



Give A Little Whistle / Grand champ Steve Herbst stands by the notion that 'whistling is an idea whose time has returned'.

SIDEBAR: WHISTLING BLOW-BY-BLOW (see end of text). Newsday; Long Island, N.Y.; Sep 23, 2002; Donald P. Myers. STAFF WRITER;

Abstract: People of a certain age find that the curious world of whistling evokes memories of a father whistling in the yard or a mother whistling in the kitchen. Jim Voltz, a Washington, D.C., whistling historian, said that one of the richest sources of whistling nostalgia comes from old newspaper obituaries. "People will say, 'Dad was known as the whistling postman of Idaho,'" said Voltz, 44, a whistler himself. "There were whistling doctors, whistling policemen, whistling farmers, usually local or family icons. Something about whistling makes people sentimental." Whistling might not be in American music much, but it's everywhere in our speech. [Steve Herbst] knows all the whistling puns and cliches and popular expressions. He's just one of many who whistle while they work - and he's not just whistling Dixie. A Casanova can use a wolf whistle to attract, or repel, a woman - and they might even wind up wetting their whistles with a cold one. Whistling in the dark or whistling by the graveyard are meant to portray confidence when faced with fear or danger or defeat.

Full Text: (Copyright Newsday Inc., 2002) Quotes: "You know how to whistle, don't you, Steve? You just put your lips together and blow." -Lauren Bacall to Humphrey Bogart in "To Have and Have Not"

Steve Herbst is the king of lip shtick. The 56-year-old Manhattan ad man knows how to whistle, all right. When he puts his lips together, puckers up and blows, the purity and power of the sound can take you back to the days when whistling was as American as Jiminy Cricket or Bacall and Bogart or seven diligent dwarfs who whistled while they worked. Herbst was crowned grand champion at the International Whistlers Convention in Louisburg, N.C., five months ago. He's a souvenir of an age when whistling was at the center of American culture, a less technological time when it seemed as if everybody whistled, or at least tried. Santa

Claus and Sherlock Holmes whistled. Charles Lindbergh and Albert Einstein whistled. Harpo Marx and Gene Kelly whistled. Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower and Woodrow Wilson whistled in the White House. Bing Crosby whistled on the radio. In the movie "The Bridge on the River Kwai," World War II Allied POWs whistled while they built. On television, the whistled theme of "The Andy Griffith Show" recalled rural America. Today, whistling is at the far fringe of American culture, an oddity, an annoyance, maybe even a joke. "Whistlers are compared to people who scream for cows and pigs," Herbst said the other day. "I'd like to be compared to a violin or a flute - not Jethro the hog caller." The world champion is not just another guy walking down Broadway whistling a happy tune. His signature song is the fast and furious "Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2" by Franz Liszt - so we're not talking "Turkey in the Straw" here. He's a lyrical whistler with a three-octave range - and his musical instrument is right there under his nose. An ideal gig would be to whistle the violin solo from "Scheherazade" with the New York Philharmonic. "Whistling is a lost art," Herbst said. "My goal is to be the go-to guy if anybody is looking for a whistler. I could hold my own with a symphony orchestra. I stand for the notion that whistling is an idea whose time has returned."

Trying to emulate his whistling father, Herbst started puckering up when he was a boy at PS 118 in Hollis, Queens. Before long, he was whistling Prokofiev and Rimsky-Korsakov on his way to school. In those days, whistling was about the only portable entertainment available. Today, boomboxes, Walkmans, cell phones and even wrist-TVs are everywhere. "We live in an age of serious entertainment overload," Herbst said. He was walking around the living room of the sixth-floor apartment overlooking the East River that he shares with his wife, Melinda; their dog, Sparky; and an emerald-green Solomon Island eclectus parrot named Verdi. "People want to be entertained today, rather than entertaining themselves," he said. "They're walking around with headphones on. Why bother to whistle?" People of a certain age find that the curious world of whistling evokes memories of a father whistling in the yard or a mother whistling in the kitchen. Jim Voltz, a Washington, D.C., whistling historian, said that one of the richest sources of whistling nostalgia comes from old newspaper obituaries. "People will say, 'Dad was known as the whistling postman of Idaho,'" said Voltz, 44, a whistler himself. "There were whistling doctors, whistling policemen, whistling farmers, usually local or family icons. Something about whistling makes people sentimental." What whistlers believe to be beautiful, soothing and fun, has long been considered by others to be a sign of an oddball or a disturbed mind. Peter Lorre played a whistling murderer in "M," director Fritz Lang's 1931 movie. In the same year, New York University philosophy professor Charles G. Shaw snarled to The New York Times: "Whistling is an unmistakable sign of the moron. No great or successful man ever whistles. No, it's only the inferior and maladjusted individual who ever seeks emotional relief in such a birdlike act as that of whistling." Einstein and Ike and Bing did all right while whistling, and so has Steve Herbst.

The former Dix Hills resident graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, where he sang and whistled in the school's glee club. He's a senior vice president at a Manhattan advertising and employee communications firm. Herbst has whistled at Avery Fisher and Carnegie halls. His television appearances include whistling the national anthem last Fourth of July on CBS' "The Early Show." As the reigning world champ, Herbst will appear Oct. 17-20 in Tulsa at the Puckerama Whistling Festival. He's got his own Web site, www.stevethewhistler.com. And he's got a CD out, "Broadway and Beyond." Still, the world champion feels like Rodney Dangerfield sometimes. "I was whistling at an affair one time, and some guy started laughing," Herbst said. "The idea of somebody whistling a serious piece of

music, or whistling a piece of music seriously, struck him as funny. He couldn't control his laughter and had to leave the room. So yeah, there's disrespect." If whistlers get little respect today, it hasn't always been that way. Herbst whistles while walking to work among Manhattan's skyscrapers. He might not object to having his whistling described as rhapsodically as O. Henry did for the title character in his 1909 short story "Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking": "Subdued, yet clear, with each note as true and liquid as a bobolink's, his whistle tinkled about the dim, cold mountains of brick like drops of rain falling into a hidden pool." Where's Peter Lorre when you need him? Menace or murder is not the usual mood attached to puckering up, but in the golden age of American radio and the movies, and in the early years of television, one of the most popular programs and film series was "The Whistler." The show and movies used an eerie 13-note whistle that set the mood for the opening spook: "I am the Whistler and I know many things for I walk by night. I know many strange tales hidden in the hearts of men and women who have stepped into the shadows. Yes, I know the nameless terrors of which they dare not speak." If you whistle today, it's not easy doing mad or sad or scary. You're pretty much limited to chipper or jolly or derring-do. When whistling is used at all today - in radio and television commercials for P.C. Richard & Son or with the Wal-Mart smiley face - it's meant to imply success or happiness or a carefree spirit. Whistling might not be in American music much, but it's everywhere in our speech. Steve Herbst knows all the whistling puns and clichés and popular expressions. He's just one of many who whistle while they work - and he's not just whistling Dixie. A Casanova can use a wolf whistle to attract, or repel, a woman - and they might even wind up wetting their whistles with a cold one. Whistling in the dark or whistling by the graveyard are meant to portray confidence when faced with fear or danger or defeat. Defeat for the whistling champion is trying to whistle for a New York cab - the two fingers in the mouth and the ear-splitting shriek. Herbst can't do it. How does he hail a cab? "I raise my arm," he said.

The world of competitive whistling includes pucker whistlers such as Herbst, knuckle-and-cupped-hand whistlers, finger-flute whistling done with an index finger, tongue-and-palate whistlers and open-mouth whistlers. Some can whistle out of both sides of their mouth at the same time. Competition at the 2002 International Whistlers Convention included 24 men and seven women. Competitive whistlers include the Puckulatory Pirate from Key West, Fla., and an old wire-service reporter in Oregon who's the only whistler ever to perform a duet with Bertha, the harmonica-playing elephant. There are doctors and lawyers and janitors. There used to be a guy who called himself Dr. Horatio Q. Birdbath. There's a group called The Three Tendons, which bills itself as "30 fingers, six hands, two lungs and one bicycle-tire pump." Many whistlers call their instrument a "pucculo." Herbst avoids the hokey stuff. "Whistling is certainly looked on as an oddity," he said, "but what I'm striving for is to have whistling accepted as a legitimate art form. I don't do silly too well." He calls whistling "loner art" because most of it is personal and private, meant to amuse just the whistler. Herbst whistled "Danny Boy" in the popular category and Liszt in the classical competition to win the world title. He got \$300 and a trophy. "Nobody is making a lot of money out of whistling, but I would like to," he said. "None of us is ready to quit the day job." Until Herbst went to his first whistling convention eight years ago, he felt like he was alone in the world. "When I went to the competition in North Carolina," Herbst said, "it was like finding my tribe after wandering the desert for 40 years on my own." The Herbst tribe itself also is musical, particularly his late father. Whistler's mother, Marjorie, now 83 and living in Pompano Beach, Fla., used to be a model, actress and Broadway showgirl. The whistling king's most valuable tools include lip balm and lots of water. "To see somebody go dry during a performance is not a

pretty thing," he said. Lip shtick has taken Steve Herbst to the top of the curious world of whistling. His wife, Melinda, 50, an attorney for a major Manhattan corporation, said the benefits of puckering up go way beyond whistling. "He's a good kisser," said the wife of the world champ. "He's got great lips."

WHISTLING BLOW-BY-BLOW

It used to be cool to whistle. Whistling was first used not as music but as language. Ancient warriors and hunters whistled signals. As music, whistling has stretched across American history as a celebratory sound. Alice Shaw, a socialite known as the "whistling prima donna," was the most popular American whistler in the 19th century. She toured the country and the world at a time when women weren't supposed to be whistling. In 1889, the Des Moines Mail Times raved after one of her concerts: "All beholders held their breaths as the broad expanse of snowy decolleted bosom heaved gently, the handsome head and face uplifted, the rich ruby lips puckered kissably, and a soft, sweet, silvery trill shot forth, at once electrifying the audience and suggesting the presence of an impossibly cultured canary." Today on Gomera, one of the Canary Islands, schoolchildren are required to learn to whistle - in order to save the island's centuries-old whistled language. Whistling enabled shepherds to communicate from miles away. At the turn of the last century, whistling was popular in vaudeville shows. In "The Jazz Singer," the first talking movie in 1927, Al Jolson put two fingers in his mouth and whistled "Toot, Toot, Tootsie." In the 1940s, blind Fred Lowery sold a million recordings of "Indian Love Call." Elmo Tanner whistled another No. 1 hit that year, "Heartaches," with the Ted Weems big band. Whistling permeated popular American culture in the 1950s. The whistled theme of the movie "The High and the Mighty" won the 1954 Oscar for scoring. Three years earlier in the Broadway opening of "The King and I," Gertrude Lawrence sang "Whistle a Happy Tune": Whenever I feel afraid I hold my head erect And whistle a happy tune So no one will suspect I'm afraid The last whistling song in the top 20 was Whistling Jack Smith's "I Was Kaiser Bill's Batman," in 1967. In the 1980s, Simon Argevitch whistled a song with 17 cigars in his mouth - and it's still a record. In the 1990s, Garth whistled the "Star Trek" theme in "Wayne's World." Billy Joel whistled on "The Stranger." And this year, on his album "About to Choke," contemporary country singer Vic Chesnutt features a Jiminy Cricket whistling solo on the song "Swelters." Whistling has been used during peace and war - as secret codes by soldiers, by kids in their backyards and by urban gangs on the street. As an object of folklore, whistling ranges from a representation of joy to an omen of evil spirits. The superstitious say that you're not supposed to whistle in theaters, aboard ships or in newsrooms because it's bad luck. Puckering up may be an oddball survivor of folklore and myth, but Jim Voltz, a whistling historian from Washington, D.C., said whistling is common currency around the world. Birds do it. Whales and dolphins do it. Even educated tourists do it. "If you go to another country, you might not speak the language, but you can still connect with whistling," Voltz said. "It's a universal language. If you whistle, people will smile."

-Donald P. Myers