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UNDER-THE-RADAR KNIFEMAKERS

CHECK OUT SOME
OF TODAY'S MOST
UNDERRATED
AND OVERLOOKED
BLADECRAFTERS

One of the best ways to identify the most underrated and overlooked custom makers is via purveyors and collectors, and though the landscape of custom knives is always changing, there are undiscovered stars out there.

Larry Connelley of KnifeArt.com readily includes former silversmith and Canadian maker Rod Olson in the overlooked/underrated realm. While Olson has been building knives since 1979, some blade enthusiasts may know little about him. "I'm seeing lots of new models and increasing popularity for Rod," Larry remarked.

According to Connelley, Olson began working in fixed blades and hunting knives. He visited veteran maker Henry Frank's shop a few years ago and then stepped into making folders. Olson's favorite materials include titanium, carbon fiber and RWL-34 stainless steel. He is known for knives with outstanding fit and finish and utilizes button-lock, lockback



Custom knife purveyor/photographer Duane Weikum said Brazil's Mauricio Dobruski is well known in the balisong world, but remains relatively unrecognized elsewhere. "He has been making knives since around 2001, and he had taken several years off to work as a machinist," Weikum explained. "But now he's back and making even better knives. He won't be overlooked for long." (Weikum image)



Custom knife purveyor Dave Nittinger rates Tim Withers an up-and-comer whose knife prices are fantastic for collectors looking for a new maker who many years from now will be untouchable. Withers not only makes stunning fixed blades (left) but the sheaths (above) he supplies with them are outstanding as well. (SharpByCoop knife photo; photo of sheathed knives courtesy of Dave Nittinger)

and bearing-pivot mechanisms in his folders.

Pennsylvanian John Gray is another fine maker Connelley says is lesser known. Gray's slogan is "Overbuilt, Practical, and Tactical." He lives up to that billing with tactical designs that incorporate blades of CTS-XHP stainless, oversized pivot mechanisms, and titanium frames with real heft that let you know you have a handful. "I see a lot of interest now in both John's folders and fixed blades," Larry said.

RISING ABOVE the CYBERTRAP

Purveyor/photographer Duane Weikum noted a downside of the rapid rise of some new makers on various social media. "It seems that even fresh makers get on Instagram and Facebook and become superstars before they really become true knifemakers," he observed. "There are makers out there who turn out sub-par knives, but due to social media they are able to become overnight sensations. Then people [who buy the knives] don't

want to say they made a bad decision, so they 'say' they got a good knife and the sham grows."

Those who have obviously risen above the cybertrap of mediocrity are a relative few, Weikum says. Brazilian Mauricio Dobruski is well known in the balisong world, but remains somewhat in the shadows elsewhere. "He has been making knives since around 2001, and Mauricio had taken several years off to work as a machinist," Weikum explained. "But now he's back and making even better knives. He won't be overlooked for long."

While generally not fancy, the work of Rick Marchand and Wildertools remains totally functional in Duane's book. "These are beautiful knives and swords," Weikum observed, "and you could carry his knives and survival kits to the ends of the Earth."

He counts veteran maker Fred Perrin as one of the best in the underrated and

THE COMMON THREAD

Purveyor Les Robertson of Robertson's Custom Cutlery sees a similarity among makers who are escaping appreciable notice.

"Those that I feel are underrated or overlooked all have one thing in common," he opined, "and that's quality at a value price. Most knifemakers don't know their position in the market that they are competing in. Often, their prices come from asking a fellow knifemaker. Unfortunately, [the resulting price advice] is usually just an educated guess. Pepsi does not go to Coca-Cola for advice on the pricing of a new soft drink."

Robertson advises makers to get as many of their knives in circulation as possible, particularly in the hands of collectors and users. Establishing their vocation as a business is also a step in the right direction for those who want and need to gain some recognition. Social media is a must along with attending shows and creating an Internet presence.

— by Mike Haskew

overlooked category. "Fred makes amazing knives," Duane remarked. "They are made on the rugged side, not the collector side, so they're a great value for using knives. Add that Fred is a super-fun guy to have around, super skilled with pretty much any weapon. It's fun to watch him flip a balisong."

Others who rate with Duane are the South African team of Andre van Heerden and Andre Thorburn. "Amazing workmanship for not a lot of money," he noted, "and they're super nice guys."

Purveyor Les Robertson of Robertson's

Custom Cutlery has been buying and selling custom knives for 31 years. Among the makers he sees as underrated are Will Morrison, an Australian who specializes in forged blades, Tim Steingass, a stock removal maker with seven years' experience, and bladesmith Tad Lynch.

"Morrison has an excellent value for the money," Robertson commented, "and Lynch is a top-shelf ABS journeyman smith. He flies below the radar, and those who have seen his knives in person understand he's ready for the ABS master smith test. Steingass is a superb craftsman and custom orders are his specialty."

... 3 to GET READY

A collector of art knives since the 1986 Solvang Show, Dave Nittinger lists Tom Overeynder, Mamoru Shigeno and Tim Withers among the underrated and overlooked because each brings a distinctive style and flair to their genres.

"Tom has quietly been recognized as one of the very best in high-end folders," Dave related, "and has been invited to attend the 2017 AKI [Art Knife Invitational] show of the best 25 makers today [page 10, November *BLADE*®]. I believe that finally his name will become a household word in the knife industry, and his attendance at the San Diego AKI will increase his visibility greatly."

When he attended the 2014 Solvang Show, Nittinger had never heard of Shigeno. He left Solvang with a lasting impression. "[Solvang Custom Knife Show coordinator] Dave Harvey writes that Mamoru creates fantastic knives and that his fit and finish, grind and polish work are among the world's best," he said. "I was fortunate at the 2014 show through the lottery system to be drawn for two of the best knives I have ever held and now own. The Special Big Fighter and the Special Fighter are shown on my website. Mamoru is in his early 40s with many years ahead for our enjoyment."

Shigeno makes 20-to-25 knives per year and uses ATS-34 stainless steel. His



Larry Connelley said Rod Olson (left) is known for knives with outstanding fit and finish. Olson uses button-lock, lockback and bearing-pivot mechanisms in his folders. His M9 Urban Tac features a 3-inch blade of RWL-34 stainless, a titanium body and carbon-fiber inlay. His base price: \$500. (images courtesy of Rod Olson)



According to custom knife purveyor Les Robertson, Tad Lynch is a top-shelf ABS journeyman smith. He seems to fly below the radar, and those who have seen his knives in person understand he is ready for the ABS master smith test. (SharpByCoop image)

work has been recognized in the Bob Loveless tradition, and Nittinger invites Shigeno to “come to America more often, and, with a bit of luck on our part as collectors, we can increase his workload to over 50 knives a year.”

Withers works long hours as a commercial plumbing project manager. He says his phone rings at least 30 times a week with collectors requesting a knife in the Loveless style. “Why, you say?” smiled Nittinger. “Well, Tim has only been making knives since 2011 using ATS-34, 440C and 1095 steels. His first show was in Pasadena, California, and he sold out the first day. His prices are fantastic for collectors looking for a new maker that many years from now will be untouchable and will have a long waiting list.”

Dave adds Joe Cordova to the underrated/overlooked list for an interesting reason. According to Nittinger, the only maker Loveless ever asked to make knives for him was Cordova. During a visit to Loveless’ shop in October 2005, Dave



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Larry Connelley of Knifeart.com said he is seeing a lot of interest in both the folders and fixed blades of John Gray. Gray's Interceptor linerlock flipper folder features a 3.8-inch satin-finished blade of CTS-XHP stainless steel that pivots on the Ikoma Korth Bearing System. Weight: 6.3 ounces. Closed length: 5.25 inches. KnifeCenter.com's price: \$895. (images courtesy of KnifeCenter.com)



asked about the request. "Bob's answer was simple," Nittinger recalled: "[Joe] was the only maker that could do it right." The reference was to three reproductions of Marble's canoe knives.

Dave asked Loveless if he really needed all three of the knives, and Bob pulled him aside. "He said, 'Here's one.' I bought it immediately, and, along with its 'brother' that I obtained from Jim Merritt later on, it's part of my permanent collection. The final knife was taken back to Japan with Bob's wife of many years," Nittinger related. "Cordova has been making knives for over 60 years and still makes a few each year."

WHAT it TAKES

As for today's maker-talent level, Nittinger says it is as good as ever with more makers coming along every day. Robertson attributes a growing number of talented makers to the improvement of and access to machinery in the knifemaking process, and the American Bladesmith Society with its Bill Moran School of Bladesmithing that teaches the building of a complete knife.

"That said," Les cautioned, "it isn't about the quality of the work from the new makers. It's the prices they're asking for their knives that are filled with mistakes. Granted, it may take a keen eye to spot some [of the miscues]. A maker may have talent, but it takes years of experience to hone those skills to produce a knife of exceptional quality."

For the contact info for the makers of the pictured knives, see "Where To Get 'Em" on page 64.

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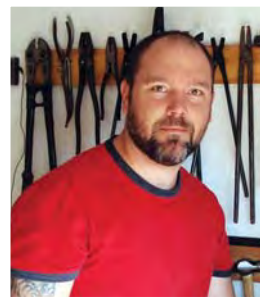
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Though ABS master smith Joe Cordova has been making knives for many years, he's on Dave Nittinger's underrated/overlooked list. Nittinger said Cordova is the only maker Bob Loveless ever asked to make knives for him. The knives were repros of Marble's canoe models like the two above. (image courtesy of Dave Nittinger)



Rick Marchand (inset) is another maker on Duane Weikum's underrated list. "These are beautiful knives and swords," Weikum observed of Marchand's work, including the Bush Waki, "and you could carry his knives and survival kits to the ends of the Earth." (PointSeven sword image)

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