

STAGE WHISPER

SINCE THE DAWN OF VLOGGING, WOOD WHISPERER **MARC SPAGNUOLO** HAS BEEN USING VIDEOS TO EDUCATE AND ENTERTAIN FELLOW WOODWORKERS. HE TALKS TO *F&C*

Cast your mind back to the dim and distant past. 2006, to be precise. YouTube is in its infancy and the Apple Video iPod is gathering a head of steam. 'I had been listening to audio podcasts for a while but then suddenly, these devices were capable of playing user-generated videos,' recalls Marc Spagnuolo, whom you may know as The Wood Whisperer. 'There were only a handful of people doing it and most of the shows were focused on either the tech industry or pure entertainment. So I decided to try my hand at making videos aimed squarely at woodworkers.'

Marc dug out an old JVC camcorder, charged it up and started messing around in his workshop. 'My Apple laptop had built-in editing software, so I tried my hand at editing the clips and eventually ended up with a pretty serviceable video. Back in 2006, that was just the beginning,' he recalls. But from that humble beginning Marc has grown into a top vlogger with some 840,000 YouTube subscribers and 296,000 Instagram followers.

Marc was working in biotech when he got interested in woodworking after buying his first home. He had lots of little projects to do around the house such as flooring, tiling and baseboards. 'In the bathroom, there was an old medicine chest and my wife asked if there was a way to turn it into a built-in shelf unit, since we had no need for a traditional medicine chest. That was the first thing I made that started to venture into the world of true woodworking and furniture-making. From there, I started watching TV shows about woodworking and my interest grew rapidly,' Marc says.

Marc hadn't had much early education in woodworking – although seeing his stepfather build and fix things around the home as a child gave him a can-do mindset when it came to doing up his own house. As mentioned above, there were no YouTube woodworking videos at that time where he could learn the craft. Marc took a few in-person workshops, but mainly learned his craft by watching DVDs and episodes of *Woodworks*, the woodworking TV show made by California-based David Marks, and Norm Abrams' *The New Yankee Workshop*. He says: 'Eventually, I worked up the courage to ask David if he'd ever take on a student or apprentice. On two occasions, I went to

work with him on an extended vacation of sorts and worked on projects in his shop during my stay. It wouldn't be fair to call that an apprenticeship, but it was about as close as I could get.'

EARLY WORK

After his medicine chest project Marc built a birch nightstand held together with biscuits, which he sees as the first real piece of furniture he made. 'This was also the first project that showed me I could actually make furniture that was competitive in quality with commercial furniture stores,' he recalls. A biotech colleague heard he was getting into furniture-making and asked if Marc would be interested in building an entertainment centre. 'This was back in the day when entertainment centres were those large monstrosities that housed deep 36in tube TVs, so we're talking something quite substantial,' he explains. 'They also expressed interest in the Stickley style, which was completely new to me at the time. I took on the job and was proud to deliver a pretty nice end product. I suppose that was the first transaction that made me feel like I would really need to start taking the woodworking seriously as a potential side business or full-time gig.'

As he built up his furniture skills, Marc also grew his video skills. 'YouTube was just getting started and wasn't really taken seriously by anyone at the time, so the exercise of getting an edited video online and distributed on multiple devices as well as a website was a lot of work,' he says. 'But I put in the time to learn the process and launched *The Wood Whisperer* as a show as well as *thewoodwhisperer.com*.' As his original aim in making the videos was to try and convince potential clients that it was worth paying for his work because of the love and attention that went into the furniture, he was surprised by the huge following his videos gathered. 'It soon became clear that my real customers were my fellow woodworkers,' he says. 'There was almost no woodworking on TV at that time and the online video world was just beginning to blossom, so for a while I was the only game in town. While I was certainly surprised, in retrospect it's pretty clear that we were just in the right place at the right time,' he says modestly.





BACK TO SCHOOL

The Wood Whisperer video series forms the core of Marc's business and is free for anyone to download. 'Because it's free and often advertiser supported, we're forced to create content on that platform that's very digestible for a general audience,' Marc says. 'As a natural-born teacher, I get the most satisfaction out of really digging into a topic and conveying that information to others, and in the realm of YouTube, that sort of detailed content doesn't really do very well.' So in 2008 he launched an online school called The Wood Whisperer Guild. He explains: 'My goal was to create a safe place for people to receive top-quality instruction from talented woodworking instructors all over the US. I really wanted it to be the next best thing to taking an in-person class. And in some ways, it ended up being even better. Today, we have over 60 courses featuring 12 world-class instructors.'

As well as inspiring others, Marc takes a lot of inspiration himself from people he follows on social media including Instagram, Facebook and YouTube. But he adds: 'A huge amount of my inspiration still comes from traditional resources like magazines, books and especially the old *Fine Woodworking Design* books. Whenever I'm stuck on an idea, I start there. I also have every episode of *Woodworks* on a Plex server at home, so I find David's videos are helpful for unlocking my creativity.' As he is always exploring builds his readers might find interesting, Marc finds himself jumping from one style to another, and doesn't see his work as having guiding style per se. 'I almost never feel compelled to make my work fit into any particular paradigm. Instead, I try to live within the world of design rules set by the particular piece I'm building at that time,' he explains. 'Now that said, I often hear from people that they could pick out my work in a line-up, so what do I know? And if I were pressed to consider a guiding principle, it's simply to do the best work I can and have fun doing it.'

While he loves building and teaching, Marc doesn't feel like a natural designer, and says the process is both frustrating and gratifying. 'I often find myself blocked creatively,' he says. 'If anything I've designed comes out looking pleasing to someone, I doubt they realise just how gruelling and stressful the process was for me. Part of the challenge is that everything I do is captured in video and the plans for the project are often made available to the public in some form, so I have a lot more pressure on my shoulders to not only create something good, but to do it in a way that makes sense and is easily replicated by other woodworkers.'

His design process starts with a simple hand sketch, which he then fleshes out in SketchUp. 'I rarely sketch the full project digitally, however. I just use it as a tool to work out proportions and some of the more complex joinery I might need to execute,' he says. 'When I'm stumped, I'll often do a quick Google search for inspiration or I'll take a break from designing to go watch some old *Woodworks* episodes.'

Marc adds: 'I also have a couple of secret weapons with my designs: friends. In my line of work, it's important that I form partnerships with other talented woodworkers either for the production of content or plans. These people often represent sounding boards for my ideas and I can often shoot a quick text and a photo to a friend to ask for an opinion. And in some cases,

I'll fully collaborate with another woodworker behind the scenes to help to develop a design I might be struggling with. I have to give a shout out to my buddy Brian Benham (brianbenham.com), who not only does all of our plan creation for *The Wood Whisperer* and The TWW Guild, but also frequently helps me with my designs.'

HYBRID WOODWORKING

The Wood Whisperer workshop is currently in a converted 1970s single-storey firehouse. 'We moved in about a year ago and renovated just about everything, including the roof and the interior of the office spaces and kitchen, and we plan on staying put for a while,' Marc says. 'The shop space consists of two large bays where they used to park the fire trucks. I have pretty much everything I need in terms of power, and even though we have about 1,200 sq ft we're already outgrowing it since the shop space now includes things like a laser engraver and a space for lumber sales.'

Marc describes himself as a 'hybrid woodworker' and has even written a book on the topic: *Hybrid Woodworking: Blending Power & Hand Tools for Quick, Quality Furniture*, published by Popular Woodworking Books. 'My favourite way to build furniture is using the best and most fun tool for the job,' he explains – and that generally means combining power and hand tools 'to make great things happen'. Marc says: 'I focus on power tools for the ultimate in efficiency and repeatability, but rely on hand tools for the detail and finesse work.' The one tool he doesn't use much is a CNC, although has owned one in the past and plans to again in the future. 'I use CNC to make products and templates but that's really about it,' he says. 'I don't use the tool to its fullest potential, mostly because that's just not the kind of woodworking I want to do. The CNC sometimes gets the fun jobs and for me, woodworking is very hands-on. So I have great respect for CNC and I'm sure I'll use it more as time goes on, but at this point it's definitely on my list of tools I specifically do not go to, even though I could.'

His favourite woods to work with are what he calls classic domestics, mainly cherry and walnut. 'Both are timeless, beautiful, and easy to work,' he says. 'I sometimes work with plastic, metal and glass and all three of those have a whole different set of rules for cutting and processing. I find them all to be much less forgiving than wood. I recently completed a sideboard featuring torched copper panels. While it was fun and interesting, I was glad to be done with the copper.' He tends to gravitate towards hand-applied finishes that are safer both for him and for the environment. 'Since I really don't have to build for clients anymore, I don't have to be so concerned about my furniture being bulletproof,' he says. 'If one of my pieces needs a little love, I have no problem grabbing a can of oil and sprucing it up.'

There's no better teacher than first-hand experience. So even if you're just now building your skillset, go out to the shop and exercise those skills as much as possible.



STAND-OUT PROJECTS

In 2010 Marc set up Woodworkers Fighting Cancer, a yearly community woodworking build that raises cash for cancer charities. Over the past 10 years the initiative has raised more than US\$100,000 (£79,000). These builds are among Marc's favourite projects to work on, and he also loves making things for a specific need in his home. 'Back in Denver, we had a transom window in our bedroom and my wife complained frequently about waking up too early, as the rising sun would stream in every morning,' he recalls. 'The window was large and consisted of three arched panes with a long arched trim at the top. To block the sun, I created three custom-fit plantation shutters that were able to completely block out the sun. I had never made shutters before and I was extremely pleased with the way it turned out, and my wife was thrilled with the ability to control the incoming light.'

His current project is a walk-in closet for his wife. 'In our old house, she had a beautiful closet and had room for all of her clothes,' Marc says. 'Where we live now, the closet is a lot smaller and featured wire shelves that fell down within the first week of living there. So I'm making her some nice 8ft-tall units with lots of hanging rods and adjustable shelves, as well as drawer unit on one side. After that? Who knows. I almost never know what I'm doing beyond the current project.'

Marc loves to challenge himself and, as time goes on, has been concentrating more and more on fine details, pleasing proportions and creative forms. 'Every time I design something I feel pressure to outdo myself - I guess it's a lot like a game of golf in that way,' he says. 'I'm always playing to improve my previous score, not so much compete with other people. And without a doubt, my most recent project, a walnut sideboard, was one of the most challenging. The biggest challenge came from some questionable

choices I made early on regarding the orientation of a couple of rails. I wanted them to be flat to help retain a sleek, low-profile look, but the structure really could have benefited from a classic rail with the side of the board supporting the case. I spent a great deal of time trying to design myself out of that hole.'

While he loves teaching, Marc's first and foremost love is woodworking. 'Making videos can be fun, but it's also a lot of additional work. When folks ask me how long it takes to build something, my time frame is meaningless to them since I have to include a lot of time spent talking, writing, moving cameras and lights, and so on.' Looking forward, he doesn't have specific plans other than continuing along the woodworking journey he has embarked on. 'For my videos, I really have no idea where we'll be in the future,' he says. 'Online video is now a very competitive and challenging space and the rules are constantly changing. So it's impossible to know what our show will look like in five years - though I suspect it will be much the same.'

Marc's one piece of advice to furniture makers is simply to get in the shop and build. 'These days it's very easy to find yourself in a cycle of watching videos and buying tools, but rarely building anything,' he says. 'There's no better teacher than first-hand experience. So even if you're just now building your skillset, go out to the shop and exercise those skills as much as possible. When you get stuck, search for help online and work your way through it.' When he's not working, Marc loves to spend time with his wife, two children and two dogs, to play video games and to barbecue. 'I actually have a YouTube channel called TWW BBQ where I occasionally post videos about cooking, just for fun,' he says.

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