. By night he is the lead guitarist of Viv, an Americana/Brit-pop band that plays 150 nights a year and has two CDs out.

By day he teaches lessons in the parlor. He's popular with kids just starting out. It helps that since he was a kid himself he has been nicknamed "Pie," for pie-face, and it's more accurate now that his head is shaved. Pie teaches both violin and guitar, though more students take guitar. "Learn five chords and you can play 3,000 tunes poorly," is his sales pitch.

If he needs business, all he has to do is sit on his front steps and start strumming. That's all it takes to find bandmates, too. Within one square block of his porch, at Lyon and Fulton streets, live three professional bands and probably twice as many garage bands. Around here a neighbor who pounds and clangs at a drum kit is never a nuisance, just "somebody practicing their art," says Pie.

The Haight stands for hippies and hangers-on. The pan-flat strip between the panhandle of Golden Gate Park and Fulton Street is for hard-working bands. It is dense with dark Victorians for rent. As it turns out, their narrow front rooms form perfect studios, and the requisite fainting room, for women who couldn't take the tightness of their corsets, is right-sized for a music library/waiting room.

The high ceiling and mahogany wainscoting makes Fiorentino's \$100 Yamaha sound like a Martin. "One of the best recording places is right about here," he says, standing in the hallway where Viv did a vocal track for its latest CD, "Flawed."

It is a night musician's duty to spend daytime in greasy diners, guitar stores and Laundromats. Pie has all three within short walking distance, which is important, because he hasn't owned a car in 10 years. He's down the stairs and on the street in the Saturday morning sunshine, even though his head didn't hit the pillow until 3 a.m., after headlining the Great American Music Hall.

On the corner, Pie runs into his downstairs neighbor Doug Diboll, a "semi- retired taxi driver." Asked what it is like to live below three musicians, Diboll ponders the questions and answers, "Sometimes my music bothers them at 4:30 in the morning."

On the opposite corner is 1598 Fulton, occupied by "12 or 14 people who do tons of music." On the first Sunday of each month a sign announces "the Cabaret." "There's music, there's spoken word, anybody who has something they want to do," Pie says. "It's like a variety show."

Three blocks down, Pie passes hipsters sunning at sidewalk tables in front of Cafe Abir. "We don't really have time to be hipster," he says of Viv, which runs its own label and production company -- Ten Toes Over. "People hang here eight hours at a stretch."

Across Divisadero is Eddie's Cafe, a corner breakfast joint known for Southern-style cooking by Korean Americans. Eddie's has nine counter stools and six booths, but it wouldn't be the place to spend eight hours on a Saturday, with hung-over nightclubbers stacked outside in desperate need of fried eggs and grits.

Farther down Divisadero is Pie's favorite venue, the Independent, formerly the Kennel Club. "They have an incredible sound system and the nicest lighting rig in the city," he says.

Turning right at the 76 station on Fell Street, he stops in at Panhandle Guitars, just to imagine the possibilities. Dangling from the ceiling are vintage Fenders and on the wall is a poster for the first Beatles concert in North America -- Washington Sports Arena, Feb. 9, 1964. It would make a match with the poster for the Beatles last concert, but the owner behind the counter doesn't know that happened at Candlestick Park on Aug. 29, 1966.

Squaring off his walk, Pie passes the Department of Motor Vehicles and stops to admire the entrance, which is only slightly more inviting than the county jail. "What's even better is when you get a place in line and they say come back in an hour and you can go home," says Pie, who did this when he got his California ID card.

Near home he passes the place where Gina Lagatore, one of his former students, used to live. A few months after starting lessons, she dropped the violin but picked up Pie. Now she lives in his old Victorian. That's Lagatore meets Fiorentino. Try finding a song lyric to rhyme with that.

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