

Spirit of a Flute Maker: A Conversation with Scott Loomis
as recorded by John Sarantos

As I drove the 178 miles in a driving Oregon downpour to meet with Scott Loomis for this article, I kept telling myself that I must stop committing myself to writing articles for VOW. However, once I approached Scott's property and I felt the peacefulness of his soul, I knew this would not be my last article. This was what life is about. Visiting friends old and new, sharing personal philosophies, talking to the animals and the trees, feeling the energy of all those who have visited before and those whose spirits have always been there.

I was greeted by Scott's canine Boris, 3/4 wolf and part Alaskan something or another. Boris wasn't too sure of me as he circled around me. At first, I wasn't too sure of Boris either. He stayed his distance from me at the beginning of my visit.

Scott and I visited at his house for a while, then we went into his workshop about 35 yards from his house, which cuts down on his travel time to work.

Once inside the workshop, we just sat for a few minutes without talking. I took animal communicator Penelope Smith's advice and just took time to look at Scott while I cleared my mind and focused on where I was until I felt very comfortable about just being in the workshop and being with Scott.

I had emailed Scott about twenty-five questions which he didn't read and which I never made myself a copy of. Scott expressed a desire not to have an interview, but instead just have a conversation between ourselves.

And that is just what we did.

John: Scott, I'm sitting here feeling the peacefulness of the shop. Usually I don't think of a shop as a peaceful, meditative place, but your shop has that feeling.

Scott: (Scott points to a wall where several tall pieces of wood wait to be crafted into flutes) That's what happens when you're surrounded by all the tall ones that give themselves so that we can bring beauty and music into the world.

That's my life's philosophy, You have a choice. You can either see the beauty or not see the beauty. And I choose to see the beauty.

When I approach my work, I try to make every flute with the intention that it is the last flute and the best flute, and if I can't do that, I turn out the lights and close the door, because I have lost my concentration. I've lost my intention on making the best flute that I can make. And that is what separates the craftsman, the artist from those individuals who just want to make a flute.

John: It's like people who can sing a song by hitting each note, and the melody is there, but there is nothing coming from inside their soul.

Scott: Right, there's no soul. And that comes across. I think that really comes across in a person's work, no matter what the work is.

I tell people, I can teach you how to make a flute, and I have no problem teaching you how to make a flute, I just won't be able to teach you how to make a Loomis flute. I'll give you all the secrets...whatever those are, but there is a certain amount of personal energy that goes into what you do, that makes it yours; that separates it from everybody else. It is a certain mind set.

John: I think there are people like myself who play flutes a lot and who are familiar with the sound of some of the more reputable flute makers, who could probably sit in a circle with our eyes closed and tell you whose flutes were

being played because of their individual quality. It is the sound of the flute maker that we really hear coming through the instrument, not just "a note".

Scott: It's a sound signature that you get. Like Ken Light's flutes don't sound like Hawk LittleJohn's flutes, whose flutes don't sound like Loomis' flutes, but all three of those are good flutes. So, yes, you feel that sound signature.

Hawk and I have the same note progression that we put on our flutes, but yet they play differently. And that's good.

John: Even with your own flutes, your standard flute's physical appearances are different from your museum-styled flutes, but your sound signature is there in all of them. It is your sound coming through the flute.

Scott: That's one of the things I talk about with people who ask me how to make flutes. I say first of all you need to have a sound in your mind. What are you trying to accomplish? What are you trying to make these flutes sound like? And then I can give you the things to do to that flute to make that sound come out. But if you don't have that in your mind, what you want those flutes to sound like, then you are really beating your head against the wall. And that's the one thing I had in the beginning, I knew what I wanted the flutes to sound like and tried very hard to strive for that sound. And I have been told that it is different from a lot of others. And I think that's really important to a flute maker to have that intention of creating something out of himself and not just copying something from somebody else. A guy says, "Well, I want it to sound like yours." And I said, well you won't get it to sound like me. (big laugh) You need to get it to sound like you.

Like the other day, I told you that I finished that one fancy flute, and I did this with furniture too. You finish something and you stand back and look at it and you wonder where it came from. Because you are so overwhelmed with the finished product that you ask yourself, how I couldn't have done that. I mean where did that come from? So you feel real appreciation for the finished product, even though it came out of your hands, it's not an ego thing, it's an awe. I really believe that something outside you helps you with the creative process. That the creative process gave you this gift. So, I'm truly blown away sometimes by...whoa, look at that. (big laugh) Does that make sense?

John: Oh, yes. There have been times when I have written poetry in the middle of the night. I wake up the next morning and read it and wonder, who wrote this?

Scott, I've seen the evolution of your flutes over the past few years. You are constantly working on improving them. It appears to me that you do this so it just doesn't become a job to you where you are just an assembly line knocking out flutes.

Scott: Good Point. What I said earlier about making flutes with the same intention, with making it the best that I can do. That's why I can't bring myself to make two lines of flutes; one a beginner line and one a professional line. I don't know how to make any flute less than my best. And so every innovation that I come up with to make my flutes sound better, goes into all of my flutes. What you're paying for with these carved and fancy flutes are the carved and fanciness of them, you're not paying extra for the quality of sound, because the quality of sound coming out of this carved and fancy flute I hope is the same quality of sound that comes out of that standard flute. So, that's what I mean about making one line of flutes. People say, "Make a less expensive flute." I don't know how to make a less expensive flute. "Make less expensive cabinets." I don't know how to make less expensive cabinets. I know one way of doing that, and that's the best way that I can make it. And that came from my Dad and my Mom. Any job worth doing is worth doing well. (Laugh) You've heard that one before, you're from that generation.

John: Many times.

The other thing along the line of quality is that lately the market seems to be flooded by individuals who are making a cheaper quality of flute and selling them for 75 to 150 dollars. What are your feelings about some of these people who are just doing a fast assembly line of flutes? Do you think they might be hindering the consumer from understanding why the reputable flute makers charge more for their flutes?

Scott: I think that it is not only the Native American flute that suffers from that. All instruments have different levels of quality and different levels of tonality and sound. The shame is those people who misrepresent them and call a flute that isn't really as responsive or doesn't have the quality of sound as having a professional sound.

I don't want to get into the political thing, because I have respect for anybody who creates something with their hands.

John: What I am hearing you say is that it is the representation of the quality of the flute that concerns you.

Scott: Yes, because there is a place for a beginner flute, for an intermediate flute, a place for the professional recording flute. It only does everybody else good to have those different levels, because a person who isn't quite sure about the flute shouldn't have to pay \$300.00 for a flute. But if they can get a pretty sounding flute for \$100.00, \$50.00 or whatever and see the potential that this instrument gives them for bring their inner music out, then they can grow up the levels as their proficiency grows. So there is a place there. Once again, it's the misrepresentation that I have a problem with.

John: I've taken two of your flute making workshops that you give all over the country. You mentioned that the sound of the flute has a lot to do with the spirit of the flute maker. Have you ever been surprised by the quality of flutes by some of your workshop participants?

Scott: Yes, definitely! I really, really feel that the spirit of the maker follows the flute, and that people can feel the spirit of the maker in a flute when they play it. I've been told that a number of times. There were the ones from Pat Partridge, she brought out those cane flutes that she had made, and I felt the spirit immediately, as soon as I touched the flute I felt it. She is also the only person I know who can put a spirit into a plastic flute. She had one plastic flute that she brought and that was the first time I ever felt a live spirit in a plastic flute. And so yes, when the intention is there, you feel it.

I really haven't played many flutes that were made after the workshop, but I've heard that people are saying "Oh, this works!" "Oh, this sounds different now that I've done what Scott Loomis suggested."

The more the sound is projected out there and is pleasant to the ear, the more people are going to be coming to the flute. So helping people make a better flute only does all of us good. We are educating people to the sound of this instrument. It makes me feel good because I recognize so intensely and so personally the satisfaction one gets from producing something with their hands, and mind, and their heart. You can see the pride and the goodness there.

John: Sitting here in your shop I feel an incredible amount of energy. I am feeling ideas coming to me that I hadn't thought about talking about. I feel your gentle spirit all around the shop.

Scott: What we've been talking about is what the maker brings to his work. Whenever I come into the shop, I ask for and prepare myself. I ask for permission, ask for help and prepare myself for that day's work. Because I feel strongly that the maker's spirit goes into the flute, is carried with the flute, I have an obligation to the customer, to the flute; to be in a right mind when I am performing my work; when I am making these flutes. And so I prepare myself everyday before I come into the shop. If negative things come into my mind while I am working, I try to get rid of those negative things because I don't want any negative energy going into any of these flutes. And so I try to get rid of that, by thinking of the good things that come out of this, out of my work. And if I can't stop that from rattling around in my brain, I turn out the lights and I close the door. And I don't come back into the shop until that positive mind set is back. I am not just saying this, this is what I do, and I think that is projected in my work. This is the way I have been my whole life. That's why I think I can't work for somebody else.

That's why I say on my web site about these fancy flutes, that I don't normally work with somebody else's vision.

John: Mind set wise, then it becomes their flute and not yours. And that you're just making something to someone else's specifications, so that the spirit isn't totally there. It's not yours, it's somebody else's. They should make their own flute if they want the spirit to be theirs.

Scott: If they feel strongly about it, yes. I mean, I can work in other people's vision as long as they don't put too many parameters on it. And I've done that before like with the White Buffalo flute I made for Tim Crawford because his vision was so strong that I identified with it and therefore was able to do something with it. But he also didn't put any parameters. He said "This is my vision; can you make a flute?"

John: He didn't give you a detailed sketch as to what he wanted?

Scott: No, no. He said he would like it to be white. (Laughter from both of us)

John: I imagine that with your strong mind set about not working with negative thoughts in your mind, that it must be hard for you to come to work on some days.

Scott: Sometimes it makes it tough. I had a falling out with a very close friend, and I couldn't figure out why it happened. It just tore me up inside. And it just spiraled. I couldn't come into the shop and work because I just couldn't get rid of it. But it is important to work.

Saggio sent me a letter. I have it right there on my door. This flute, this instrument completely changed his life. So as a flute maker I have a responsibility to do this right because it is a life-changing thing. I hope this doesn't come out hokey.

John: No, the Native American flute has been a bridge for a lot of people, a connection for a lot of people to who they are. It has tapped into things that maybe they have suppressed about themselves. It not only brings out their inner voice, but it also gets a person thinking about life, that maybe there is more to life than just going through a daily routine.

Scott: It is the first time for many to really express themselves in a personal way. And I think that is really important to people. Like you said, we have been suppressing that self-expression for way too long. Everybody has music. There is no getting around it. Our heart beat is a rhythm. We were born with a rhythm. We grew in our mother's womb with a rhythm all around us. And for us to deny that inner music, that inner rhythm is really a shame. And this instrument because it is so easy to play is releasing a lot of that inner expression, that inner music of people. That is what happened to Saggio, and I use it as an inspiration because of it. And again, I can't stress the point enough that I have a responsibility to make this flute right.

John: You use several kinds of woods for your flutes. How does the wood effect you as far as deciding what type of woods you use?

Scott: For the four standard flutes, I've chosen those types of woods because they are very similar in consistency and tonality. They're very slightly different from each other. Like the Sitka Spruces and the Eastern Red Cedar are a little brighter in their tonality than the Western Red Cedar and Redwood. They are a little bit warmer in their tonality. I just found that these four woods make a good flute. And you can still find real good wood because it is really important to find very tight grain and clear wood for a consistent sound. And that is what I am trying to get is a consistent sound. And I think that is one of the things that I am known for, producing a consistent product.

John: What kind of wood do you use for your carved and fancy flutes?

Scott: For the carved and fancy flutes I've gone to the hardwoods because hardwoods are easier to carve and also because of the different densities, thickness of the hardwoods, the carvings don't effect the sound of the flute as much as it would in a soft wood. In a soft wood that sound vibration is disrupted by the different thickness of the wood caused by the carving, which makes a difference in the sound.

About 3 years ago I've become knowledgeable enough to be able to manipulate the tonality of the flute to be again consistent with my sound in these fancy flutes. It took me a long time to get up the courage to branch out into these carved and fancy flutes because I am so concerned about the tonality and the sound. But now I am just having a blast (big laugh) because I am finally able to use my artistic side

and still feel good about the sound.

John: I've also noticed that for the fun side of flute making, you have been making the smaller, higher sounding flutes. When I was playing one of them in a chapel in Seattle, I was making raven sounds with it and it sounded like the rafters were full of ravens singing.

Scott: That's one of the things Sky WalkinStick did for me. He took me under his wings and was teaching me about these flutes. He's the one who broadened my horizons. He said, "Hello, why don't you make me a 'C' flute, a low 'C' flute?" I said, "OK." So I would go out and experiment and try to get this "C" flute going. I'd come back and the next time he'd say, "Well, why don't you make me an "E" flute?" Because nobody was doing any at that time. So like I said he's the one that broadened my horizons that way. That's why I make twenty-two different flutes from high pitched "G" to that middle "G" that a lot of flute players have, to a very low deep "G" and every half step in between. Because that's fun.

Like you were saying before, each flute has its own voice, well each flute also has its own mood to be sung with. And I find that in certain moods that I have I pick up a high pitched flute, and in certain moods that I have I pick up a low pitched flute; other moods, it's one of those mid-ranged.

I can do a real melancholy sound out of this really high sounding "G", but I can also do a real happy sound out of a high pitched "G". So, ah, did I just contradict myself just then? (both laugh)

John: I'm trying to think. You said melancholy sound as opposed to low pitched sound. So, I think you're o.k.

Scott: Right. (laughter)

John: I find it humorous when someone is playing a low "E" flute and they say they love it but that they can't get the highest note to sound the way they want to. That's because it's a low flute and it's not designed to play the highest note the way a high pitched flute is.

Scott: I think that's the beauty of having an instrument that is so range limited. Sam Kurz who is a recording artist was telling me that every time he gets a different pitched flute from me, he finds five or six new songs. Therefore, I think it is a creative stiffness to have such a small range in a flute. So you have to go upper or lower in pitch. Plus it keeps all of us flute makers in business. (laughter)

John: About the consistency of your flutes. Gary and Sherrie Kuhl and I were playing several "G" pitched flutes one night trying to hit the high "A". Some of the flutes would hit it, but we had to play one or two notes below it and work our way up, but your flutes were consistent every time.

Scott: Well, that's good to hear. That's the way I intended it to happen. (laughter)

My daughter calls me anal retentive. I'm a perfectionist and when I set my goal, because I am also goal-oriented, I set my goal to create a quality professional instrument. My target customer base was going to be the recording artist, the professional, the musician. And that is what I set my goal for. That's who I sought out; people who made their living with music. And I think it paid off because I have listened to those people, and they have told me what they want. So, I do that.

I'm telling you a whole lot more than I've ever expressed to anybody before. And it feels good to be able to let that out because I haven't been able to do that, and I think it is important that people know that it's not just a job. That work can be really good to people if they treat it the right way. My Grandfather used to say that if you approach your work in the right way then no work is demeaning.

John: I remember my mother was telling me, "No matter what you choose to do in life, do it honestly and be the best you can."

Scott: I'm glad you said that because that's what I've been trying to say. Doing your work honestly. Being honest to yourself and your customer.

John: Would you like to share some of your thoughts when you got together with Hawk and Geri LittleJohn and Ken Light this past summer at the National Flute Association in Phoenix?

Scott: We sort of threw out there what about some sort of organization or guild for flute makers. I think those kinds of organizations are a good thing, and I would like to be a part of it. But I would hope that that organization wouldn't want to start demanding things from flute makers such as standardization, such as aesthetic boundaries, or whatever. But as an organization to legitimize, especially with retailers, this instrument, to exchange knowledge where retailers could come for information. I think that would be a good thing. It would help all of us as flute makers.

John: You just mentioned sharing of information which reminded me about your web site. You share a tremendous amount of information not just for flute makers but also flute players. For example, you have the detailed blueprints on how to make your plastic flute, and you also share a lot of tips for flute players. You post other people's comments and ideas about the flute, and you also have links to other people who sell books and music. What's your philosophy about sharing on your web site?

Scott: My wife Linda and I were both educators and once an educator always an educator. (laugh) It just seemed the natural, logical progression to make it more than just a store for my flutes. I feel that the more information and knowledge that the public has, the more they will become an educated buyer where they can determine what they want.

I really want this instrument to grow, to help people with their self-expression because it is so easy to play. You can pick this flute up with somebody who has never played an instrument, that has all the anxieties of being tone deaf and can't do this or can't do that, and give them one of these flutes and in fifteen minutes have them start to bring their music out using three or four notes.

What better way to spend your life than to produce things like that, that make those kinds of changes in a person's life. (laugh) When I go to shows and I see people pick these up and start playing them or I go to those workshops and see you guys start playing the flutes and I just giggle. I am having such a ball. Talk about self-gratification.

John: There was a woman at the last Oregon Flute Circle meeting who had had a stroke. She used to play the transverse flute and she had hardly any movement at all in her bottom hand. She finally got all the holes covered and was able to lift one finger up and back down. And just the joy those two sounds brought to her was incredible to see.

Scott: Wow.

John: She was just really glowing.

Scott: Wow.

John: So the flute is not only a musical instrument but it is also a healing tool. It just seems to cover so many different levels of life.

Scott: Did you read this? (Scott walks over to his shop door.)

John: NO.

Scott: This is another one of my inspirations.

John: (I walk over to read a letter posted on the back of the shop door.)

(I walk back to my chair) The letter told about how Dennis Sizemore was in a hospital where a woman was dying. Dennis handed her husband his flute and showed the man how to play it. He played it for a few minutes. When he had finished, his wife had peacefully passed on.

John: Scott, I was wondering if you would like to share some of your feelings about your accident with the router.

Scott: Whenever somebody comes to me and asks me can you show me how to make flutes, the first question that comes out of my mouth is, "How much do you need to play the flute? How much of that is part of your life?" And if they answer me that that is important; then I question them about why they want to make a flute. Because making a flute puts your hands in jeopardy. Working with any tool puts your hands in jeopardy. And I say if you are real serious about making a flute because you need that one personal expression of yourself, then I can show you how to do it. But if you are planning on making flutes for a living and playing flutes for a living, then reconsider and let me or someone else make the flutes for you.

I had twenty-five years of experience working with woodworking tools as a professional cabinet maker, furniture maker, flute maker, and I never had an accident. And one day, one hesitant movement on my part took away my two fingers on the router. And if it can happen to me, a professional, it can certainly happen to you, the non-professional. So again, if flute playing is important to you, let someone else make the flutes for you.

Making the flutes is more important to me than my playing. Even though the injury was devastating, absolutely devastating to me, it was less so because I wasn't serious about playing the flute.

John: I think you showed your commitment to make flutes, to be able to come back to the shop and make new flutes after you lost part of your two fingers. I think it shows how much it means to you to make flutes and how much enjoyment you feel by creating them. I imagine there must have been some hesitation about coming back to the shop after the accident.

Scott: There was never any hesitation. When I came back from the hospital in San Francisco, I came immediately to the shop and walked through what I did. And my hands were in the correct place. It was just some sort of lack of concentration. I couldn't reenact it, because every time I reenacted it, my hands were out of the way. So I have no idea what happened. It was a wake-up call, because it was a blessing because I approach my work now not only totally involved in creating the flute in the right way, but also totally involved with saving my hands. (big laugh)

John: So you could make more flutes. (more laughter)

Scott: So I could make more flutes in the right way. (even more laughter)

John: Are there any special goals you would like to accomplish in the future with the flute?

Scott: I would like to spend more time working on the carved flutes, the artistic flutes. I don't have any interest in creating a new instrument because I like this instrument the way it is. I want to take this instrument as far as it can go within the limitation of keeping the integrity of the original thought. And by adding too much and changing too much then you lose the integrity of the original.

I'm always, always working to better my flute. To better my consistency, my sound. I think any artist who is satisfied with his work, has finished his work and should move on to something else. Hopefully I won't be satisfied until I'm ready to die.

John: How many flutes have you made in your career?

Scott: I've only made probably thirteen to fourteen hundred flutes. That's the other thing, you asked me what advice I would give to someone getting into this for a profession, make sure your spouse has a good job. (laughter) It's a struggle. I won't say that I am a business man and I probably could do a whole lot better financially if I had any business sense. But if you make a quality instrument as a single person

shop like I am, you're limited to the amount that you can do. I can only make 200 to 250 flutes a year. Some people are under the impression that Ken Light, Hawk Littlejohn and I make a lot of money. But just realize how few quality flutes one person can make in a year.

John: I know a few people who think that it only takes a couple of hours to knock out a flute.

Scott: I spend a minimum of eight to twenty hours to make one flute.

John: I know that you not only work on the sound and the looks of the flute, but also on the quality—that the flute is going to last as opposed to someone who just throws them together, who doesn't know to treat the inside or outside of the flutes, or how to protect the fipple area.

Scott: Right, I think that's what I brought from my cabinet and furniture making experience, is how to treat the wood so it can last and still project its own beauty. And I feel that the magic of this instrument is the wood coming alive again through the sound.

John: Scott, do you see any new trends with this instrument?

Scott: I'm really impressed with and grateful for all those people who are taking this instrument out of the Native American genre of music and are experimenting with other forms of music with this instrument. They recognized the magic of the instrument and now they're putting it into music that isn't influenced outside of their culture.

So, I'm really excited about what Gary Stroutsos is doing with the flute, what Mark Holland is doing with the flute, and several others who are going outside the Native American genre and using jazz and using Latin music and using Asian sounds with this flute. And treating and recognizing the magic and the purity of this instrument and taking advantage of it with the music of their own culture. And that's what is exciting to me.

John: Besides creating the flutes, what other joys does your job as a flute maker bring to you?

Scott: One of the major joys of this work is the people that I come into contact with, and I've made a lot of friends, associates through this flute. And I've come to appreciate the things that they bring to this world.

John: The flute seems to bring a lot of people together. That's part of the magic of the flute; the way it brings people together. At all of the flute workshops I've been to, there is an instant bonding with everyone. And people do stay in contact with each other after the workshops are over.

Scott: It's a great support group. (laughter)

And that's another thing that concerns me. The misuse of the beauty and magic of the flute. The other day a man called up and he ordered a flute from me, and he said, "Oh, by the way, and I hope you're not offended by this, but I would just like to ask you something." I said, "No, what? Go ahead." "Do you pray over your flutes while you are making them?" I go, "Wait a minute." This is something that I have a hard time with. A sacred object is not sacred in and of itself. It's made sacred by the person who is using it as a sacred object. I don't make sacred flutes. Like I said before, I prepare myself to make a good flute, but you make the flute sacred. When you pick the flute up and it speaks to you in a sacred way, then it becomes sacred in that way. You make it close to you. You make it part of yourself, I don't. As a flute maker I don't do that. As a flute maker I can only have high integrity in my work when I make it.

Scott and I sat in silence for awhile. We got up, turned out the lights of the shop and walked back to his house. I spent the night during which there was a tremendous rain storm that continued into the morning. Scott said he wished that the rain would stop so he could show me a special place on his property. As I loaded my car, the rain stopped. We walked to his special place and I as I gifted the spot with a flute song, the sun came out. After I finished my song, Boris came over and placed his head on my leg.

Scott then took me on a walk around his 27 acres. I couldn't help but feel Scott's gentle spirit glowing as he shared stories and showed me places where different friends had camped on his property. Scott Loomis' spirit is not only in his flutes, it is all around him and the people, animals and nature that he comes into contact with. I left Scott's place feeling excited about being alive. Thanks, Scott.