

Story by **TEN & TWO STAFF**
Photos by **WALTER HODGES** and **OTIS TOMAS**

The
FIDDLE TREE
OF OTIS TOMAS



OTIS. The name fits him. A fiddle maker should have a name like Otis. He should be a big guy with a beard who lives in the woods up Goose Cove on St. Ann's Bay, where the hardwoods own the hillsides that in turn birth the highlands of Cape Breton Island.

Celtic music brought him to island in 75. He had made his first musical instrument (a dulcimer) from wood when he was 18 and Cape Breton had lots of material to work with. He thought he would make guitars, but fiddle making became his life force. About 16 years ago, he was wandering the woods when he came upon a sugar maple he guessed to be 250 years old. The possibilities became impossible to ignore.

(Previous page) A close up of the arch from the back of a new fiddle as it is taking shape in the workshop of Otis Tomas. (Above) A fiddle scroll in the first stages of being carved. (Facing page) Otis Tomas with three friends and neighbors at the door of his studio in the Highlands of Cape Breton Island.





“I AM A VIOLIN MAKER, and so of course it wasn’t long before my thoughts turned to the possibilities held deep within this tree and the voices that might come forth were I to turn my hand to the transformation of this giant of the forest. But a magnificent creature as old and venerable as this ancient king—who was I to presume to end its life and turn it to my own purposes?”

As he speaks about it now, you can hear the old anguish in his voice, as well as the purity and certainty of his purpose. “I debated within myself for well over a year before deciding to claim this majestic giant. Before I ventured to take the saw to it, I visited it with my young son and played a tune that I had composed for it on the fiddle. If it could have taken any notice of us, I wonder what it would have made of the strange sounds we were sending it, and if it would have understood that someday it, too, would learn to play that same wonderful music.”

Today, he uses “The Fiddle Tree” and makes fiddles, guitars, cellos and harps, and every single chip of wood has a piece of his soul attached to it.

“In ending the life of this tree in October of 1994, and taking command over its silent history, I couldn’t help but

be struck with the sense of responsibility that comes with such an act of killing. I will remember that day every time I take a chisel to a piece of this wood. I made a promise to myself and to the tree that I will always handle it with care, bringing to it the respect it deserves and making an effort to use my art to bring new life from old.”

The Fiddle Tree is a testament to the passage of time and Otis knows the nature of time as well as its relationship the music of the island. “More than any other of the arts, music is made of time; yet paradoxically, it gives us an escape from time. When we listen to music, we enter into the flow of time itself, rather than watching it move past us. It’s a connection to the past and the future. Is this not the voice that musicians and violin makers alike ultimately seek to connect with—that magical enchantment that can stop time and let us return to that universal harmony of Nature deep within us?”

Fiddle Tree

<http://www.fiddletree.com>

(Previous page) Otis Tomas at his workbench using a gouge and mallet to make the first chips on a maple violin back. After the gouge, it will be finished with small planes and scrapers. (Facing page top) This group of instruments shows a violin, viola, cello, guitar, harp and mandolin that were all made from the wood of the Fiddle Tree cut down by Otis 16 years ago. (Facing page bottom) Some of the rough pieces of maple and spruce that will become a violin, along with a compass, straightedge drawing of the instrument, template for the body and the mold upon which the ribs and blocks are assembled. (Following page) Otis Tomas in his woodshop with the tools of this trade and a completed fiddle, made from The Fiddle Tree. (Last page) A close up of the detailed work involved in creating a fiddle.





