

# JACK LARIMORE



Jack Larimore was born in 1950 in the suburbs of Chicago, where he spent the early years of his life with his parents and two older sisters. His father was an entrepreneur, a profession that seems to have influenced Jack's career. When Jack was twelve, the family moved to a farm in Michigan. "My sisters lost a lot in the move, because they were older," Jack remembers. "But it suited me. I was between grade school and high school, and in a way that small town embraced us as a family. This was especially important, as soon after we moved my father died of what turned out to be lung cancer."

Before this tragedy, a chance encounter helped determine Jack's future direction in life. The farmhouse his parents had bought in Michigan was in poor shape, and they intended to restore it before moving in. Young Jack was captivated by the renovation process. "My Dad had an architect in to update this wreck of a house. I could draw you a picture of that guy's office right now I could also draw you a picture of the drawings he made and the effect they had on the house. At the age of twelve, that really clicked for me." More than meeting an impressive architect, it was the incremental steps taken toward a goal that fascinated Jack. The process, the sequential actions taken to realize change, the discussions, drawings, and the building process, all got hold of him.

Jack's mother taught at the local school after his father's





death. "Pretty much everyone worked. I had skills, too. I didn't draw much at school—that came later—but I could letter a sign, so I did that for a couple of neighbors. I guess I was pretty handy . . . We had 'shop' at school but I didn't do much in it. I did some music and played guitar in a band, and I suppose without knowing what I was taking on I decided I would be an architect."

As the youngest child, Jack struggled with the decision to go off to college and leave his mother by herself. He commuted to a junior college to earn the grades he needed to enter architecture school. At this school, he met a rare listener, a teacher named Bill Shaw. "He was the kind of guy that had his coat on and was ready to leave an hour ago, but he stayed to talk with you," says Jack. Shaw introduced Jack to landscape architecture and gave him a book entitled *Design with Nature* by Ian McHarg. This was a "process" book that talked about design upon the land and with the land; it was one of the early theoretical works on good ecological practice in land manage-

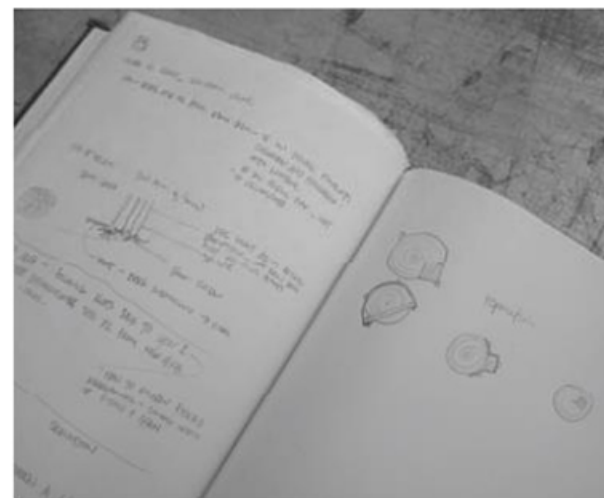
ment. Thanks to Shaw's influence, Jack changed direction, becoming a qualified landscape architect in 1973. He had an idealistic view of his career: "We were the people who were going to save the world."

Jack got married soon after graduating, and he and his wife moved to Philadelphia so that she could attend graduate school. He landed a dream job as a landscape architect, but within three years the reality of the situation hit him hard: being successful in the field required a degree of political savvy that he didn't possess. He was good at the job; as a designer, he was skilled at seeing the whole picture and envisioning open space. But over his three years in the office, he came to understand that he was only a tool in the process. If a client came in and told Jack's boss that three hundred more units were needed on a site, the boss was probably going to assent, and it would be Jack's job to provide them, whether it was a sound move or not.

Realizing that he was not cut out for this type of work, Jack took a leave of absence. His wife had landed a good job, so he decided to spend nine months doing reconstruction work on a house they had bought. This turned out to be a long nine months, and Jack never went back to landscape architecture. He was handy with tools and good at solving problems; he knew builders and architects and had skills in design. Doing real building, not planning, seemed to be a good fit. "I knew that I liked stuff that involved my head, my heart, and my hands. But, proactively, what I do to feed my heart—that comes through my hands."

Around this time, Jack consciously took up more drawing. As a landscape architect, he had been able to lose himself in drawing presentations for clients, and he was well versed in using tracing paper to build and communicate ideas layer by layer. Three further influences entered Jack's life that motivated him to begin making furniture. The first was the Richard Kagan Gallery, situated at the front of Richard Kagan's workshop in Philadelphia, barely half a block away from the house that Jack was refurbishing. This gallery was one of the very first to show the work of so-called modern studio furniture makers, including such leading makers such as Wendell Castle, Jere Osgood, Judy Kensley McKie, Roseanne Somerson, and Alphonse Mattia.

The second influence, the studio of the artist Budd Drake, was just across the street from Jack's house. Budd's influence and his example as an artist—as a person not merely living the life of an artist but living creatively in the moment—influenced Jack profoundly. "You could ask Budd to show you what he was working on and he wouldn't understand you. To Budd, what he was doing at any one time was Art, his life was Art. Budd Drake enlightened me, and seeing the work of all those other furniture makers at the gallery inspired me and opened a door for me."





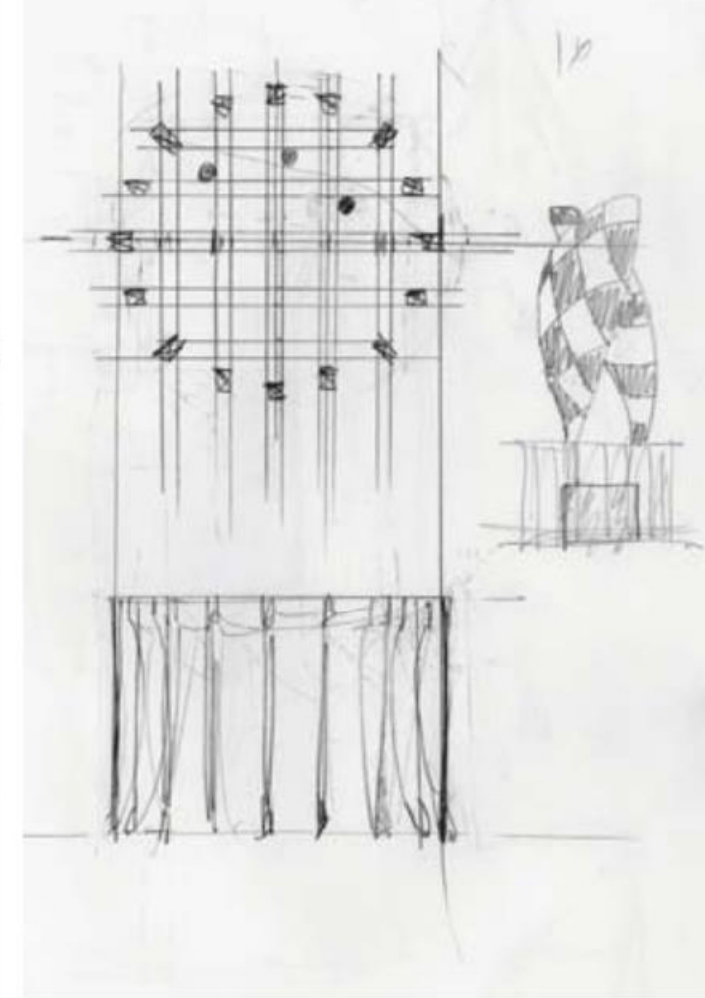
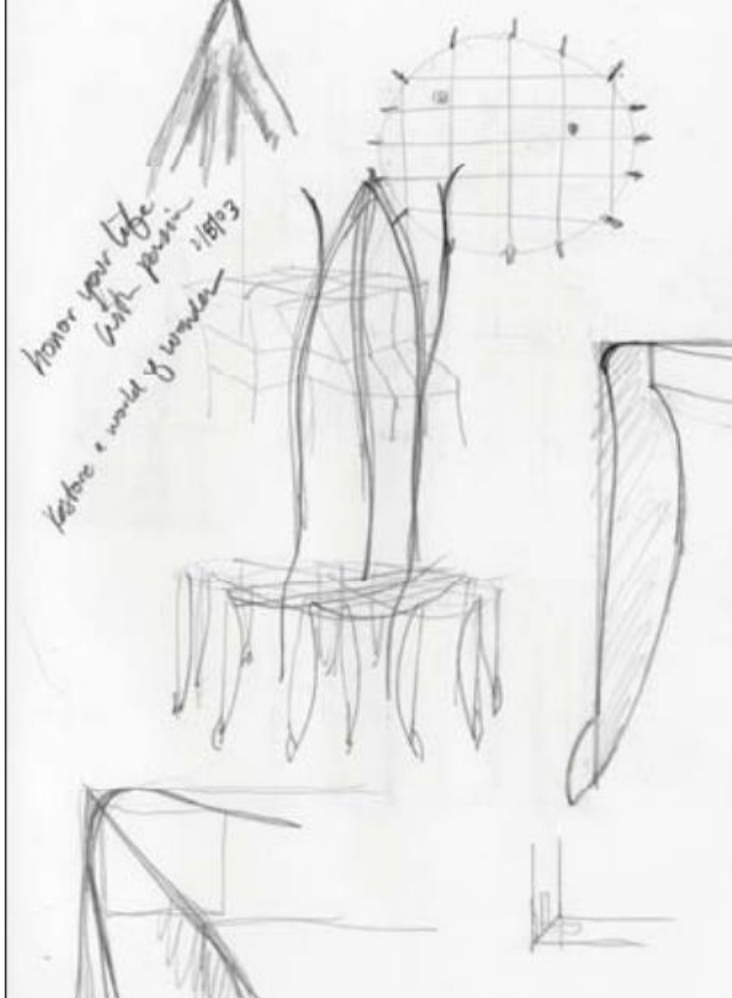


"Abide" - J.L. 07

The third influence was the work that he was doing on the house itself. By taking up tools to refurbish the house, Jack was opening himself not only to learning by doing, but to the very idea that making things was important. The Zen master Taisen Deshimaru says to "think with your whole body," and Jack was beginning to do just that.

In 1981, Jack had some pieces accepted at the Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show. Unlike a gallery exhibition, this is a selected craft show in which each artist is given a 10-by-10-foot (3 meters by 3 meters) booth, and it is up to the artist to represent him- or herself to prospective customers. "I made a few pieces that were accepted, and all of them sold," says Jack casually. In fact, only one of twenty applicants gets accepted to this show, and it was the first time he had applied. Soon galleries were approaching him to exhibit his work, and clients were asking him to make pieces for them on commission. Pieces from this period included works like *Balltop Table* and *Chairs Chair*.

Many of his contemporaries were working with galleries while holding down teaching positions, but Jack sought a different path. Perhaps inspired by his father, he took a more independent, entrepreneurial viewpoint. "I never totally threw my hat in with the galleries, though I exhibited with some. I suppose from their point of view I



blew it." He saw the income achievable through galleries as being unreliable, and developed a business plan involving multiple craft shows in different parts of the country combined with gallery representation. "I guess the galleries didn't like it that much. Some people can work both ends, but the galleries never completely embrace you."

For Jack, the key to nurturing his creativity is building a body of work, a minimum of five but up to ten pieces that are consistent in their creative impetus and direction. "The body of work is the objective—not the opening night, the wine, the lights, the accolades, the celebrity status." He sets out to create this group of works without consideration for how they will reach a market. They may well end up in a gallery, but if they do not, he knows that he could exhibit them somewhere and sell them himself. This is Jack's self-confident, entrepreneurial nature. If someone asks, "Why do you need to go looking for rejection?" His answer is, "Do you wanna win? If you do, you gotta play, and if you play you might lose. So, do you wanna play? Even the Chicago Cubs have to win sometimes."

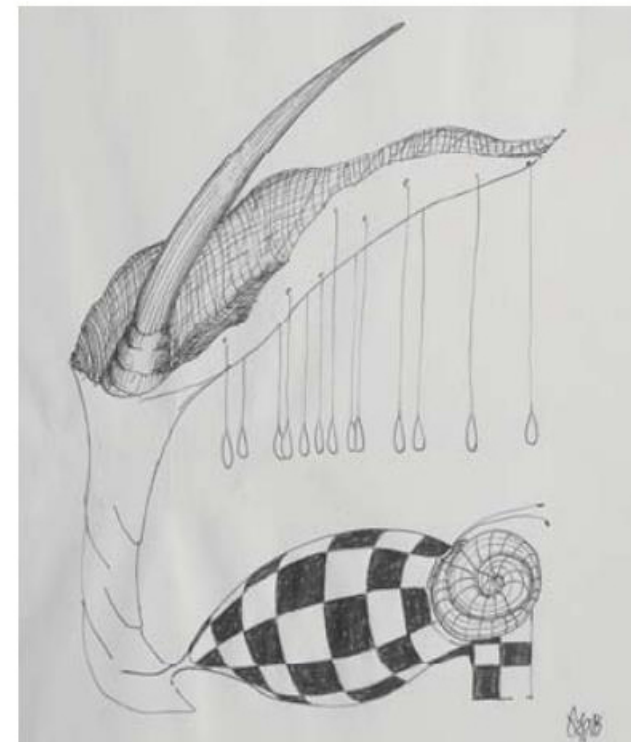
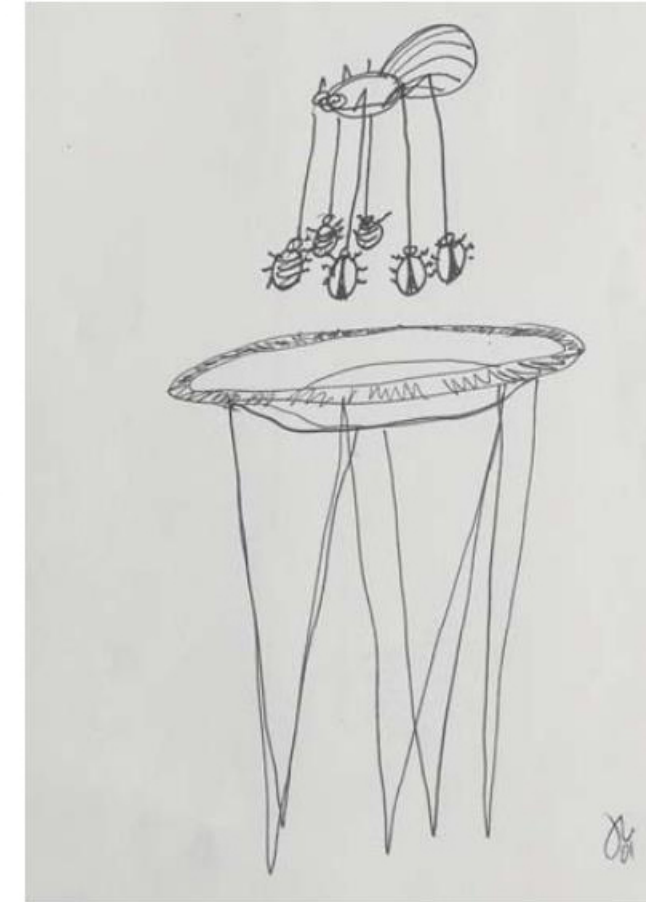
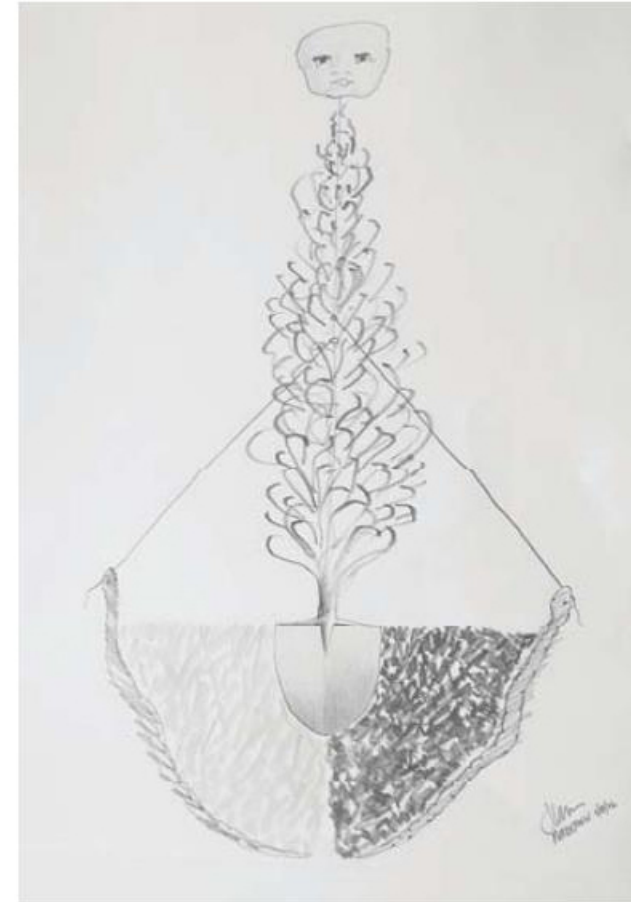
In the early 1980s, Jack's daughter Mae was born. Although his marriage did not survive, Mae still remained a very important part of Jack's life, and he was able to make space in the world of his studio for a small child. Jack teamed up with another woodworker, Bob Ingram,





and rented a big warehouse space in the Fishtown industrial area of Philadelphia, buying it from the owner shortly thereafter. This building was ideal for their purposes: it had power, good light, and enough room to rent out bench space to other users. There was a big demand for this, as there were three colleges nearby. Jack and his partner were able to fill their space and create an exciting and dynamic environment through the contacts they made with professors. Their studio soon became known as the place to work or buy creative stuff.

"It was fun. There were young people there, and lots of energy. As a designer I responded wholeheartedly to what was the hot thing at the time, the 'postmodern aesthetic.' I enjoyed playing with various details and iconography, messing about with scale, and making little cabinets with huge crown moldings. I got that right off the bat, and it attracted attention. I don't think, however, that it was too expressive."





After a great ten years, Jack started to feel physically and mentally cramped in the space, and moved on. "I decided that the shop had evolved that way. If I were setting up again I probably wouldn't do it like that, working on the second floor and moving my stuff up and down all the time, so I decided to rent out my space and move somewhere else. Also, as the 'old guy' you realize how much time you spend talking to other people. I enjoy teaching and mentoring, but time is time, and I needed to consider my work." He moved to a beautiful light-filled studio with two loading docks in the East Falls neighborhood of Philadelphia. "I like Philadelphia, the combination of a wonderful art community and great human beings. It's a vibrant place, a bit less competitive than Manhattan." Here Jack was able to take student interns from the local university. They would get university credits for coming and working for Jack every week, and he would get some unpaid help.

About this time Jack became interested in what he has since described as the "natural process." He made it a personal quest to explore nature's great conundrums by abstracting forms, simplifying and merging them with humor, and evolving warm symbols with a functionality that was sometimes minimal. One senses that pieces from this phase of Jack's career were made in the spirit of a curious child examining the very essence of nature—not naturalistically, not academically, but creatively. Working with forms to see if they succeed, as nature herself would. For Jack, "process" is one of the key words here; he was not making a statement about simple ecology, but was more interested in how nature goes about its business.

He explored his questions through assemblages of evocative forms, such as the 1996 piece *Time Dances Slowly*. This wonderfully evocative helmeted creature, with a series of tiny beautifully formed drawers opening to create a semblance of face, is both gentle and menacing. Those of us scared of spiders might approach it with care, though we would warm to its surfaces and feel enchanted by its detail and humor. "This is a jewel box that literally grew from an abstract sketch. It was one of those pieces that I just started making and it came together as it wanted. In retrospect, I see that there are references in the piece to a wide range of times and cultures—hence the name, which refers to the beauty that is the continuum. We are such small specks."

When I ask Jack what he means by the "natural process," he tells me that he and his partner Helen, a horticulturalist, can spend hours exploring a single square yard (meter) of ground, just seeing what's there. "Natural process represents truth, religion, philosophy, and more." Pressed to say whether he considers himself a furniture maker or an artist, he responds, "The characteristics and intention of my work are probably similar to artwork, but I don't know. I do like my forms that play on that edge. In a way it doesn't matter. I see myself as an artist; that's how I







run my life. I put an artist's emphasis on the quality of the journey, but I probably define my medium as furniture."

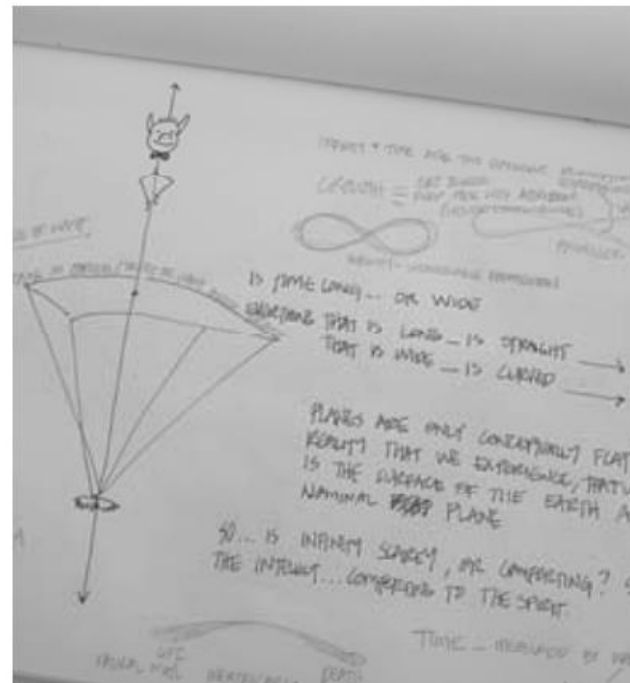
Looking at some of Jack's more recent pieces, it is hard to identify their function. Are these pieces of sculpture masquerading as furniture? When asked, he gives an interesting answer: "Today we have furniture that's so multifunctional, a bit like a Swiss Army knife—it does this and that. I think it's also valuable to have furniture that functions really well but does so in a very specific way. It may just be a table to hold a small collection of shells, but it can do that perfectly, with great meaning and celebration and ritual."

Regarding his relationship with sculpture, Jack says, "You know, it's a pity that sculpture can't be more interactive. I think it's wonderful that my work invites contact, invites interaction—that interaction is essential to it. Sculpture that is not interactive tends to be more intellectual and conceptual, and less emotional. The result has a kind of distance to it, kind of like the difference between a hug and a handshake."

Although they have kept the house in Philadelphia, a few years back Jack and Helen bought a farm and workshop in rural New Jersey, and he moved his operations there. His new work has shifted from a "natural process" to an "organic process" that allows him to function more intuitively. Again, the word "process" is important: "The earlier work required so much rational time and thinking to make it happen. I found myself moving further away from an organic process because it needed so much engineering. Now I try and play and make things I really love by being responsive. I simply put them together with no particular intention, just assembling, connecting."

I asked Jack about *Old Pine Story*, a piece I find especially evocative. He told me, "That's a good example of this new, more organic process. I got that really powerful totem when it was upright. It had been in a fire, I mean really scorched. By laying it down it became okay again, more sublime . . . and then the white felt seemed to work to enhance that." There is a particular place for work like this. It is right on the outer edge of our experience of furniture. Jack helps us explore the possibility of objects that are both meaningful and useful—things that could help us tell the world who we are, describe our tastes and vanities, our loves and fashions. He makes deliberately challenging and difficult pieces, some of which are only minimally functional and could only just be called furniture. Yet they still function as furniture: they are not sculpture. Because of their resonance with living beings, their understanding of the structure of nature, their complexity and subtlety, his forms and imagery have a place that puts them well within the criteria of furniture that is about something—furniture with soul.

Jack's habit of working without depending on gallery representation has served him well for many years. Although he insists that he is certainly not anti-gallery,



his nature and independence ensure that he can always sell his work himself. His more recent organic work is not well suited to the commissioning process, but Jack is fortunate to have clients who are happy to trust that whatever evolves will be special. Those clients are truly heroes and heroines, for without patronage—more specifically, patronage of quality—quality itself cannot exist.

When I visit Jack's shop in the New Jersey countryside, he is working on the pieces of what will become a bed for just such a patroness. "This is for the perfect client, the second piece I've made for her. I guess she's a retired government official who has a nice house and enjoys spending some of her money on art. I did some drawings for her before I started the piece, but later I called up to tell her that it really wasn't working and ask if I could do something different. She said 'Okay, that's fine—I like the fact that you care.' People like her—wow."

It's hot outside as I watch Jack working alone, but the shop is cool and the doors are open. Jack uses a pattern-maker's vise to hold the job. It allows him to move the piece around into the light to see where he's going and get at the cut. He works with the freedom earned by experience, cutting curved lines, bending a Japanese saw to clear the waste and open the form. He refines as he shapes, cutting in with a chisel, followed sometimes by a spokeshave, sometimes a rasp or file, as the image unfolds before him. Lou Reed blasts out of the workshop music system, working the melody as Jack works his process. Somehow the music seems to merge with the shaping of the wood—both creators knowing, at last, exactly what they are doing.

