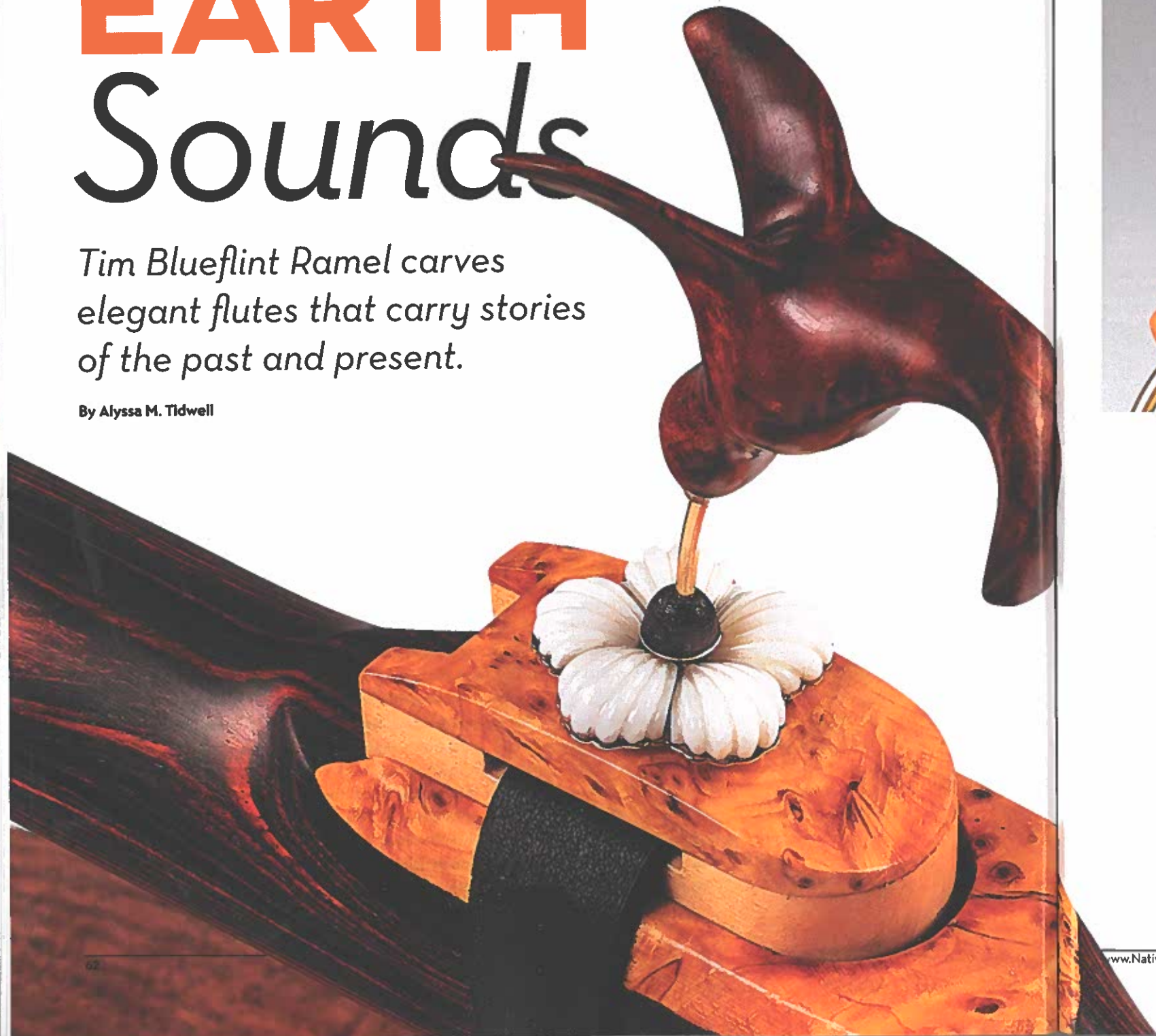


EARTH Sounds

Tim Blueflint Ramel carves elegant flutes that carry stories of the past and present.

By Alyssa M. Tidwell



Beauty Before Me, Mexican rosewood, Alaskan yellow cedar burl, blackwood, ancient redwood burl, vintage Japanese coral, 14k gold, commercial tanned deer hide, natural-edge curly maple and brass, 30 x 13 x 11¼" (overall display)



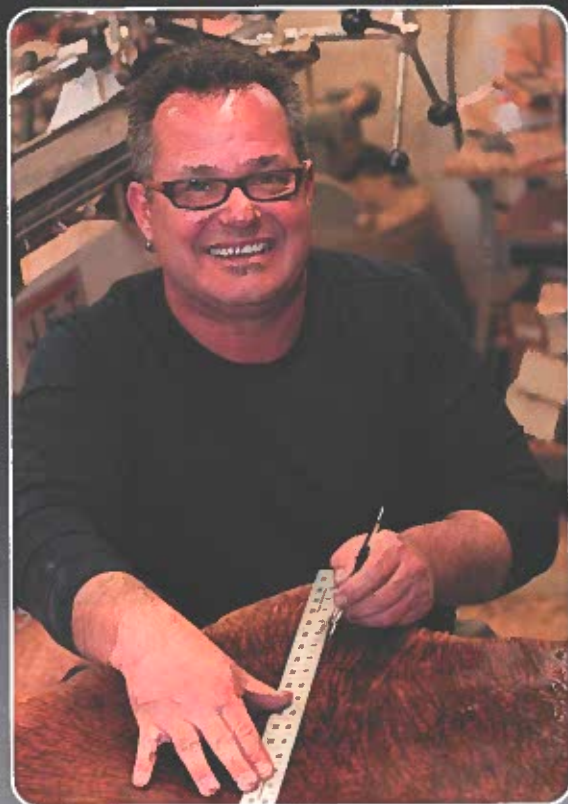
Tim Blueflint Ramel's story starts with something we can all connect to. Relationships. Family. A desire to capture and preserve the memories most important to us, and to preserve those things for the people we love.

A distinguished flute carver in the Native American art community and citizen of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Blueflint uses exotic woods with modern techniques and finishes to create stunning, intricate instruments. One of his basic flutes takes about eight hours, and if he's working on a more artistic flute with exotic wood inlays and jewelry elements (yes, he's a jeweler as well), it can take months. He's also decorated with dozens of awards and honors from art shows across the country, and we'll dive into that, no doubt. But, first, it's important to pause and look at where he's been in order to understand where he's going—what passions and

motivations have carved him into the artist he is today.

"It was a long journey to get here. There were a lot of sidetracks along the way," Blueflint begins. "My grandmother was a silversmith, and so when I was a teenager I used to mess around in her studio...and my grandfather was a flute player. So his friends would come over and they'd play their flutes in the kitchen, and I just always grew up with it. There's a difference between taking something for granted and growing up with something, just experiencing it as a normal part of life," he reflects.

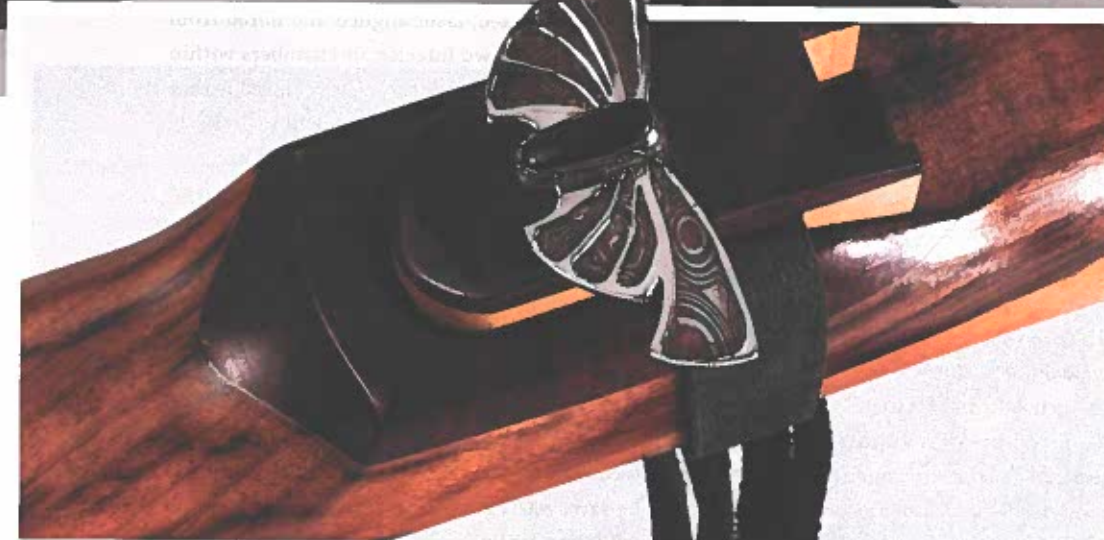
Then, when Blueflint was in his early 20s, his grandfather passed away. "You know when you have those 'one of these days' moments? Where you say, 'One of these days, I'm going to do *blank*!' When my grandpa passed away, I realized how much my grandmother loved flute music. And I told myself, 'One of these days I'm going to learn the flute and play it for my granny.'"



Duality of the True Warrior, myrtlewood burl, African blackwood, maple burl, turquoise, fabricated, stamped and formed sterling silver



Mariposa Musings, curly pinto myrtlewood, African blackwood, manzanita burl, natural turquoise, leather, sterling silver and Mokume gane



He continues, "It's very rare that you can actually pick out the absolute moment where it all began, and this is one of those moments. I was determined to learn to play the flute for my grandma."

Blueflint played the flute for years before starting to *make them*.

"I carried in my memory the sounds of my grandfather and his friends and their flutes...I was searching for that old sound." In 2005, the artist decided to start designing flutes he hoped would capture the music of his grandfather. It took about two

years of experimentation before Blueflint would find the specific sound he'd been searching for.

That "old sound" he refers to is called the "warble." The sound is akin to an accomplished vocalist who can achieve a very controlled vibrato, but in truth, it's much more than that. It's like something from the earth, primal and ancient. Like a bird.

"What it actually is is a multi-phonetic oscillation that happens within the sound chamber of the flute based on differing pressure," Blueflint explains. "The way I was taught was that particular sound was like a

prayer. It was a cry for help that connected things from above and below. The flute originally came to us as a healing instrument, to heal us from the inside out. So it's a spiritual instrument...Then I had to refine it, because it's a very raw sound. I wanted to learn how to control it, how to manipulate it. That took another several years. At some point, I realized that all of the potential was there for these flutes to evolve into a world class instrument and fine art."

It was in 2011 that Blueflint won his first major award, which came from the Indian Arts and Crafts Association. This is also when he shifted to making flutes full time. Four years later, he won the Bernard Ewell Innovation Award at the *Santa Fe Indian Market* for his double flute *Horse stealing songs beneath a Comanche moon*. A double flute is two complete flutes tuned to each other identically and able to be played individually or together. It follows the rules of Cartesian harmonics and can play seven different drones.

An especially significant piece is his *Duality of the True Warrior*. A unique and ergonomically designed bass flute, it's crafted from myrtlewood burl, African blackwood, maple burl, turquoise, fabricated, stamped and formed sterling silver. It's a study in "minimalism and understated elegance," he says, and was designed to be played like a modern saxophone. What makes the piece so invaluable for Blueflint, though, is the meaning it holds—a tribute to his father.

"*Duality of the True Warrior* is an interpretation of the man that molded me, not through words, but rather his acts and deeds. It is a memory of lessons personally seen and of stories told by those who served with him, men that pledged their lives and called each other 'brother,' says Blueflint. "My father was a true warrior, serving actively [for] over 22 years in the U.S. Marine Corps, with two tours of battle in the Korean Conflict and three tours in the Vietnam War. During times of conflict, he was awarded two Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star and a Silver Star, among many other decorations. He was most proud of the love story that spanned more than 60 years with my mother and his children. His loving devotion to my mother is a true lesson in love, commitment and hope. An artist himself, he was my biggest supporter and fan."

Completed in March 2022, Blueflint's *Beauty*

Before Me recently won First Place in the Diverse Arts – Musical Instruments category at the centennial *Santa Fe Indian Market*, First Place in the Musical Instruments category at the 30th annual *Eiteljorg Indian Market & Festival* and the Judge's Choice Award at the 64th annual *Heard Museum Guild Indian Fair & Market*. A stunning and ornately crafted

piece, *Beauty Before Me* showcases some of the best of Blueflint's skill, with a hummingbird made of ancient redwood burl and 14k gold perched atop a flower of Japanese coral. "Exhibition grade exotic and domestic woods are laminated, laser aligned and bored from each end, forming two interior air chambers within the flute. Exacting concert tuning is achieved within a unique, climate controlled environment at precisely 72 degrees Fahrenheit," he explains. "The exterior is shaped by a combination of lathe turning and extensive hand-sanding. The finish is applied in eight layers of sprayed, pre-catalyzed lacquer, wet sanded between each coat and finally hand buffed and polished to a warm, natural glow."

Blueflint's adventures have also led him into television.

It was 2012, shortly after he'd walked away from his 18-year job to pursue art full time. The first thing he did, he says, was a show outside Seattle performing and exhibiting his flutes. After that, he spent a month driving along the Oregon coast talking with art galleries.

One day while driving down the coast, his phone rings. On the other end is a man speaking in a heavy French accent, and Blueflint immediately thinks it's a prank call from one of his friends. So, he hangs up. The man calls back immediately and introduces himself as the producer of the Discovery Channel's *How It's Made*. "We want to feature you on the show," the producer says.

A few months later, in the fall, the Discovery Channel sent a film crew out and shot everything in Blueflint's studio. "It was a process," the artist

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- » Timothy Nevaquoya
- » Calvert Nevaquoya
- » Alex Maldonado
- » Leroy Cully
- » Brian Akipa
- » Aaron White

recalls. "They shot 11 hours of film in one day, and that got edited down to 4 minutes and 45 seconds. Then they sent me the director's cut, and I had to go through it frame by frame and explain to the writer of the show exactly what was happening." The episode was released the following year in 14 languages and 38 countries.

Blueflint's work truly is a conduit for creativity. A number of prominent musicians have played his flutes, including Grammy Award-winner Mary Youngblood and respected composer, orchestrator and recording artist William Hoshal, whom Blueflint calls a dear friend of more than 40 years.

"It's pretty amazing," he says. "I think about where and why my career started. How this whole journey started. Because I never expected it to be a career. It was a path that started with a deep love for my grandmother, and a memory. I've been blessed over the years with so many friends and clients and collectors.

"I mainly work in solitude," Blueflint continues. "I think a lot. I have a lot of quiet time in my life, and I reflect, and I remember, and I dissect...So when I think about these special flutes I make, it all begins with a story. And then I have to ask myself, how do I tell this story? What's the lesson here, the statement contained within the story? And then, visually, how do I represent that story so it's told in the cleanest simplest artistic terms? How do I make someone feel the essence of the story just by looking at a piece? Many of these pieces, the designs evolve for years. And then as you're making it, you have to have confidence in the piece, the design and the message to allow it the space to evolve."

Blueflint is currently vice president of the Board of Directors for the Native Arts Community Foundation and has served on the Education Foundation Board for the former Indian Arts and Crafts Association, among other prominent roles in the arts community. He's also a member of the World Flute Society. ■



Waterbird Dreams at the Morning, sandcast sterling silver, curly myrtlewood and madrone burl, ebony and leather