

## Whistle While He Works



**Steve Herbst is the International Grand Champion Whistler, but he says getting respect for his art is harder than winning the title was.**

by John Tanasychuk, Staff Writer

A few weeks ago, Steve Herbst jammed with jazz guitarist Les Paul. He has graced the stages of both Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. He has appeared on *The Today Show* and CNN. But perhaps the greatest honor Herbst has known came last April when he took home a trophy and \$300 after four days in Louisburg, N.C.

Herbst, 56, won the title of International Grand Champion Whistler.

"You know how to whistle, don't you, Steve?" Lauren Bacall famously purred in 1944's *To Have and Have Not*. "You just put your lips together and blow."

Actually, it's a whole lot harder than that.

Just ask Herbst.

Even harder than whistling, says the world's best, is getting the respect he deserves for devoting so much of his life to perfecting his talent.

Lack of respect is the reason the New Yorker and vice president of an advertising agency has hired a public relations firm to promote him.

"Part of the challenge is getting people to appreciate that whistling as I do is being a musician. I would grant that somebody who goes out on the street and whistles for a cab is not a musician," he says. "I consider myself a professional whistler. My definition is if somebody pays you, that's what makes you a professional. Seven years ago, I was on the Regis and Kathie Lee show."

On Saturday, Herbst appears at [Sally O'Brien's Irish Pub](#) in Fort Lauderdale, where he'll whistle several tunes from his Irish repertoire. It was his rendition of Danny Boy, along with Franz Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2, that snagged him the international award.

"Whistling is an idea whose time has returned," are the words you'll find on his Web site.

Whistling may have last caught the attention of the American public during the eight-year run of *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-68), with its famous whistled theme song, and Herbst thinks whistling has become a lost art.

"If you call up your parents, they can probably tell you that they remember whistlers from the '30s, '40s and '50s," says Herbst. He mentions the so-called whistling troubadour, Elmo Tanner, who had a hit called Heartaches with the Ted Weems band in 1933. Movie theme songs have been whistled, from 1954's *The High and the Mighty* to 1957's *The Bridge on the River Kwai*.

But try to come up with a famous whistled tune in the past few years and you quickly come up dry.

Dry is a "don't go there" word for whistlers. For Herbst, dry lips mean a less than stellar performance. Colds and coughs can wreak havoc, but worse is chapped lips. "If my lips are out of shape, I'm out of business," he says.

Allen de Hart, founder of the 30-year-old International Whistlers Convention and National Whistlers Museum in Louisburg, N.C., says that what makes Herbst such a good whistler is his musical background.

"He already has a vocal art in singing where he has to be aware of all of the fundamental qualities like timbre and tune," says de Hart. "He's a trained vocalist."

Herbst has been a member of the University Glee Club of New York City for 25 years. But it was at college that he first offered to whistle publicly. Until then, it was strictly for personal pleasure.

"One day," says Herbst, "the conductor of the glee club was supposed to whistle something that simulated the flute and he came up dry."

That word again.

"I came up to him afterwards and I said I can do that. For the rest of my undergraduate years at Penn, that's where I would come in and take over." Once, the audience included members of the Japanese royal family.

His mother, Marjorie Herbst, who lives in Pompano Beach, says she was unaware of her son's talent until he got serious about a decade ago.

"He told me he used to whistle outside. He was with the dog. He was doing whatever he was doing and I was always in the kitchen," she says. "He's always

had so many activities. He just happens to have an unusual skill."

It was Marjorie Herbst who approached Sally O'Brien's about her son appearing Saturday with the pub's house band, Fire in the Kitchen.

Herbst has had his share of solos both singing and whistling with his New York City choral group, but he knows he's a better whistler. His whistling range is three octaves. As a baritone, he can sing two octaves and five notes.

"Which gives me the opportunity to whistle things I would never sing. And the reality is, singers are a dime a dozen and there's a good argument to be made that no one else in the world can whistle like I can."

Herbst says most of us can recall someone in our lives who whistled, perhaps a grandmother at the ironing board or an uncle in his workshop.

"People don't do that anymore," he says. "People have forgotten it in an age of portable entertainment, like boom boxes and Walkmans and cell phones. You now have games in cell phones. People are not into internal entertainment, self-entertainment."

But Herbst says those who've heard his CD, *Broadway and Beyond*, tell him they find it both relaxing and soothing.

Herbst is what is known as an instrumental whistler, as opposed to a bird whistler. He's also a pucker whistler, which means he purses his lips to whistle and creates sound while breathing in or out. There are also tongue and palate whistlers, throat whistlers, finger whistlers and hand whistlers.

To win the international award, whistlers must compete in two categories: classical and popular. In 1996 and 2001, Herbst took home second prize. "What put me over the edge [last year] was the fact that I rendered Hungarian Rhapsody by Liszt. Judges are concerned with pitch, degree of difficulty. If you go out there and do 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' very nicely, that's not going to do it."

If there's one tune Herbst would love to be able to whistle, it's Flight of the Bumble Bee. "And I do know a woman who can whistle it," he says. "But I've been tackling more and more difficult pieces. If I were just doing it for my own pleasure and not looking to be a champion, I could stick with stuff that is beautiful and easy."

He figures he whistles about two hours every day.

He whistles in the shower. He whistles while walking his dog. He whistles on his 17-minute walk to work, which has led some to call him a pied piper of whistling, as many people have followed along to hear.

But aren't there some people who are annoyed?

"There are people who don't appreciate it. For one reason or another, they usually find it distracting. It's not because it isn't pleasant to hear. There's one guy in my office who used to be across the hall. Eventually, he moved his office to the other side of the hall."

While Herbst has no plans to give up his day job, he does have some professional whistling goals.

"My goals include being a guest artist with symphony orchestras all over the world. I would love to be doing that. What would be very doable practically -- and audiences would love it -- would be a pops situation where you have a night of Sondheim, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Bernstein." Herbst also wants to do more CDs. He's sold "several hundred" of his first, but gets requests for classical, Christmas and Irish selections.

He needs an agent.

"I've been looking for an agent that has the vision to say: 'We've got something here. We've got something unique. We've got something no one else has.'"

So far, the search has come up dry.