

Tuned In

Searching for the soul of wood

By David M. Freedman

I recently read a book about wood-working in which the author reverently offered this stunning divulgement: “You can look deeply into the soul of a board and it will tell you what it wants to be, whether a carved figure, a jewelry box, a Windsor chair, or whatever. If you tune in to it, the wood will speak to you.”

Intrigued, I immediately slipped down to my basement shop and attempted to penetrate, soul-wise, a cocobolo board I had just received as a gift from a fellow woodworker. I hadn't yet decided on a project for it, so I thought maybe I could induce it to tell me what it wanted to be. Actually, I started by trying to figure out where its soul resided, so I could look deeply into it. It wasn't as simple as I had hoped. As it got to be late in the evening, I decided to resume the quest the next day.

Lying in bed pondering the soul of dead flora, I floated off to sleep. I woke up in the middle of the night in a mild stupor, and felt compelled to drift back down to the basement in my pajamas. In the darkened shop, the board lay there in an eerie glow that gave me chills. Then I realized I had left it sitting under the nightlight above my bench. Anyway, trying to shake off my stupor, I stood looking down at the softly lit board, endeavoring to “tune in to it.” I implored the board, addressing what I hoped was its soul: “Tell me, what sort of

furniture do you desire to be? Into what form shall I masterfully craft you?”

To my astonishment, the wood responded, and with less delight than I might have expected. “That's a bit presumptuous, wouldn't you say, Mr. Master Crafter? Truth is, I'd rather still be standing in the forest, with woodpeckers making of me what they will.”

I had never apologized to lumber before, but did my best to convey my sympathies to wood cut down in its prime. I explained that the best I could do would be to honor its existence by bestowing upon it a new, useful form, and that I wished to thank it for

its sacrifice in the same way some American Indians thank and honor the game they slay for meat.

“Well here we sit, then,” the board acknowledged. “Things being what they are, I guess I wouldn't mind being a small, sturdy stool of some sort.”

“Splendid!” I replied. “A stool it is. I'll make you proud!” To underscore my good intentions, I reached for my favorite smoothing plane and took one satisfying, full-length pass with it. The board yelled “Ow!”

I may have to rethink this tuning-into-the-wood business. ■

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