



# JERRY BENNETT

## SCULPTURE THAT RESONATES

Betty J. Scarpino

*Photos courtesy of Jerry Bennett.*



*Opening Act*, 2009, Yellowheart, mahogany, steel, brass, 10' x 4' x 3½' (3m x 1.2m x 1m)

"Several years ago on Bourbon Street, I stepped into a musical wonderland of totally improvisational, unscripted, emotional sounds. Super-talented guys made a direct connection between their souls and the music they were playing. The audience, including me, was swept right along. My rudimentary efforts at playing the guitar would never be the same, nor would my concept of music." —Jerry Bennett

**A**coustic panels greeted me as I entered Jerry Bennett's expansive studio. Music filled the room as he selected a CD from a stack of his own works. I had been aware that music informed the expressiveness of Jerry's segmented sculptures, but over the course of my three-day visit, I would learn so much more about how music plays a role in what makes Jerry Bennett one of woodturning's most innovative, interesting makers.

Our first encounter, though, happened at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, during the second Segmenting Symposium in 2010. As editor of *American Woodturner* at the time, I was there to become better informed about a subset of woodturning little known to me. Jerry, his wife Peggy, and I sat together on benches just outside Arrowmont's dining hall, soaking up sunshine and talking for the better part of a morning. As our conversation deepened, I wondered, "Why hadn't I previously known about Jerry and his artwork?" Then, and even more so years later, four reasons would surface: Jerry is modest, he was somewhat of a newcomer, segmented turning was not well understood or appreciated within the larger turning community, and segmented turning had not yet experienced the innovation that is evident today. During that morning talk, I discovered and enjoyed the magnetic, positive personality of Jerry Bennett.

### From guitar picks to bowl gouges

When Jerry was nine years old, a door-to-door salesman offering steel-guitar lessons knocked at the door of the Bennett family residence. Jerry eagerly petitioned his parents and to his delight, they agreed. From that opening note on, music infused Jerry's life, although more so during some periods than others.

Recording music became a passion, and Jerry ultimately built a world-class recording studio in the Houston area. After years of playing music, he was ready for a change in direction, and change he did, but not in a direction he expected. A friend had given Peggy a special pen he made from a pecan tree that was taken down at her high school, and right away she wanted to learn how to turn. Jerry's reaction at the time: "I am not the least bit interested in turning wood; I've always liked working with steel." In response, she replied, "Well, we're going to do it anyway," and so they did. After turning a candlestick, a natural-edge bowl, and a lidded box, they were hooked.

Out of curiosity, they attended an area woodturning symposium, now called SWAT (the Southwest Association of Turners). An art talk given by James Johnson of Kerrville, Texas, changed everything for Jerry. James displayed the most creative works the couple had ever seen. He presented the unlimited creative possibilities of wood and turning, along with the story behind his art. His talk lit a path to a creative new world. Eventually, the guitar pick in Jerry's front pocket would face serious competition from the gouge in his back pocket.

### It's all in the armature

In our meandering conversations, many of Jerry's comments piqued my interest. One example: "Don't consider what art is, consider what it can be. All those deceased artists were *experimenting* with art, not writing a bible defining it. It is okay for us to go our own way. Concrete definitions lock a person's mind into thinking within boundaries. I imagined no boundaries with

wood and turning. I imagined a sculpture very tall, uninhibited in form, flowing like glass and seemingly supported by an unseen force. The solution turned out to be the centuries-old armature. An armature, however, has to be incorporated correctly and a few experiments led to a way to accomplish it." Synchronicity comes to mind when I mentally review the various elements that ultimately came together for Jerry to conceive and execute his towering ten-foot-tall sculpture, *Opening Act*, in 2009. It has traveled to all borders of the United States over the last ten years and shows no signs of wear.

The results of Jerry's design efforts are exemplified very well in his 2013 piece, *Twist and Shout*, pictured on the front cover of this issue but best viewed "in the round." As viewers walk around the sculpture, the relationship of each loop to all of the other loops, as well as to the instrument from which they flow, continuously changes, resonates, harmonizes, ▶



*All My Roads Take Me Home*, 2019, Mahogany, steel, dye, lacquer, 13" × 9" × 13" (33cm × 23cm × 33cm)



*Orange Blandy*, 2007,  
Maple, ebony, brass,  
22" x 12" (56cm x 30cm)

*Rockin' Round the Christmas Tree*,  
2018, Mahogany, maple, Corian®, steel,  
brass, aniline dye, acrylics, lacquer,  
20" x 8" x 10" (51cm x 20cm x 25cm)

all the while encircling negative space, a reflection of the quiet spaces within musical pieces. With his ability to visually express music flowing through a room, Jerry carefully composes the placement of each curve from all points of view, with the help of Peggy's critical eye. The result



is akin to a musical ensemble's song, yet in Jerry's case, it is a three-dimensional optical delight.

With that said, however, Jerry does make vessel forms, and brilliantly so; *Orange Blandy* (2007) is one example. As you might imagine, his version of a segmented vessel is distinctive. Conventional segmenting usually incorporates patterns in a piece by using different woods. Jerry's designs are centered on shape. The segments only provide a sense of texture. "Sometimes there is a lot of trial and error before getting it right. That is why there is a burn barrel just outside my studio." According to Jerry, "Failure is an over-used word. If you try something and it does not work, it is not a failure. It is just one step in the process. What you learn is more valuable than any piece of wood. Blowing up that innovative segmented bowl or vessel is not to be fretted over, it's simply an event that will lead to the next developmental step."

### An open mindset

As I listened and jotted notes, I became aware of how modest Jerry is about his "can-do" outlook. His mother imbued in Jerry this important foundation early on, implanting in her son the mindset to keep going, no matter what. She would say, "Put trotters under those wishes, son—you make it happen." As he watched her work on her own art projects, he took note that she would patiently start over and over when learning a new technique or skill. He recalls being aware that she enjoyed the process as well as the end result. Acquiring this valuable mindset early on has benefited Jerry throughout his life. Indeed, Jerry has an open mindset, which is a fundamental attribute for excellence in any endeavor. (See Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D.'s *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, How We Can Learn to Fulfill*

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— Jerry Bennett





*The Dance*, 2010,  
Mahogany, steel, maple,  
brass, 23" x 13" x 14"  
(58cm x 33cm x 36cm)



*Agony of De-Feet*, 2006, Asian burl, holly, 14" x 15" x 15" (36cm x 38cm x 38cm)

A club challenge was to make a footed vessel.

*Our Potential*.) One of the most valuable teachings Jerry advocates is to dispel the internal limitations we place on ourselves. "There is nothing to discover on the traveled path. The undiscovered is always in the weeds."

When I look at the photo of *Rockin' Round the Christmas Tree*, made in 2018, it makes me smile to imagine the many life events this joyful holiday sculpture represents, from Jerry's boyhood and throughout his adult life. Contained within this celebratory package are the feelings generated from family times together—traditions, the flurry of activity supported by a sturdy structure, and music in the air.

### Emotion in art

Several times during our days together, Jerry brought up the topic

of emotional content in artwork—his own, as well as that of other artists. The emotional aspect of a work always comes to the forefront. "You want others to react in some way to your art. A beautifully made vessel with a pleasing shape has a definite effect on me. While craft is an essential component of art, great craftsmanship can never save a poor work of art. We have a tendency to concentrate primarily on the *crafting* of a piece and far less on the overall design. It should be the other way around."

Of his sculptures, Jerry says, "As a musician for many years, my friends and I measured a performance based upon its feel. Sculptors as well as musicians bring their life experiences to the table. Art is personal and I expect to feel something as I create it. If by

simply viewing it, you do too, nothing is better than that."

For the past year, I have been attending a weekly line-dance class. *The Dance*, which Jerry made in response to a great performance of the *Paso Doble* during an episode of "Dancing with the Stars," makes me want to close my computer, get up, and practice. I'm not even close to being graceful, but that sculpture moves me.

*Agony of De-Feet*, from 2006, makes me chuckle. His simple explanation for making this delightfully quirky sculpture: "A club challenge to make a footed vessel." I just know that everyone in my dance class would giggle and also want *Agony of De-Feet* as a mascot. All of us at times feel the agony of seeming to have multiple feet. ►



*Hot Licks*, 2018,  
Mahogany, ebony,  
steel, dyes, lacquer,  
36" x 16" x 24"  
(91cm x 41cm x 61cm)

Crating and shipping  
a sculpture like  
*Hot Licks* is a feat  
of engineering and  
design all its own.



*Consensus*, 2013, Mahogany, maple, steel, brass, 20" x 16" x 10" (51cm x 41cm x 25cm)

The everyday struggle to form a consensus requires compromise, not of values but of direction. To find consensus is not easy, and sometimes we must yield to accommodation.

On a more serious note, *Consensus* is to be studied because included in its flowing graceful loops is a purposeful “kink.” At first, I didn’t consciously note that kink, which no doubt was Jerry’s intention when composing this piece. To have consensus in our lives, sometimes someone or something must change direction. Perhaps we can pinpoint the exact location of a consensus being created, but as in this sculpture, effective compromises flow from shared values that blend and bend to form a way to move forward. The wire armature is, after all, one single strand.

### Segmented possibilities

Jerry knows that beyond his highly individualized sculptures exist unlimited possibilities for creative expression using the lathe. He looks forward to others exploring this vast, not-yet-realized potential. He articulated this viewpoint several times—and sincerely means it. As I got to know Jerry better, though, it became clear that he is genuinely modest about his own accomplishments. I’m not sure he is fully able to relate to or understand the internal limitations so many of us place on ourselves. He truly is gifted with a unique set of skills, which he freely shares with others. He teaches his methods and techniques in seminars, videos, and online, which has played a role in building community within the segmenting field worldwide. At one point, Jerry said to me, “What lasts the longest is what you give, not what you receive.”

### A final note

Consider the imagination, skills, knowledge, and influences needed to make (not to mention crate and ship) a sculpture as complex, moving, and visually appealing as *Hot Licks*. Coming together are musical influences, emotional associations, imagination, and an expansive knowledge of woodturning techniques. All of these



*Serenade*, 2008, Mahogany, ebony, maple, steel, brass, nickel frets, dye, lacquer, 72" x 41" x 41" (183cm x 104cm x 104cm)

attributes and gifts form and support Jerry’s internal framework.

The flow of musical notes, from an auditory experience to visual enchantment, hits just the right notes. Play on, Jerry!

For more, visit [jerrybennettart.com](http://jerrybennettart.com).

Betty J. Scarpino lives in Indianapolis, where she turns, carves, and embellishes wood. Her website is [bettyscarpino.com](http://bettyscarpino.com).