



# Making Music with a Plane

*A celebrated craftsman explains his devotion to an indispensable cabinetmaking tool*

by James Krenov

When I was in school in Sweden, we had regular European planes that had to be held in a certain way. For some reason, curiosity or whatever, I made a little wooden plane out of maple. Suddenly, my friends are gathered around, and we're making shavings. I realized the versatility of that little block of wood. It was comfortable with two hands on it. It was comfortable with one hand doing a tiny little edge or corner. It had a new dimension because it did not force me to relate to it very rigidly in one certain way.

I don't think that you can prove in a court of law that these little wooden planes make thinner or better shavings than any other plane. I think the emotional element is the main difference, not necessarily performance only. It's a connection, an intimacy. The really good plane becomes an instrument. It becomes something that you want to make music with.

I used to make planes as a kind of therapy. Between jobs, I couldn't be idle and sit around. I'd finish a piece and have time to catch my breath, so I'd make a couple of planes. Some I'd give away: I've never sold one, and I never will.

There's no magic in any tool until you put the magic in it. The magic doesn't come with the tool. There's no one plane that will do everything. Mine go from jointer size down to very small. My favorite one is the little cocobolo one pictured in *A Cabinetmaker's Notebook*. It was my favorite, and I gave it away to someone very nice. I don't have a sentimental attachment to the planes anymore. I just want the ones I have to work well for me, and it doesn't matter which one it is; they are all good.

## Don't be a slave to accuracy

You come to a point where you can either engineer a plane or follow your common

sense logic and feelings about it and arrive at about the same point. I make a good plane and then somebody else comes along and tells me it's a good plane because this angle is like this, and this thing is like that, and you've got the wedge this way, and you've got the opening like that. And I say, "Oh, is that what makes it good? I didn't worry about that. I just made it."

So somewhere the engineer and the peasant reach a parting of the ways, which

*"The first attempt with a plane that succeeded may have been the turning point of my life."*

is true throughout the craft. You can get so exact that you immobilize yourself with accuracy. I joke about it. You buy this square, and you pay \$400 for it and it's accurate to a 10,000th of an inch. Then all you've got to do is get yourself a job with Boeing building 747s and it's great. It's what you want, but it's not a woodworker's measurement, and it never will be. Somewhere there is a flexibility that relates to the kind of person you are and the kind

of work you do, and it has nothing to do with sloppiness. It's just flexible enough to keep you from being paralyzed.

Can you get results that are good with a metal plane? I think so, yes, and I've seen it. We've never said to our students here, "Put that thing away." As long as it's working well for them, and it's tuned up properly, and it's kept in perfect shape, and they do beautiful work. I would never want anyone to quote Jim Krenov as saying that you have to have a wooden plane. It's nice if you like them, but there isn't only one way.

## Making your first plane a success

My first suggestion would be to ask yourself, "Am I doing this out of curiosity, or do I believe in it? Do I intend to arrive at the point where this becomes the thing for me, and I know I can make a good wooden plane anytime I want to and I can do fine things with it?" If it's mere curiosity, then it becomes just like anything else we do for the sake of exercise. Just to prove that we can go through the ABCs of it.

I think it's important not to fail completely with the first plane, because then you might not make a second one. You could be missing something. Do try to get the essentials right on the first one, and get it to where, yes, it does work, and yes, I can make one better, and yes, I *will* make one better.

One key element is what happens when you raise or lower the pin in relation to where the shavings need to exit. You can put the pin so far down that you choke the plane up. But once you have this and a few other things right, then you're off and running. If I had the wood and the iron and the breaker, I'd have a plane done by evening, and I'd start using it the next morning. Tune it up, and forget about it.

The first little attempt with a plane that

succeeded may have been the turning point of my life because it opened up the fact that tools can be better, that tools can be more personal and intimate. Had I failed, I might have just fallen back into the general pattern. That doesn't mean I wouldn't have become a cabinetmaker, but I might never have been able to make music as I try to do.

### **Don't let sharpening take over**

A plane is no better than its cutting edge. But you can develop an imbalance in the relationship of your work and the sharpening. There should be a nice balance between the time you work and the time you care for your tools, whether it's a chisel, a knife, a plane or anything else.

The tendency ever since the Japanese waterstone thing is that people are more worried about the stone not being perfectly flat than about how they hold the iron or about working harmoniously. Even with a perfectly flat stone, they're not going to get what's needed. It's not in the stone. I observed in Japan some house builders who were pretty casual about their stones, yet they got their planes to sing.

There should be a balance there somewhere. Gradually, you arrive at a point where the sharpening is minimal rather than maximal. It won't be a chore anymore. You'll do it and do it fairly quickly.

I think that having two or three nice oilstones and a little bottle of kerosene can compete with having a Japanese waterstone, because the Japanese method of sharpening tools is almost an art form or ritual. Doing it haphazardly or not completing the process is neither here nor there. You can spend an awfully long time sharpening but what you're really doing is honing too much. If you hollow grind a tool, a very slight hollow, then all you need is to just hone until you get a tiny little burr, and then quickly move to a finer stone and not keep going on until you flatten out the hollow, because you'll always have the burr as long as you use that stone. So with just a few strokes, you get the scratches from the wheel off, and then you go to a finer stone right away.

I've had the same oilstones for 30 years, and I've never trued them up or anything, which doesn't speak well for me. I've got an old Carborundum that I found in Stockholm, a soft Arkansas and a hard Arkansas and a little kerosene and that's it. People wonder if I ever sharpen my tools because they hardly ever see me doing it. When I

do, it's just a little bit. It becomes self-defeating if carried too far because you're fussing more about your tools than you are working, and at some point, fussing just takes over.

I've got planes I haven't touched or adjusted or sanded or trued up for several years. I just pick them up, and they're ready to go. One thing that is amusing is if the last time I set a plane the air was very dry and since then it has rained and increased in humidity, I'll pick up the plane and it won't cut because the wood has expanded, a little bit and the iron is no longer protruding. The opposite is also true. If I set it on a very hu-

*"It's like  
a musical  
instrument that  
you have to tune  
up a little bit  
before you start  
the concert."*



mid day or part of the year and later we get a cold snap, I'll pick it up and it will really dig in, cutting much too deeply. It's like a musical instrument that you have to tune up a little bit before you start the concert.

I look at the plane from behind rather than in front. I look at the bevel and lower my eye to the level of the plane itself. I can see the glint before the iron reaches the level of the bottom of the plane, and then I tap on the iron very lightly. You'll never get a good cut if the iron is not absolutely parallel with the bottom of the plane. You'll get an angled cut. You want to tap the iron

itself, not the plane body. When you tap the plane body, you have no guarantee that the iron won't slip sideways as it moves forward or back. You do tap the back of the plane body to retract the iron. But readjust it by tapping the iron itself.

The wedge should not be too tight. You should be able to remove it easily with your fingers by just zig-zagging it out. The tendency is to really bear down on it, but you don't need to do that. You want a low-angle wedge. If you have a high-angle wedge, it's apt to kick out when you are doing coarse work.

You very seldom have to go back and true up a plane. If you notice a consistent misbehavior or if the plane tends to produce an arch or a dip, then you can fine-tune it. But it also becomes second nature with you. Where to press, now to do that. It's very minimal and elementary.

### **For cabinetmaking, the plane is a basic tool**

A plane is a favorite of mine by necessity. In other words, it is *the* tool in case work. With the kind of work that I and other cabinetmakers do most, it's almost indispensable. Because I started out not being able to afford a jointer and I only had a bandsaw, I discovered I couldn't even bandsaw anything without having a plane to true it up a little bit. I almost killed myself doing it, but it showed me how necessary the plane was, not how refined it should be but just how necessary it was.

I think there's a line between sentiment and positive emotion or creative emotion. In other words, you buy a yard sale tool and you fix it up as best you can and you know it will never sing, but it has something and gives you something emotionally. It has a sentimental value. Then there's this other element that is not sentimental, but is emotional, where you believe that you work better with this finely tuned instrument than you do with something more awkward or more coarse. That, I think, is the difference. You don't get carried away by the fact that it is an antique or that George Washington used it or something. You just think of what it will do and what you can do with it. □

*James Krenov works and teaches at the College of the Redwoods in Fort Bragg, Calif., and he has authored four books about craftsmanship and cabinetmaking. This article is adapted from conversations recorded in Fort Bragg in July 1996.*