"Behind the Lathe"

by Johnathan Burton

Bruce Boone

Top: This popular solid titanium fountain pen is known as Spectra. Bottom: Created by a patent-pending technique is Bruce's exotic hardword inlay rings. Pictured is Titanium and African Olivewood.

Bruce Boone might not have a huge background in pen making, but what he has accomplished in such a short amount of time is remarkable, at best, and has set him apart as one of the best.

One sign of a great artist is the instant recognition of one's work. After having seen the style of pens Bruce Boone has become known for creating, anyone looking at a line-up of pens will quickly spot the work by this member of the Pen Makers' Guild.

Born in New York, he moved to Georgia at the age of 8, along with his two older brothers and sister, when his parents bought a Dunkin' Donuts shop. "Growing up, I was the quiet guy that was always working on some kind of project. I was a technology geek before being a geek was cool," he said.

With parents that helped inspire and motivate, Bruce continued to create and build things as his interest in science and inventions grew. Not only had he built a working go-cart, with steering and brakes, at age five, his childhood was also filled with building things such as a solar collector, cylindrical phonograph, telephone system for the basement, electric arc light, lasers, a motion picture hologram device, and even an eleven room "fort" with a lookout tower and underground room complete with a cable car.

During high-school, Bruce was accepted into the Spirit of Atlanta Drum and Bugle Corps for his trumpet skills. Bruce commented that "this was a life-changing experience for me, and gave me a taste of what being amongst the best in the world at something was like." He stayed in the Bugle Corps for three years and had the opportunity to travel all over the country and Canada competing in shows. He continued, "I liked the feeling of being the best at what I did. It's something I always strive for."

"I was a technology geek before being a geek was cool."

A small taste of the high-tech machines Bruce Boone uses to create his works of art.

In college, Bruce changed from majoring in electrical engineering to mechanical engineering, as this field focused more on his love of inventing and making things.

During school, he still managed to work on projects. He said, “I built a few speed bikes with full aerodynamic bodies, designed a bike that folded up into a suitcase, and even ruined my sister’s muffin pans melting plastic resins in the oven for a prototype of a dodecahedron Rubik’s type puzzle.” He was all set to get a patent on it, then saw the exact same cube in Omni and Scientific American Magazines.

It seems that Bruce was on the 8-year plan in college. Struggling to survive, after returning home from juggling three jobs late one night, Bruce found a message from an old college buddy that would change his life.

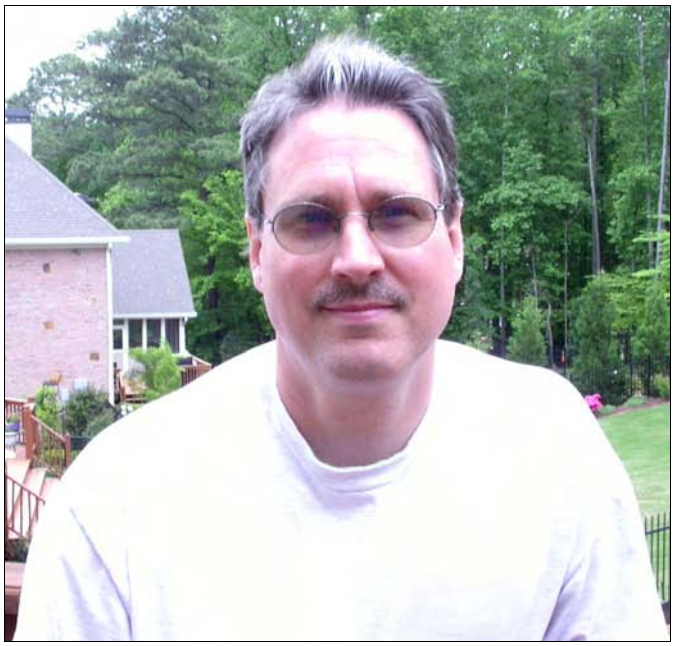
His old friend had a job testing valves at nuclear plants. He managed to get Bruce an interview with the company, in which they promptly hired him. He began making great money as a result of the 96-hour per week job. “It was a huge amount of work, but I wasn’t complaining. This allowed me to buy a house, and get some machine tools.” He started with a full-size lathe and mill and later added the ultimate tool to his basement workshop, the CNC knee mill. “I really didn’t know what I would do with it, but I knew that I was always inventing stuff, and that one day I would have something to sell to the public.”

“ I learned the art of finishing wood with CA from the IAP. I make wood ring inlays nearly every day using this technique.”

Life was going great with work and even his personal life, as Bruce married Trish, whom he had met at work. Now, with such great tools located at the home shop, it was time to put them to good use. Bruce found himself selling large sprockets for the speed bikes he used to race. This was a small, but good, niche market to be in, but the real payday came when he saw a company selling titanium cogs in a magazine.

“I thought I could do that, so I ordered the minimum quantity of material they would sell.” After selling a few plain looking cogs, he started focusing on having a unique design. “I realized that I could make the cogs look cool and also be the lightest cogs in the world.” A last-minute decision to have a booth at the International Bike Expo proved to be a great choice. After making “Best in Show”, he found business booming. Bruce quit his job, moved the business to its own building, hired employees, and bought more machines. “We pulled in a lot of money, but it was going out the door as fast, if not faster than it came in.”

There came a point when the market dried up and Bruce found himself struggling with the payments of the machines left behind. During this stressful time, it was also a joyous one with the birth of his son, Tyler.



Bruce's favorite pen is Spyra, pictured above. The look of wood spirals in polished titanium has a look all its own. "I feel it closely matches my ideals in design that I was trying to achieve."

Luckily, Bruce received a job offer in California to work for GT Bikes. They took over payments on six of his machines while he worked programming lasers to cut bike tubes. The company was taken over after the death of the CEO. Bruce managed to return to his old job just before the 650,000 sq. ft. factory was closed.

Hard times fell again on Bruce and his family. He decided to keep the CNC machine that was paid for, along with all of his manual tools. "It was a real burden moving all that stuff across the country, but I still had my dream of selling something to the public. I wanted something to show for all those years of struggle."

With no money to spare, he made the tough decision to buy a computer and get on the internet. The $20/month bill was a strain, but after making a simple website, he was able to sell all of the inventory left behind from the bike business. With debt still lingering, thought was put into what else could be sold. "I then realized that I could use my CNC machining center as a lathe and make titanium rings. I remember that we took titanium rings to those bike shows and no matter how many we brought, we sold every one of them."

Word of mouth helped. Ring orders started to get better and better, to the point that Bruce was making more money from them than his full-time job. He was able to pay off his debt and his new house in 24 months. With a corporate takeover at work and things becoming more and more political, Bruce and his wife made another tough decision. They decided to move back to Georgia to focus on the ring business. "I'm glad that the right opportunities presented themselves when they did. Sometimes you have to make your own luck by just working hard."

After a slow start, Boone Rings has been doing well ever since. Trish does the paperwork and packaging while Bruce works on the rings. He was able to buy a CNC lathe and laser to help with production.

Like many, Bruce got hooked on turning pens at a local Woodcraft store while researching exotic woods for inlays in his rings. " I decided to attempt some pens that looked different, and tried to design with the 'cool' factor." From the success of the bike parts, Bruce understood that, for him, his niche in the pen market would be pens that looked different than what was being done already. His machines went to work creating the pens out of the tough metal. "I saw that pens could also fit in well with the machinery and would be possible to make in batches when ring sales aren't as busy."

Rather than offer many different styles of pens, Bruce has strived to get a few lines and make them marketable. "It seems that most manufacturers either just scrape by, or are really in the big time. There seems to be less middle ground. I would like to further explore the territory to see what's possible."

Bruce Boone continues each day to better perfect his art. With such high standards and unlimited imagination, we can only wait to see what will come from his talented mind.

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Questions and Answers

Q: What is the hardest aspect of pen making?
A: The toughest part of making a pen is thinking through the fixturing and tooling. I normally design a new pen in CAD and refine the design several times. A complex pen might have something like 20 different programs to write and work out. If I miss a detail there, like a decimal place, the lathe will crash and ruin the expensive tools and take the part with it.

Q: What is the easiest aspect of pen making?
A: Making more pens once the programs and tooling have been worked out.

Q: What is your favorite tool in the shop?
A: My Mazak CNC lathe. It's very accurate and high-tech. It doesn't care what material I use.

Q: Do you have anyone you'd like to mention as a mentor or positive influence?
A: Some of the people of the craft I strive to be in company with are David Broadwell, Grayson Tighe, and OMAS. Each are innovators and masters of materials.

Q: Do you have any thoughts you would like to share with other penturners?
A: Always buy more tool than you think you will need, and don't underestimate the power of the Internet. If the difference in tool X and tool Y is a few hundred dollars, one high-end pen can pay for the difference right there. Once you have the better tool, you'll never apologize.

Left: Athena is a very elegant pen. It has an understated pattern of Mokumanium TM, an exclusive Boone Ring process.
Top: Even Bruce's bike parts have an elegant and artistic flare as seen here.

For more information about Bruce Boone's work, please visit his website at www.boonerings.com