



STEPHEN HART & THE
dichotomy
 OF ART

By *CB Wismar*
arts@mainstreetmag.com

The piano chords are strong, decisive, and fully resolved. The music echoes through the beautifully designed and constructed home perched above the Housatonic River in West Cornwall, CT. When the clear baritone voice sets the melody and lyric above the chords, the entire space is filled. It may be winter outside, but inside transcends seasons and the music soars well beyond geography.

Stephen Hart is a bit of an enigma. In a world of entertainment where individuals with multiple talents are referred to as “hyphenates,” we’ve become used to the writer-producer, or the actor-director. Stephen is a musician-builder ... not a distinction often heard. True to other hyphenates, he is an expert in both.

Finding his passions

Born in San Francisco his family moved to Sharon, CT in the mid-60s. Beginning with that cross-country trek, Hart’s career has

been a peripatetic one. Growing up in the Northwest Corner of Connecticut with strong family ties to several of the local towns – among his family’s connections, a long line of executives with Stanley Tools – he came under the instructive spell of Paul Padua in the woodshop at Housatonic Valley Regional High School and fell in love with the wonders of wood.

After spending some formative years in this area, he found his way to a family home on Martha’s Vineyard and began building boats, doing cabinetry, building furniture, and working on the construction of houses.

But through it all, there was the undercurrent of a second love. Music. Stephen Hart was maturing as a musician. A drummer, he formed musical connections with a group of performers that included keyboard player and vocalist Paul Thurlow, who gravitated toward reggae, the “feel good” music that emerged from Jamaica in the mid-60s and was noted for its counter rhythms – just perfect for a budding drummer.

A life on the road

When, in the mid-80s he and his band, “Ululators!,” won a music recording contest, the hammers, saws

and chisels were set aside and the intoxicating mysteries of live musical performance took over. Recording contracts led to albums which naturally led to tours crisscrossing the country.

Stephen followed his muse into music and joined that unique fraternity of performers who move from town to town by day, playing clubs and concert halls by night, only to pack up and do it again and again. “It was a five-year tour,” recalls Stephen. “We played 270 shows a year.”

That kind of grueling schedule can take its toll on the most dedicated performers. “We got ‘road rash,’ for sure. We lost some members of the band ... replaced them and kept going.”

After five years, however, it was enough. Time to step back from the demands of constant travel and performance and return to his other love – wood. The celebrity population of Martha’s Vineyard seems to bring with it a hunger for new and better, and Stephen stepped into that world with a vengeance. He built houses, barns, cabinetry and fine furniture for a clientele that included actor Tony Shalhoub and celebrated late-night host, David Letterman.



Above top: Hart’s home in West Cornwall, CT. Above: Hart at the piano. Opposite page, top to bottom: Hart’s custom-built kitchen in his home. One of Hart’s custom-built furniture pieces.

The tug of war

Like any artist, however, there was the constant struggle between two very different forms of communication. Additionally, there was also the tug of war going on between Martha's Vineyard and the Northwest Corner. Family was here, so Hart created the bridge between Chilmark and West Tisbury on one hand and Sharon and West Cornwall on the other.

He has made the effort to shift his focus "back home," and has found success in several projects, including working on the mountain top home of John Brett and Jane Strong in Sharon. He remains somehow torn, however, by the fact that significant work seems to beckon from the island. "I want to be here," he says wistfully, "but every season there seems to be a reason to go back to the Vineyard."

House on the hill

The house he has built for himself in West Cornwall is a grand example of the craft and care that Stephen Hart brings to a project. No corner, no finishing piece, no selection of fine woods appears to be an afterthought. From the overall design to the way one moves from one space to another, the effect is to witness an intense belief in meticulous craftsmanship.

Well placed within the house is furniture Stephen has crafted. His love of woods – the contention that

fine craftsmen have that the wood "speaks to them" – is quite evident. There is respect for the grain and the contrasts between types of wood, contrasts that take a chest and turn it into an artistic statement.

Have trailer, will travel

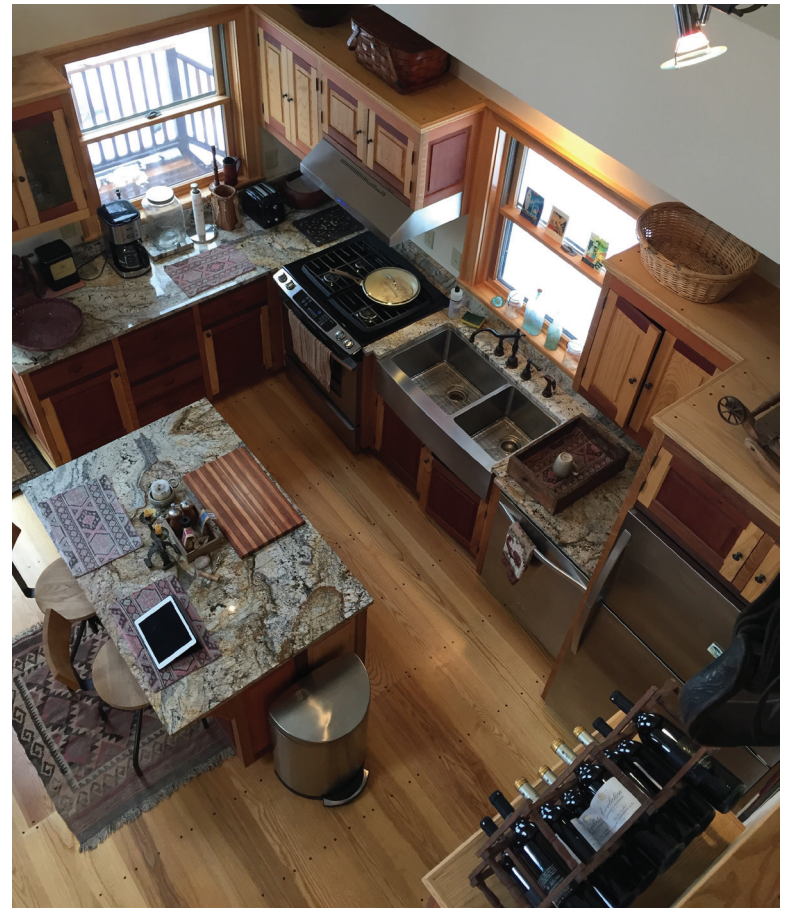
"It's not been easy" reflects Hart. "I had hoped that a reputation in one area would translate to another." Although there are several representations of his custom work in the area, the restlessness and discovery continue.

Of course, there's still been the music. When the "Ululators!" disbanded, Stephen's love of music and performance did not go with them. The first floor of his West Cornwall home is a recording studio that he designed and built himself. Balanced for optimal sound and wired to handle the control boards, microphones, and digital recording equipment needed to turn performances into presentations, he has created a work/live environment that allows him to serve that master.

Working with like-minded local Connecticut musicians, Hart pulled together a reggae/rock fusion band, "Mojo Nectar," that has performed locally and assembled a strong CD.

Rules of the road

Well aware of the demands on a burgeoning group – the time and effort it takes to build a musical



reputation – Stephen discovered the fact that a local band playing local dates is one thing, but investing the time to play wherever, whenever a promoter sets a booking is something quite different. These aren't the 80s when the band was "footloose and fancy free." There are families to consider, and "day jobs."

After playing dates on Martha's Vineyard, at the old Colonial Theater in Canaan, CT, at Club Helsinki in Hudson, NY, and Infinity Hall in Norfolk, CT, the band is "retooling" as Stephen terms it. Local guitarist Jeff Kennedy and Stephen form the core of the redone "Mojo Nectar" with additional band members being added. And while the river flows past the encroaching ice and winter takes hold, the dichotomy of being a musician-builder rages within Stephen Hart. He's added facility with several instruments to his musical repertoire. There will always be the drums as the solid foundation. Self-taught, he's also mastered the piano, the guitar, and the Native American flute.

The recording studio on the first floor calls as a new composition begins to take shape. But then, the phone rings and an inquiring voice wants to talk about a potential project. Here or there. Martha's Vineyard or Salisbury. Reggae or rock. For Stephen Hart, the tensions that are so much a part of being an artist continue. ●

Stephen Hart's construction, finish work, and furniture can be seen on his website, www.hartcustombuilders.com while the "Mojo Nectar" album can be sampled and downloaded at www.mojonectar.com.

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