

## The Puckulatory Pirate

story | Serena Craven photography | Eric Luther

**A**part from the baby-blue eyes, lopsided grin and rolling stride of a seaman, there's not much about the fellow that stands out. But stand next to him and you'll feel a vibrant energy, energy that hums and escalates audibly as his fingers start tapping,

his lips lightly purse and he cuts loose with melodic tones so pure, so lilting, that shivers run up your spine. He has incredible talent. In fact, he's awesome. He's Whistlin' Tom Bryant, a world-champion whistler with an amazing three-octave range, voted Entertainer of



the Year by his peers at the International Whistlers' Convention in Louisburg, North Carolina.

When I first stumbled onto Whistlin' Tom's website I was (you might say) totally blown away! My dad was a semi-pro whistler and I manage some good trills myself, so I'm not impressed by tepid tootling. The sound bytes on Tom's site were so good that I sent for his CD. We traded emails and phone calls, and then agreed to meet at Selby Gardens, which lies halfway between my pocket of paradise and his new home-base in St Pete.

It was truly surreal. Tom whistles constantly, often unconsciously – and the music he creates is so enticing that passersby would smile and nod, halt, then turn around and follow us – sometimes through several songs. We stopped once so Tom could snap a picture, and almost caused a pile-up on the path!

Tom began whistling as a child. The nickname Whistlin' Tom popped up early on and stuck – from his days as a whistling bartender in Philadelphia, where he made guest appearances on nationally televised PM Magazine, through his many years as a charter captain based in Key West, where he often led the parade to sunset celebrations on Mallory Square. When prize-winning film makers Kate Davis and David Heilbroner produced their documentary, Pucker Up: The Fine Art of Whistling, they featured Whistlin' Tom, taping footage at his home and using his original songs in the sound track. The film won not only technical awards, but was named Audience Favorite at the Florida Film Festival.

His puckulatory prowess has also taken him to foreign countries. "Europeans are far more appreciative of street performers than Americans," says Tom, who set off to see if he could support himself as a busker. Costumed in bright colors, whistling on street corners for tips, the Prince of Pucker toured Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Lichtenstein and the Netherlands. "Where the nether people live," he quips. Support himself he did – "I'd stashed a little cash to come home on, but never touched it. I came back with more money than I started out with!"

Dubbed Lord of the Lips by the St. Petersburg Times, Whistlin' Tom is the consummate musical showman, for he sings, too; his smooth tenor voice fitting well to the ballads he favors. He performs all over south Florida, so if you're searching for a unique entertainer check him out. He is truly special. ess

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