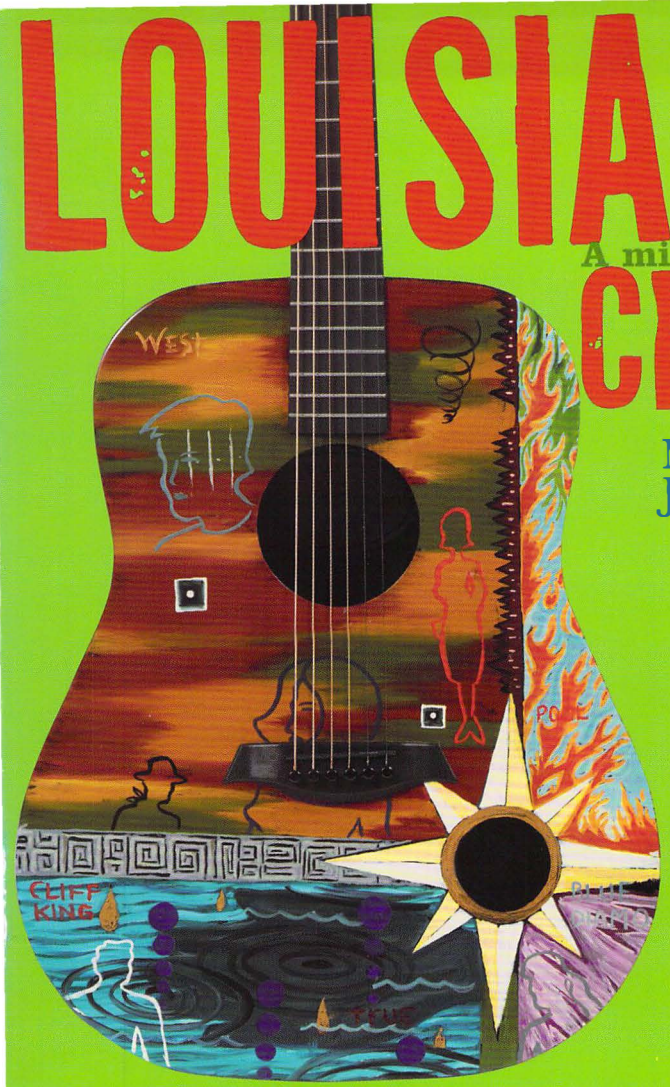
LOUISIANA CROSSROADS

A million ways to get there

MUSICAL JOURNEYS



WHERE MIND AND METAL MEET

By JOHN LAUDUN

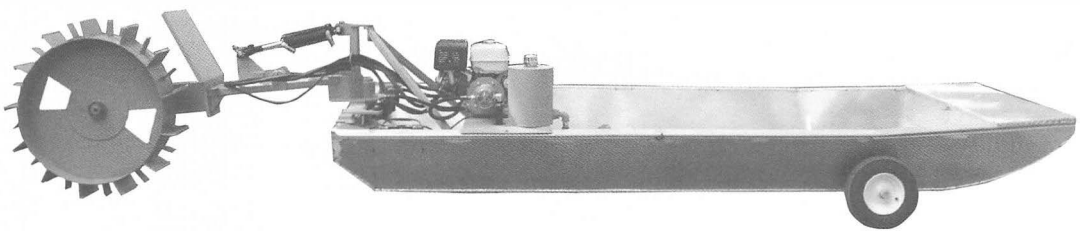
TO WATCH BOAT BUILDER MIKE RICHARD WORK IS TO BE REMINDED OF WHAT the word *craft* can really mean. Every move he makes is not only to accomplish the present task but in anticipation of the next, and the chain of tasks to follow. If a tool will be needed later, he sets it down not where he is at the moment but where he will be.

Sitting in his shop watching Richard build a boat, I am struck by his ingenuity, his ability not only to imagine the path ahead to the finished form but also his ability to remember all the boats he has made and all the boats he has dreamed. His job obviously requires skill, but as I sit and watch it becomes clearer and clearer to me that his job also requires vision.

When skill and vision are harnessed together, each in the service of the other, we have the basics for art. Yet, while a photograph or a painting of Richard's boat — or even a song about it — might be deemed art, the chances are good few will consider this metal vessel with its noisy engine and hydraulic controls to be anything close to art.

I can't help but be haunted by this idea as I follow a farmer out to a field and watch him slide one of Richard's boats into a pond and then deftly work his way up and down a row of traps not unlike the way a slide guitarist works melodies up and down the strings.

There is no art without craft, of course, but why is there such a division between art and craft? Sometimes it seems like if we have a use for it, then it's a craft; if we can't find a practical use for it, then it must be art. That doesn't strike me as a clear enough answer to such an essential query, and it's one of the reasons I find myself driving around the Louisiana countryside, seeking out intelligence and beauty in places few others would look: we need better answers.



In everyday usage, *craft* often means quaint items that we find at festivals or boutique shops. Usually the items are handmade or have a handmade quality to them, which is another way of saying they do not have a high degree of polish. Sometimes the crafts in question are described as *rustic* or *country*, which both explains their rough appearance and how that appearance evokes simpler times, simpler ways of living. In keeping with notions of a simpler past, crafts are usually made from non-industrial materials like wood and clay and leather and cotton. This sense of craft is pre-industrial, anti-modern. Crafts in the form of a ceramic coffee mug or a hand-knit sweater give back to us a human connection that we miss as we desperately e-mail and fax and text each other using devices made mostly of plastic built by people we don't know working in places most of us will never visit.

This same idea, albeit without cell phones, spurred the Arts and Crafts movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We mostly think of Arts and Crafts in terms of houses these days, but the idea of houses revealing their structure and bearing the marks of their makers was, in fact, a response to the Industrial Revolution. The rural population fell to the efficiencies of the modern factory. Those efficien-

cies, of course, had a human cost. Some costs were obvious: poor working conditions, miserable urban slums, the emptying of the countryside for the promise of cash in town.

Other costs were less obvious, and thinkers of the time struggled to articulate what it was they sensed was occurring. The English writer John Ruskin studied medieval buildings in order to understand what it was like to be a craftsman back when the guilds were strong and the work of the utmost importance. His stone masons were very different from the factory workers that were becoming an ever increasing portion of the population. Where the latter performed repetitive tasks with little personal involvement and even less thought, Ruskin's medieval masons were craftsmen fully in charge of their destiny, fully charged with their creative duties. If one of the Arts and Crafts movement's fears was that humans would become slaves to their machines, then Ruskin's writings about craftsmen revealed that repetition could be fully human.

What the handmade object — be it a song, a quilt, or a boat — offers us is the human being behind it. And not just any ordinary human being, but someone in charge of their destiny, doing something with full consciousness, fully engaged in the process.

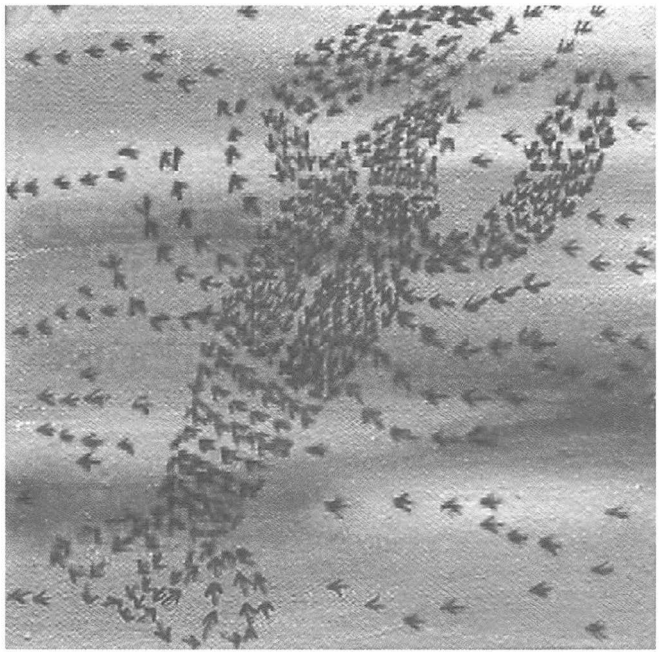
What Ruskin and his countryman William Morris realized as they studied crafts and craftsmen was that craft is based on practice and practice is not mere repetition. Practice is, as any athlete knows, simultaneously doing and thinking. It is both conceptual and practical. To the untrained eye, yes, practice seems dully repetitive, but examine a quilt with a quilter, look at photography with a photographer, listen to music with a musician: they see and hear things that we miss. They don't simply see a piece of fabric or paper or hear a piece of music. They sift through stitches and frames and notes and glean the human behind. A quilter counts stitches but feels the fingers plying needle and thread. A photographer takes in the scene, wondering if the shot would not have been better from that tree over there. A musician hears a glissando and appreciates how it blurs a chord change.

What the handmade object — be it a song, a quilt, or a boat — offers us is the human being behind it. And not just any ordinary human being, but someone in charge of their destiny, doing something with full consciousness, fully engaged in the process. Perhaps in every other

way they are just like us, but in the moment of making, they transcend time and space by breaking off a small piece of themselves and embedding it in an object so that we may discover them years later or miles away — in a museum, yes, but also in the blanket chest at the foot of our bed.

This magical quality of *craft* is retained when we use the word as a verb: when we say someone crafted something, we are marveling at how they drew diverse things together into something more than a simple assembly of the elements themselves. When we craft a meal, for example, we may assemble various ingredients but what we end up with is a dish. There is a difference between an onion, chicken and sausage dusted with flour and anointed with oil sitting on our kitchen counter and a gumbo. The same of course goes for the transformation of a lump of clay into a bowl or a block of wood into a table leg or gobs of pigment into a painting.

A craftsman is someone who can make something complex and beautiful out of simple, inert materials. Some might call this person an artist, and they would be right. Art requires craft. Perhaps, if there is a distinction to be made, maybe we can say that art also requires vision. But if that's the case, then a lot of people who we might want to call craftsmen turn out to be artists after all. Their work, too, requires vision.



Francis X. Pavy

Richard works with aluminum and steel delivered to his shop in sheets and lengths of angles and channels. From these raw elements, he cuts and welds and then bends and grinds until he has wrestled out of them a boat that can crawl on land as readily as it plies through a pond.

Everyone calls them boats. They have hulls. They float. But beyond those simple facts they don't look much like any of the boats most folks are familiar with. These crafts run off what appears to be an oversized lawnmower engine. The engine drives a pump, and the pump drives a hydraulic motor or set of motors that power the great wheel.

The wheel itself looks like something out of a previous era: its size and shape and its cleats, as they are called, are reminiscent of steamboat paddle wheels. But the cleats aren't paddles pushing water; they are treads designed to give the wheel traction as it rolls along the bottom of a pond. The advantage this offers over paddles or propellers is that the craft stops instantly and turns quickly, unlike the gliding halt and slower turns of a regular boat.

Of course the other advantage of the great wheel is also the feature that turns heads out on the Louisiana prairies: the sight of a boat driving down a road. This is such an important part of a crawfish boat that Richard puts extra cleats on his great wheels so they roll smoothly on roads.

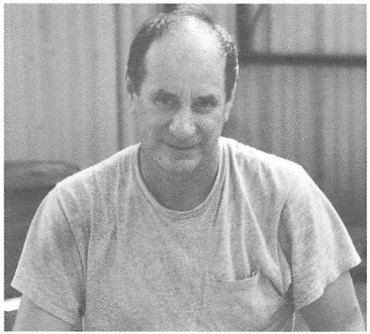
The builders recognize imagination in each other, and, in that way, share their creativity. It's not unlike an accordion player hearing a run or riff, liking it, and including a version of it in their next performance. Listening to each other, even indirectly, is what creates an artistic field. Out of that field comes innovation, as artists and craftsmen spur each other on.

He didn't invent the modern crawfish boat, but Richard is part of an active group of craftsmen that not only builds these boats but continues to re-imagine them each and every time they build one. The group includes, among others, Richard in Richey south of Eunice, Jimmy Abshire down in Kaplan, Kurt Venable in Rayne, Dale Hughes in Welch, and Gerard Olinger in Roberts Cove.

Olinger is the man widely credited with creating the first hydraulic crawfish boat, but he defers credit to the farmers who were

experimenting with all kinds of axles and transmissions and shafts in order to arrive at the moment where a small horsepower engine operating at high revolutions could move a large boat slowly.

It's an amazing machine, and one you will find nowhere else in the world except in Louisiana. It's an elegant and thoughtful response to a particular problem. It's another facet, like crab stew or the walking waltz, of Louisiana's *genius loci* — the particular genius of this place.



John Laudun

Mike Richard

John Laudun

While each builder works apart from the others, the group maintains an ongoing dialogue. They see each other's boats. They know what their customers think of the strengths and weaknesses of each design. They recognize imagination in each other, and, in that way, share their creativity. It's not unlike an accordion player hearing a run or riff, liking it, and including a version of it in their next performance. Listening to each other, even indirectly, is what creates an artistic field. Out of that field comes innovation, as artists and craftsmen spur each other on.

It's easy in Lafayette, in south Louisiana, to find a machine shop. The blue spark of an arc welder is something we have probably all glimpsed and maybe not thought very much about. What makes the spark, like what adds spice to our food and swing to our music, isn't really the machine. It's the person.

Take the time to get to know the people of this place. Who knows, the person sitting next to you at a local lunch house or Louisiana Crossroads concert may have the next great zydeco melody or blues lick in their head. Or maybe, if you're lucky, he or she will have the next great boat in their head.

John Laudun, Ph.D., is a writer and folklorist living in Lafayette, where he is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. For more information on the topics in this essay, visit johnlaudun.com.