



STEVE BUTLER

A humble approach to woodworking education

A recent commercial names several famous companies that started in a garage, wisely concluding, “You never know what kind of greatness can come out of an American garage.” Enter Steve Butler, the host of *The Garage with Steve Butler*, a televised woodworking show that’s starting to garner attention. Steve lives in Massachusetts with his modest shop housed in—you got it—a garage.

The show features a quirky mix of woodworking, music, and maker ethos. It has slowly built an international audience on cable-access TV. But recently, with sponsor support, Steve hired a professional crew and jumped to public television where the show now broadcasts to over 250 stations.

Steve trained at Sheridan College in Ontario and has what it takes to make woodworking accessible to anyone with an interest. The show centers on modest, but thoughtfully designed projects within reach of most amateur woodworkers. And interspersed with the how-to information are philosophical nuggets on “making” as a creative outlet, revealing Steve as a maker, artist, and teacher.

I’ve known Steve for years and recently reconnected with him to chat about the show.
—Ken Burton

WM: Where did the idea for the show come from?

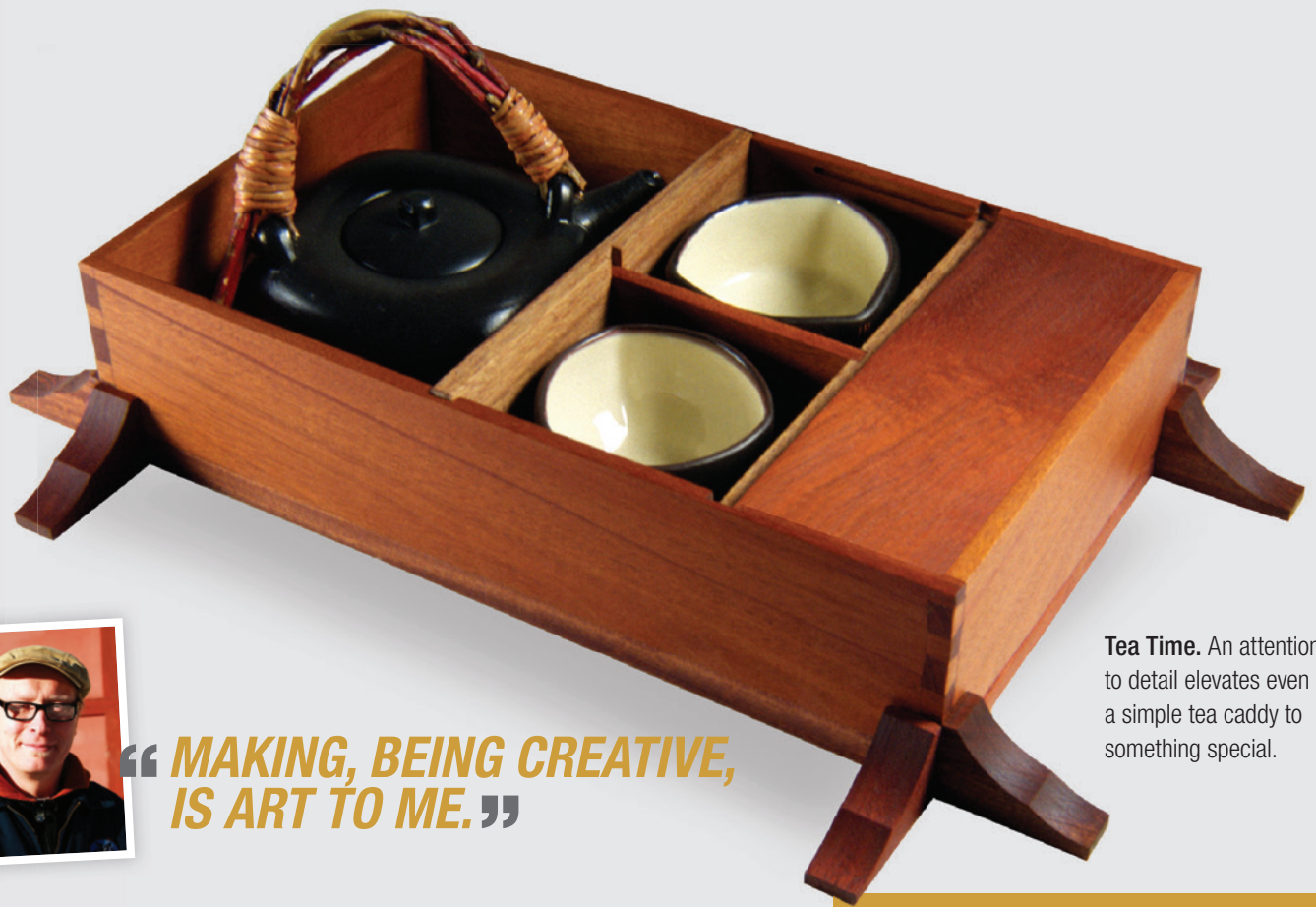
SB: It was one of those crazy, late-night things. I couldn’t sleep and was watching local cable-access TV when an ad came on looking for people who wanted to make their own show. I thought, how hard can that be? It combines the two things I love: making and teaching people to make.

WM: Why the garage?

SB: The show is humble, and that’s the appeal. It has a sense of nostalgia that harkens back to days when folks would roll up their sleeves and work in their basement or garage workshops.

WM: You don’t use a lot of fancy tools.

SB: The premise of the show is to teach woodworking in an accessible way, both technically and economically. My equipment is what I could afford on a budget—the kind of things a



Tea Time. An attention to detail elevates even a simple tea caddy to something special.

“**MAKING, BEING CREATIVE, IS ART TO ME.**”



hobbyist has. And the projects can be made using materials and hardware easily obtained at a home center, or neighborhood hardware store.

WM: But your projects are more than just “ordinary.”

SB: Some of them are, but I try to incorporate nice details into everything I do. So even if a project isn’t particularly grand, there are elements that elevate it to become more than the sum of its parts. For example look at the feet on my tea box—they’re quite simple, but really add to the design.

WM: You get into some of that when you cut away from the “action” and talk about your approach to making.

SB: Yeah, I feel that anytime you use your hands to make something, it’s art. That’s what it’s all about. Making, being creative is art to me. And teaching others how to do it, that’s where I’m coming from.

WM: I enjoy the music you play during the show.

SB: I always have music on when I’m working in the shop. So the music you hear on the show is just what I like—surf music, rockabilly, that sort of thing. I like to support independent musicians—guys like me who are struggling to be heard—and play them on the air.

WM: What’s next for you?

SB: Right now, I teach woodworking at the Austen Riggs Center in western Massachusetts a couple of days a week to pay the bills. The rest of my time is devoted to the show, my labor of love. We have several great projects lined up. I’m excited to be working with a professional crew to make the second season even better.

The Garage with Steve Butler is distributed by NETA (National Educational Telecommunications Association). ■

Steve’s Shop on a Shoestring

“I have always said that if you have a table saw, a band saw, and a router you’re in the cabinet making business.”

—Steve Butler

Start with:

- A 10" contractor table saw
- A 14" bandsaw
- A two-base router kit. Keep the plunge base for handheld use and mount the fixed base to a piece of plywood for a router table. Support this with saw horses or on top of a trash can (for dust collection)
- Two cordless drill/drivers. This way you don’t have to change between bits.

As money permits, add a small jointer and a portable planer—you can often find a local shop that will allow you access to these tools until you can afford your own.

While no one likes to do without, you don’t need to have all the bells and whistles to make quality work. You just have to be resourceful.