

1-1-2009

George Box practices the fine art of fine tuning

Andy Peters

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine>

Recommended Citation

Peters, Andy (2009) "George Box practices the fine art of fine tuning," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 51 : Iss. 3 , Article 30.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol51/iss3/30>

This Article is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Magazine by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the [FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines](#). For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.

GEORGE BOX PRACTICES THE FINE ART OF FINE TUNING

When George Box '89 travels around New York to repair, restore or re-tune a pipe organ, his backpack isn't very heavy. Often he carries little more than his trusty hacksaw blade and a few tiny metal rods.

Those are the only metal tools needed for the arcane, delicate art of organ repair. But mental tools are also mandatory. It takes someone with an unusual combination of talents in music and in mechanics, not to mention a healthy dose of eccentricity, to be attracted to the art of organ tuning.

That observation comes from Roland Ottewell '88, who has helped Box on selected organ projects. Ottewell adds that another job requirement is getting used to working mostly in solitude — and in almost total silence.

"There is something really nice about the peacefulness of being in one of these huge churches in New York," says Ottewell, a copy editor for New York publishing houses. "There is this incredible bowl of silence inside. The clamor of the city disappears."

Box practices his trade in the five boroughs of New York City, in New Jersey and in upstate New York. But he learned his craft by traveling to country chapels throughout the Southeast.

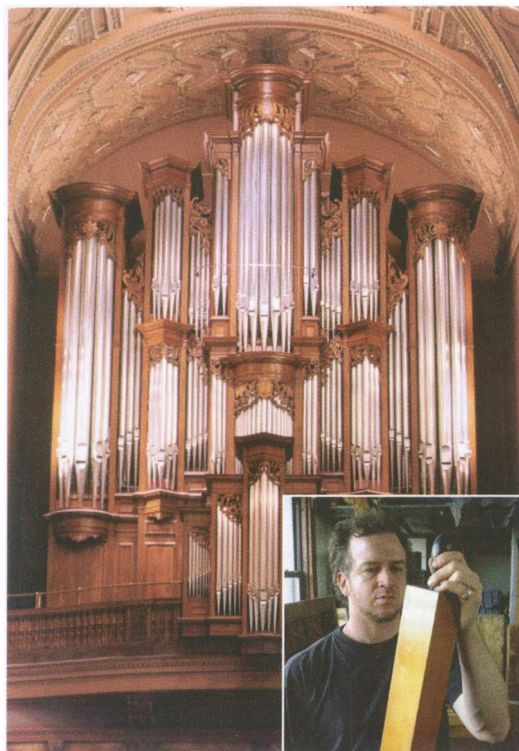
A native of New Orleans and a trained musician, Box moved to Atlanta after earning a degree in English from Furman. He became active in Atlanta's underground music scene and formed such bands as Rubber Madonna and Synchro System, which fused punk-rock guitars and attitudes with Brazilian tango beats.

While working part time at a bookstore, Box struck up a friendship with a customer named David Whittier. Whittier, who held a doctorate in English literature, pursued books from a wide array of intellectual disciplines — and displayed some idiosyncratic habits, like spending hours at the bookstore.

Box eventually discovered that Whittier was a master organ tuner. When Whittier learned of Box's interest in music, he offered Box the chance to learn the trade.

"The organ business is filled with a bunch of mysterious characters" like Whittier, Box says. "They're chronic curmudgeons.

"They tend to be bright and have diverse



The organ at New York's Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, where George Box has left his imprint.

intellectual interests, and they're maniacal in a mechanical way."

Box's apprenticeship with Whittier lasted nine years, during which they repaired church organs in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina. Between those gigs, Box worked other odd jobs.

Soon after Whittier died in the late 1990s, Box decided he wanted to repair organs full time and took a job with the A.E. Schlueter Pipe Organ Co. of Lithonia, Ga., one of the largest refurbishing firms in the Southeast. At Schlueter, Box honed his knowledge of organs built by Ernest M. Skinner, described by Box as "the most important organ builder of the 20th century."

Eventually Box moved to New York, home to a large concentration of massive pipe organs in historic cathedrals. His busy seasons for tuning are just before Easter and Thanksgiving. His reconditioning work takes place during the summer, when choirs are on vacation.

Box, 41, travels to most jobs via subway or bicycle,

and his tool chest is his backpack. Among his tools are an implement that he says "looks like a \$100 stainless-steel butter knife," as well as "little metal rods of varying lengths and edges."

When tuning an organ's pipes, Box says, "You're basically moving a piece of metal. You're moving lengths as fine as 1/64th of an inch to a quarter of an inch. Or you're moving a tuning slide, a flap or a wire."

His most indispensable tool may be a 50-cent hacksaw blade that he's had for a decade.

"It has a serrated edge," Box says. "It's bent at an angle, but not at such a sharp angle that it does any damage to the pipe. It does allow some kind of grip. It grabs on to a piece of metal perfectly."

Box's portfolio includes the 5,000-pipe N.P. Mander organ at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola on Park Avenue in Manhattan, the 3,173-pipe Holtkamp organ at The Juilliard School in New York's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, and the Skinner organ at St. Ann and the Holy Trinity Church in Brooklyn Heights, a building that dates to the mid-19th century.

An independent contractor, Box picks up orders through contacts in the small community of organ tuners and builders. Work on a single organ usually takes about a day, although if an organ hasn't been tuned in 10 or 20 years, Box says the job can last up to four days.

And he's always in demand. He has been recruited to work for companies in Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and California. But he prefers to remain in New York, where there are plenty of organs to tune.

Although he's yet to see it in person, he says he would like to inspect Furman's 2,930-pipe Hartness Organ built by C.B. Fisk, a Massachusetts company that specializes in mechanical-action pipe organs.

"Fisk's organs are extremely well-made and they have a unique tonal concept, a lot of which goes against traditional American concepts," Box says. "Furman's organ is talked about a lot in the organ business."

— ANDY PETERS

The author, a 1992 Furman graduate, is a reporter for the Fulton County (Ga.) Daily Report.