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Rechanneling Creative Energy

by Karol Crosbie

Felix Hendrickson — Changing Art Forms

When Andrew Felix Hendrickson left The College of Wooster in 1987, he had three and one-half years of college under his belt and was playing in five rock bands.

For the next 16 years he made music for a living—the past 10 as a drummer with the blues-rock band, Heavy Weather. Like most performers, his relationship with his audience was short, happy, and anonymous. The applause could be warm and the musical connections intimate, but at the end of the night the audience members were still strangers.

Infrequently there might be a screw-up. A band member might lose his place or stumble over a rhythmic pothole. But the music kept on going, and eventually he'd catch up.

Hendrickson's energy was focused almost entirely on one aspect of his profession—making music. Tasks like marketing and promotion were ignored. "You're always broke in the rock 'n' roll world," he says. "The ultimate value and goal of a musician is playing music. If you happen to make a successful living at it, that's a bonus."

But as he was making music, another art form began to take root. To supplement his income, 14 years ago Hendrickson began sweeping floors and helping out at a furniture shop in Austin, Tex. Recognizing his aptitude, the owners took him on as an apprentice.

In January 2003, Hendrickson, 40, chose the Bronx in New York City as the site of his new business, Hendrickson Custom Cabinetry, which today he co-owns with wife Lisa. Although start-up costs have limited profits, the company's revenue has almost tripled in three years. Last year it was \$900,000, and Hendrickson estimates that it will be \$1.1 million this year. The business received a bounce early this year when it was featured in *The New York Times*.

For the first time, Hendrickson was responsible for the payroll and training (many of his employees are apprentices) of 14 people. He learned about marketing, promotion, and a different kind of customer relationship—one that is long-term. "When you're building a custom kitchen or a library, you can spend a year and a half with the same client," he says. "Sometimes it's frustrating and sometimes it's rewarding."

He learned that when mistakes happen, the consequences are more severe than a missed beat or sour note. For example, he remembers the time he and his crew painstakingly measured every doorway and elevator door, as they created a mahogany walk-in closet. But when it was time to install it in a luxurious Manhattan apartment, the pieces wouldn't fit past an oversized sprinkler shut-off valve, which had been overlooked. "We took the closet back to the shop, cut it in half, made new tops and bottoms, and reassembled it," Hendrickson remembers. "It was a very expensive lesson."

Although working in New York City brings what Hendrickson describes as "the world's greatest architects and wealthiest clients," it also brings big-city headaches. Searching for parking places on congested streets, cramming large pieces into elevators for installation in multi-story apartments, and hefty insurance rates all chip away at profits.

"It's been a sharp learning curve," he says.

But the creative vision that served him as a musician continues to inform his new art. "The quality that I bring from the music side is a sensitivity to the final product. When you're playing on stage, you're always working with a team towards a single goal, and hoping for a little magic along the way. When you're working with wood, you have to know what the final product is going to be before you make your first cut. Like a song, wood has nuance and emotion; it has its own different sort of rhythmic patterns."

And does the woodworker use the same kind of dynamic expression as the musician? What, for example, would be a woodworker's pianissimo?

"Emotional expression comes when I select the wood," says Hendrickson. "A wood like a rift-cut white oak is very straightgrained and demure. It lends itself to clean lines and simplicity."

Perhaps it is the drummer in Hendrickson that makes him partial to wood that he describes as "louder." "I like wood with knots and lots of activity. My current favorite is walnut."

Although now an avocation, music continues to be important. Hendrickson has completed arrangements of a number of '50s and '60s bebop tunes and has begun rehearsals with his newlyformed Felix Hendrickson Orchestra. He says he believes he will be a more successful musician this time around, building on the discipline and tenacity he has learned as a woodworker.

"Both as a woodworker and musician, there is always a new detail to learn about my craft. And there's always more to discover about myself."

