



## RETOOLING

### THE ANCIENT CRAFT OF WOODWORKING

Article by Marie Penn, based on an interview with Steve Casey

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“At that **POINT** in my life, I ate, slept, and **DRANK WOODWORKING**. *That is all I did...* I went to **GALLERIES, SHOWS,** and **museums** and cornered any woodworker I could *talk to.*”

Although fine craftsman Steve Casey had been taught early on that you won't get anywhere overnight, nothing prepared this entrepreneur for the life lesson he learned firsthand: when your livelihood is invested in the ancient craft of woodworking, it can take anywhere from a decade or more before you can catch a glimpse of your dreams coming true. Steve Casey, who picked up the trade at age nineteen and opened his own business three years later, has been on the artistic journey to worldwide recognition now for thirty-three years. “When I started my woodworking career, there was a renaissance of craft. There was an energy happening when I got involved. It was just amazing,” remembers Steve. “Everybody was into it. Everybody wanted stuff. And I thought that kind of thing would always continue.”

But like any trend, interest faded off into the background, leaving fewer and fewer craftsmen behind who can make a living. Yet despite the difficulties, Steve continues to push forward designing custom wood projects, focusing on home theaters and fine cabinetry as well as signature art pieces. “It is a very different market today. It's always a challenge, always a struggle,” he adds. “But I am doing it. I have made a major commitment here. I'm all in. I am too much into this to give it up now.”

This work ethic is nothing new to those who watched Steve grow up. Perseverance was a characteristic he always possessed, reflected most clearly in the hobbies he partook in as a young child. At twelve years old, Steve enrolled in a summer school shop class and turned an average bicycle into a working chopper, despite his teacher's skepticism. At age fifteen, he rebuilt his first car, blown engine and all. “I started doing pretty big stuff for a little kid. It just came naturally to me,” Steve reminisces. “And I remember those being defining moments in my life, just knowing that I could do my thing no matter how daunting the task.”

Long before woodworking ever crossed his mind, Steve's first love lay in metal work, and his stash of bikes in the backyard foreshadowed his dream of becoming a motorcycle mechanic. Unfortunately, Steve had a tough time landing a job in the field after high school, and ended up in a factory doing production work instead. “I was absolutely bored to death,” he reveals. “I remember thinking that there was no way I was ever going to end up being forty-five and still working at this factory.”

The job was the incentive this nineteen-year-old needed to figure out what he wanted to do with his life, although his direction was still unclear. In need of



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a hobby to counterbalance work and his social life, he enrolled in a woodworking class at the adult night school. “I wanted to challenge myself, so I thought I would take this class because I didn’t know anything about it,” explains Steve. “When I started, I was like a fish out of water. Metal working and woodworking are very different.

“I was getting very frustrated in the beginning,” he continues, thinking back to his first project. “I was making a little shelf for my brother, and it was not coming out right. I couldn’t figure out how to mill this wood to the thickness and dimensions that I wanted. I didn’t know what I was doing.” He contemplated leaving the class and never coming back, but ultimately stuck with it. Before long, he was staring at a fully assembled shelf.

The young craftsman pushed on with more projects, moving from simple lines and shapes to a table with turnings and carved legs. “In the middle of that project, the instructor asked if I ever thought about doing this for a living,” he recalls. “He thought I had some natural talent, and suggested I might investigate doing woodwork as a career. That kind of set the light bulb off.”

Encouraged, Steve enrolled at Cal State Northridge college and moved quickly through their woodworking program. “At that point in my life, I ate, slept, and drank woodworking. That is all I did,” describes the craftsman. “I went to galleries, shows, and museums and cornered any woodworker I could talk to.”

His first public exposure, and coincidentally his sale, came during a group exhibition show. “People were two or three deep just gawking at my wooden zipper sculpture like it was the most amazing thing they’d ever seen,”

narrates Steve. “At 10 A.M. that first day, a woman approached me and asked how much it cost. I didn’t even know that I could sell it!”

A year and a half after that fateful field trip, Steve pooled resources with another student and rented a 1,200-square-foot industrial space for a woodworking shop. “He was working on his separate business, and I had my own thing. But we shared the equipment, the space itself, and the rent,” discloses the craftsman. By the seat of his pants, Steve started working on original sculptural pieces and art furniture, and launched his career at twenty-one years old.

As the businessman gained real-world experience, he realized the original sculptures that he so enjoyed weren’t enough to keep food on the table and a roof over

his head. Steve soon focused his attention to fine casework and custom furniture. “It wasn’t so much about the physical work or my wonderful sculpture or my wonderful chair. What was really important to me was to be in a situation where I was creative every day,” he analyzes. “The work almost became secondary.”

When Steve separated his artwork from his career, all the puzzle pieces started falling into place. “My ultimate goal was to be able to set myself up like my mentor Sam Maloof did, which was to have my house and shop at a location where I was literally

walking across the driveway to my shop and to raise my family,” he reflects. “We eventually got to this place. We found this fabulous piece of property, and then a year later, I was actually able to build my shop. I was thirty-one years old and living my dream.”

His niche quickly narrowed to designing, fabricating, and installing home theater solutions. “Home theater furniture was the one custom piece that regular people seemed to need and really couldn’t find in the market place because there was no way for a factory to do what needed to be custom,” describes Steve. “Every

job I do is very different from the next. And I am pretty adept at deciphering criteria and giving people what they want within their budget—and having it integrate into their space, almost to the point where you can’t tell I was there. It just belongs there when I am done.”

The craftsman merges multiple factors together when planning a custom piece—from the lighting and speaker arrangement to marital disputes over how much equipment should be left showing. He then devises a design and builds the piece from start to finish. “We hand-build all the parts and assemble the whole thing in the shop. Once that is done, we’ll typically take it apart and do the finish work on it,” Steve illustrates. “I will reassemble it to make sure everything fits properly after the finish is done, and then break it down one more

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time to carefully load it into the truck.” At the job site, he and his longtime assistant, Alex, permanently install the furniture seamlessly within the existing space.

Steve is a fan of using modern, contemporary materials for the interior of the structure (which adds to the stability and durability of the piece) before applying the exterior finish in the wood of choice. “I hand-select all the material for each project myself because I am very particular about how it is going to look,” he notes. “Part of what I believe I am getting paid for is making that extra effort and matching the grain, getting the colors right, and doing my craft. So I take that pretty seriously.”

Although this high quality work has kept Steve afloat over the years, the recent market changes have left the businessman staring at a crossroad once again. Not only are advances in technology making home theater systems virtually obsolete, but appreciation in hand-built items is falling to the wayside. “Woodworking is becoming less valuable. As unfortunate as that is, it seems to be the way of the world,” admits the craftsman reluctantly. “There needs to be a cultural epiphany

where we start to recognize that our strength is in our art and our craft. Maybe then we’ve got a shot.”

Undeterred, Steve opts to continue doing his small part to keep the craft alive. “I think that is the hardest thing to do. I get discouraged with it. There are many times in my career when I want to throw in the towel,” he reveals. “But I think back to what Sam Maloof once told me—whatever you do, don’t give up; you’ll be successful because that is what it takes. You just have to keep working at it.”

This is why you’ll still find Steve Casey in his shop working just as hard as he did when he first went into business—his current focus is set on becoming accessible to a wider range of customers. “For years, I have wanted to put an internet store together and get back into doing original work that I started my career on. The effort of the store is to make my signature pieces accessible,” clarifies Steve, who recently released a line of puzzle sculptures and squiggle leg tables. “For me, I am just going to keep on keeping on.” [AL]

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