

Vessel flutes come alive in the hands of native son

■ Spencer Register creates ocarinas for an international market.

By WALLYCE TODD

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In the farm fields of Columbus County, soybean plants rustle in the summer wind and flowers bloom near an inauspicious white vinyl-sided garage that sits separate from the house it serves. Bushes line the drive of a home that is obviously cared for and lived in; the grass stays mown and all the shrubs are well tended.

The door at the back of the home opens and a young man walks out, face contemplative but smiling and a sense of purpose measuring his gait. In a rural area known for its agricultural heritage and its southern hospitality, a unique business is finding success, compliments of God's creative gifts and the World Wide Web.

Spencer Register is a multi-talented native son, the only child of Carlton and Valerie Register of Whiteville. He was born and reared in the county named after the intrepid explorer Christopher Columbus and shares a distinctively similar quality with the man who set off to accomplish one task and ended up exceeding expectations by completing another.

As a teenager, Spencer was just a regular guy, noted as gifted by his teachers for his music and art, yet with a respectful reserve not necessarily common for his age. Intelligent and courteous, he was nonetheless like most any other teen who was drawn to a popular



Spencer Register performs on one of his custom-made ocarinas.

pastime – video games. The Christmas he was 12, he received “The Legend of Zelda.” While learning to excel at this game, Spencer, like

Columbus, made an accidental discovery that has had a rippling effect around the world.

One of the game's characters

– Link, an elfin warrior – played an instrument that had a powerful mystique brought to life via its soaring and melodious tones.

Internet research led Spencer to discover the Italians called the woodwind instrument an ocarina, which means “little goose.” Americans would later nickname it “sweet potato” for its tubular shape and sweet sound and for the fact that it looked like a yam with a mouthpiece.

A decade later, Spencer designs, creates, plays, sells and distributes these vessel flutes known as ocarinas around the globe. The quality of the instruments is so high that he is asked to ship them to far-away places such as England, Australia and Hong Kong.

Even in recent days, he continues to work on designing a more efficient mould, one that will enable the speed of production to be increased while not decreasing the quality of sound.

Over the years, as Spencer created these high-caliber instruments of clay, he has made improvements on the design to the point that he has a U.S. Patent Pending for his ocarinas because his design improves the tonal quality of the upper range of the instrument.

Of particular note, he has just produced a CD entitled “Ocarina

Hymns,” which according to its jacket cover, highlights Spencer presenting “unique interpretations ... of a stirring blend of contemporary, classical and Celtic styles. Soaring over an atmospheric backdrop of harp, piano, strings, guitar and percussion (much of which Spencer, himself, played), these timeless melodies will leave you peaceful and inspired.”

The journey Spencer takes from his studio to his home each day is a short one. The journey he has taken as clay in the hands of his Creator who is allowing him to be an artisan businessman with worldwide appeal is proving a potential to be long and fruitful.

Spencer appeared on *The 700 Club* (2008) and at the CBN Partner's Event (2009).

Video clips can be viewed on his website. Spencer will be performing during the worship service at Happy Home Baptist Church on Sept. 13 at 11 a.m.

All are welcome at the church, located at 2670 Happy Home Road, Nakina.

Editor's Note: As it says on Spencer's website, while visiting www.spencersocarinas.com, one can “explore the history of this unique instrument, listen to and purchase Spencer's music, and browse the collection of handcrafted ocarinas currently available from Spencer's studio.”



The business of it all

What's unique about your business in Columbus County?

Well, for one, my business is almost exclusively online. There is no market for obscure folk instruments in Columbus County, so without the Internet and a worldwide marketplace, I wouldn't be able to do what I do.

The business itself is unique in that I'm among just a handful of people who make a living with handcrafted products, especially on the single proprietor level. It's the most basic and traditional type of occupation but it seems to be the most rewarding.

Why e-Bay?

I have found the auction format to be the most practical way to offer my work to the public for two main reasons. As with any other type of artwork, it is difficult for me, the artist, to put an exact value on each piece.

Instead, I let them go for what the market is willing to pay for them. Secondly, auctions allow me complete control over my stock. I will never be back-ordered. I can list ocarinas as they are available. This is ideal for handcrafted work that cannot be mass-produced in large numbers.

What's your favorite part of your studio?

I would have to say the kilns are the most exciting part of the studio. Opening the lid the morning after a firing and seeing the finished version of what I've worked so hard on is really an experience like no other.

Where do you get your inspiration for design elements of your ocarinas?

My ocarinas are based on the traditional Italian form, which was later modified in Japan. As with any instrument, acoustics has a big influence on shape. With the ocarina, the more curves, the better. It's a closed ves-



In his studio, Spencer creates his special brand of ocarinas.

sel aerophone, so it's oddly globular in appearance. It looks like an elongated egg with a mouthpiece and tone holes.

Because the instrument is based on a hollow vessel, many craftsmen, especially those in ancient times, took liberties with the shape.

Many Native American ocarinas were made into animal forms like birds and turtles. As the ocarina developed into a more “serious” musical instrument, many makers adopted a more streamlined, simple form.

As for colors – I just use what appeals to me and what I think would appeal to most people. Some people like the vibrant gloss glazes and some prefer more muted, earthy tones, like the color of an unglazed, smoke-fired pottery. So I produce both.



Rolling out a 10-pound brick of “wedged clay.”

Making an ocarina

Clay is wedged by hand, similar to kneading bread. This removes air from the clay and makes it workable.

A 10-pound “brick” of wedged clay is placed on a slab roller and rolled out to an even 3/8-inch thickness.

The clay is cut into several smaller pieces that are each pressed by hand into a handmade plaster mold. The mold produces two halves of the ocarina vessel.

The pieces are assembled using a clay slurry adhesive and are left long enough to dry to a leather hard state.

The voicing and windway is carefully cut and aligned and the ocarina is fitted with precisely sized tone holes.

The ocarina is left to dry for at least 2 days. It is then tuned for A=440Hz concert pitch with an electronic tuner.

Ocarinas are bisque-fired for several hours in a 1900 degree F kiln. A vibrant shell of gloss glaze is applied to the ocarina and it is fired one final time.

A final check for tone quality and tuning stability and the ocarina is complete.

Spencer Register