

BY ROE OSBORN

## Treasure From the Deep

In the late 1980s, I had the unique experience of being an assistant caretaker on Nashawena, a privately owned island in the Elizabeths off the southern Massachusetts coast. The only public island in the chain, Cuttyhunk, sat next door, and I had many good friends there. One particular friend had a pile of old, gray, weathered logs next to his back entry, and I quizzed him about it one day. He told me to pick up one of the logs, and when I did, I was immediately taken aback by its extreme weight.

“Ebony!” When I looked surprised, he chuckled and explained that in the 1940s, a boat had wrecked on Sow and Pigs Reef south of the island (1). The boat’s cargo, a cache of exotic hardwood—including this ebony—had spilled out of the hold as the boat broke apart on the rocks. Much too dense to float, the heavy logs bounced along the rocky bottom over the years and finally washed up on Cuttyhunk’s shore. Beachcombing islanders like my friend had found the logs and brought them home. Just before I moved back to the mainland, he presented me with a couple of the ebony logs as a parting gift, and I’ve had them in my stockpile ever since.

At one point, I cut a section off one of the logs and milled two

small boards from it that I combined with glass for a sculpture (2). Otherwise, the logs have rested patiently in that “do-something-with-someday” pile of wood. Then this year, I asked a good friend, Karl Hoyt, to do some CNC work for me. Karl makes and repairs stringed instruments, so in exchange, I gave him one of the logs. With images of ebony fingerboards in his head, Karl re-sawed the log into planks on a large, heavy-duty band saw (3). The edges of the planks still have gnarled wane from the log being pummeled against the ragged seabed. But the exposed grain of the ebony has a luxurious luster—even through the marks of the saw blade.

The name of the lost boat carrying the ebony is still a mystery (at least to me), so most likely I’ll never know the exact origin of the wood. Suffice it to say, this old-growth ebony is probably the hardest wood I’ll ever encounter. Karl let me choose two of the planks to keep, and I’m hoping that this exquisite wood will find its way into another one of my sculptures in the near future.

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Sow and Pigs Reef southwest of Cuttyhunk Island has been a notorious graveyard for ships (1). In the 1940s, a boat laden with exotic hardwood wrecked on the reef. Among its cargo were ebony logs. The author was given a couple of the logs and made this simple sculpture (2). Recently, a luthier friend milled one of the logs into planks for making musical instrument parts (3).

Photos by Roe Osborn