

A Tale of Two Bow Makers

It seems like Ole Kanestrom is always on the move. Having just set up his new studio in Port Townsend's historic Baker Building, he's got about half a day to wrap up some loose ends before taking off for a week-long paragliding course in California. Understandably, he really doesn't have any time to spend with me, a complete stranger who wants him to sit down for an interview. However, in addition to being one of the world's top makers of violin and cello bows, Kanestrom is an affable guy who graciously carves out half an hour for me to quickly pop by to introduce myself and take some photographs. Then he turns his attention back to his travels.

One of several bow makers who call Port Townsend home, Ole (pronounced ooo-la) has been on the go much of his life. Born in a small copper mining town just north of the Arctic Circle in Norway, Kanestrom's family moved to another Norwegian village near the Russian border when he was just a young boy. There, in the shadow of the iron curtain, he was raised in an atmosphere of creativity.

His father was an engineer who worked in the mines. Ole recalls, "He was artistically inclined, though he didn't take advantage of it. He could have been a really good artist had he wanted." His mother, too, was an apt craftsperson, knitting and sewing and dabbling as an amateur painter. But Kanestrom's grandfather was probably his greatest influence.

"He was a master machinist," Ole says with pride. "He snuck away and made a washing machine for my grandmother before they even had washing machines in that part of the country. He made a really cool pedal car for me when I was a kid. The man could make anything. He was just absolutely brilliant."

Another acclaimed Northwest bow maker, Paul Siefried, settled in Port Townsend about 15 years ago. Like Kanestrom, Siefried can also trace his creative

**Story and Photography by
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PHOTO BY JAMES CURTIS

ART TALK

instincts to his childhood environment. His father was a successful commercial illustrator and art director in the advertising world. But unlike Kanestrom, whose early years were spent in a cold, Northern Europe climate, Siefried grew up under the sunny skies of Southern California in the 1950s and '60s.

"My dad had a studio at home filled with art supplies and he was constantly drawing and painting," Siefried says. "His influence was so strong and prevalent about art and taste, design and composition and color. I got an education out of it. I didn't realize it at the time, but it was exclusively important for me to have been raised by him."

Two of the most sought-after bow makers in the western hemisphere, each of these artisans have garnered several gold medal honors from the Violin Society of America. Curiously, both men found their way to Port Townsend almost by happenstance. Any other similarities between the two, however, are hard to discern. Indeed, their life trajectories could not have been more different.

To Each His Own

Four decades ago, one could usually find Paul Siefried on the beach. "I literally grew up surfing every day," he says, recalling that the skies were much clearer back then. "There were often days when you could be at the beach and see the snow covered mountains."

Siefried always imagined he would pursue an artistic career and thought he might even go into business with his father. It was as a teenager that his path veered in an unexpected direction, when he suddenly developed a keen interest in violins.

"I remember the day when I looked inside one of these violins and saw somebody's name in there," Siefried explains. "It had never occurred to me that there was an individual sitting down someplace and doing this work. It was this epiphany that, 'man, that's what I want to do!' I wanted a complicated craft that would be so difficult to excel at that it would take my interest for many years and be so exclusive that people would come to me to do it."

Looking back, Siefried admits "it was a strange idea for a Southern California kid

that lived on the beach." Still, he applied and was accepted to an acclaimed violin making school. But he never attended. Instead, he researched the craft on his own, and candidly assesses that his early attempts to make violins "did not go very well."

By that time, Ole Kanestrom—who looks like a Nordic version of Willem Dafoe with a wild, imported grin—was living in America. His parents had moved to the U.S. when he was six...and they kept on moving. First they lived in North Dakota, then Nebraska, and eventually moved to Washington State in 1968, where Ole graduated from Western Washington University with a degree in biology.

By stark contrast, Siefried dropped out of high school in 1967. At 17, Paul was at odds with his father (to put it mildly) and he began looking for "alternative types of careers." It was The Summer of Love and at a time when America's youth were embracing the motto "drop out, turn on and tune in," Siefried hit the road, hitch-hiking up the picturesque coast for Big Sur, California. He wound up catching a lift all the way to San Francisco. (Ole Kanestrom laughs at the story, "I wish I could have grown up like that!")

With a talent for making leather goods, Paul and a friend found they could earn a reasonable living creating "hippie crafts," mostly unusual handbags, which they sold in open craft markets. Knowing his fascination for violins, Paul's friends prodded him to interview for a job at a violin shop. The owner carefully examined his hands, and then hired him on the spot. Soon, he was learning the craft of instrument repair.

"During that time, I was handling more and more bows, and remember really starting to like bows." After three years, Siefried's independent nature once again emerged. "I stopped getting along with the shop owner," he chuckles "and I quit."

He moved back to Los Angeles to work with one of the pedagogues in the arcane world of classical instrument restoration, Hans Weisshaar. Some of the most important instruments and bows in the world came through Weisshaar's shop. Before long, Paul's innate abilities and his



passion for the art resulted in his own self-taught method of bow making.

"Every piece of wood has an individual personality as to what it can do," Siefried explains. "I try to get a certain feel and performance quality out of it that's not done with numbers. Everything is done according to feel and intuition. It's very personal."

Ole Kanestrom agrees. "Once in awhile, you'll start working with a piece of wood and you'll realize that it's really special. It just resonates and has a liveliness to it that's hard to express, but you just feel it. I really put my heart and soul into it."

Indeed, music is a very personal thing. It's about communicating an emotion and for many classical musicians, the bow is as vital as the instrument itself. "If not even more important," says Kanestrom. "It imparts a tone to the instrument. It is the connection between a musician's hand and the instrument and that's how he expresses what he's trying to get across."

All Roads Lead to Port Townsend

It should come as no surprise that, after a brief stint working as a backcountry ski guide in Montana, Ole Kanestrom was once again on the move. He headed back to Washington and ended up in Port Townsend.

"It was totally by accident. I was thinking of moving back to Bellingham, but it was too rainy and nasty when we drove into town, so we headed for the Peninsula. When we came across on the ferry, my wife at the time saw a dog parked on the steps of the Town Tavern, and we pulled over and went in." They met up with a group of friends there and in that moment, Ole says, he was fated to stay. "I had a job and we had a place to live in about 15 minutes. I never left."

"I love it," Ole says of Port Townsend. "It's not only beautiful, but I've amassed a group of friends that I'm very close with."

One close friend is venerable bow maker and Port Townsend resident Charles Espey. "He was really my influence. I watched him make bows and realized instantly that's what I wanted to do. It was so

intuitive and just the right thing. Must be close to 10 years ago I started taking classes with Chuck. He taught me the language of bow making."

Siefried, too, had struck out on his own and earned a reputation as a pre-eminent bow maker. But after 10 years of working in Los Angeles, he suddenly felt stuck. Latin gang activity there in the late 1980s had spread to his neighborhood of Silver Lake, and he knew it was time to relocate his wife and children to a healthier environment.

"So we just started to drive, going to all the small towns up and down the coast. We got a little bit further each time and within two years we made it up this far," Siefried explains.

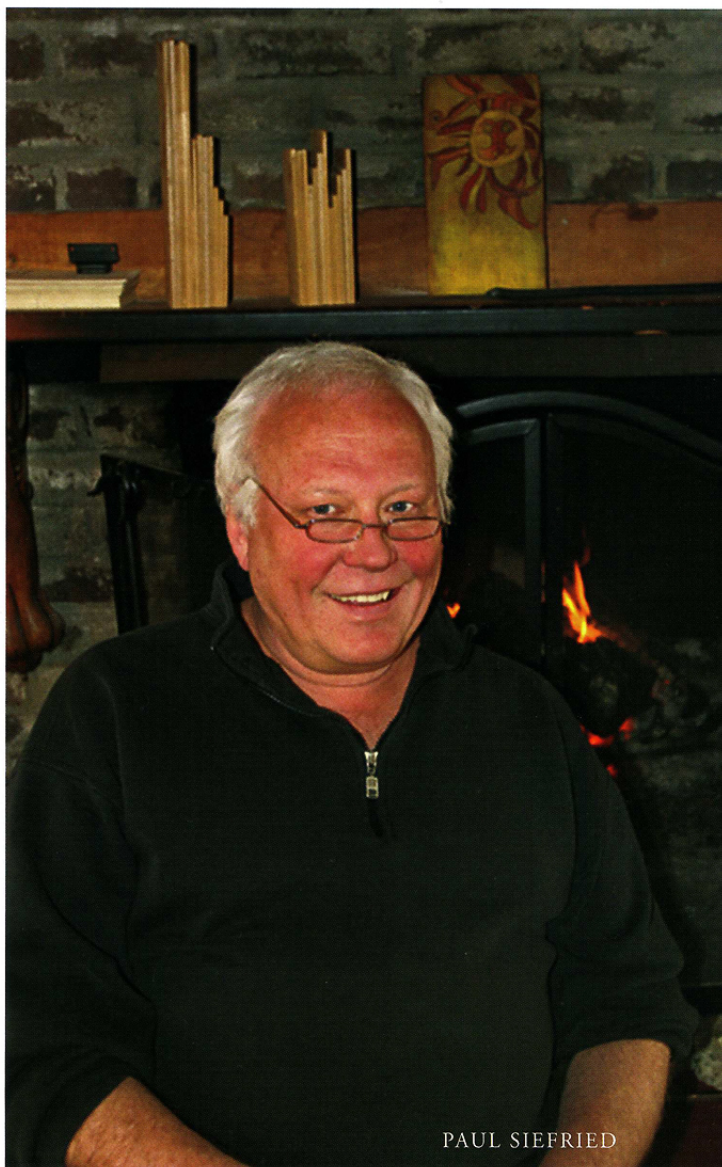
When Paul drove up the hill to Port Townsend for the first time, he recalls feeling nonplused. Then, as his car curved down the hill off Sims Way, he saw the Boat Haven Marina below to his right and the lighthouse and clock tower on the opposite hill. Siefried marveled, "My God, look at this! I had the most amazing feeling, like I was coming home. It was really remarkable." Paul and his family moved to Port Townsend in 1991. Now, his entire family lives here, including his parents with whom he is once again very close, his sister and his nephews.

And though one might assume they'd be staunch competitors in business, Siefried and Kanestrom developed a close friendship. It's a kind of mutual admiration society. "Paul is a creative genius," praises Ole. "He's brilliant and has a

great sense of humor." Siefried complements, "You couldn't hope to meet a more energetic, eclectic or charming fellow."

And both men are enamored of the town. "I love the community," remarks Siefried. "I love the fact that it's isolated. That's really appealing. We're not going to have strip malls or more gas stations come in. The people here are sensitive to the beauty of the place."

"I think the community as whole is very good at communicating," says Kanestrom. "It's an open community that way. People get to know each other very easily and help each other out quite a bit. And that makes it very special." ■



PAUL SIEFRIED