

Play Your Didgeridoo, Mate

White Salmon's George Knehr masters the aboriginal wind instrument

By Jeanie Senior

White Salmon resident George Knehr is a retired Delta Air Lines pilot and a Vietnam veteran—and possibly the only didgeridoo player in Klickitat County.

George has been playing the aboriginal wind instrument for more than a decade. He also plays the Native American flute. He says the didgeridoo

attracted him because “it’s very mystical, and it comes from a people and a land that I like a lot. It’s just very intriguing to me.”

When he plays the didgeridoo, the sound that emerges is deep and resonant.

“I like to play the traditional aboriginal style,” he says.

Also called a drone pipe, a didgeridoo is made from the trunk of a eucalyptus tree that has been hollowed by termites. The length of the channels left by the insects determines each instrument’s unique sound.

When playing the the didgeridoo, George is making music with an aboriginal wind instrument that has not changed in millennia.

“That’s the beauty of it,” he says. “You’re continuing on with a very ancient, primeval thing.”

However, he adds, it is also extremely difficult to learn. He has taught lessons, but the learning curve is extreme.

It took George years to master the didgeridoo, including about 12 months to learn circular breathing—simultaneously inhaling through the nose while exhaling stored air. Combined with continuously vibrating lips, circular breathing is necessary to play the didgeridoo. The volume of air must be constant. To add vocals, it means learning a skill much like ventriloquism.

“It’s not like other instruments,” George says.

There are many players in the U.S. and Europe, according to George, some of whom have recorded music as well as instructional CDs and videos.

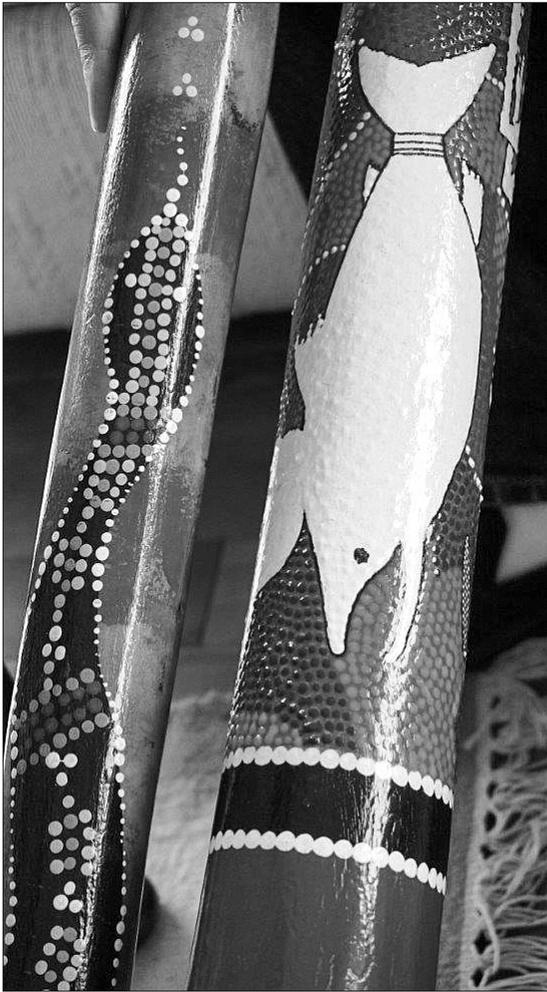
George initially studied on his own, using CDs and finding instructors in the U.S. He went to Australia and studied with artist and musician David Hudson, an Australian Aborigine and didgeridoo player who has been a featured performer in musician and composer Yanni’s world tours.

When he first heard David play a didgeridoo, “I’d never heard anything like that,” George says. “We all became great family friends over the years.”

Among George’s several didgeridoos is one David decorated elaborately. The traditional designs painted on it include two white handprints and a white



George Knehr practices circular breathing on his didgeridoo.



Left, George plays his snake-decorated didgeridoo.

Far left, a close-up of two didgeridoos, both from Australia. The one on the right with white salmon was decorated by David Hudson, an Australian artist and musician.

salmon, a nod to George's hometown.

Another didgeridoo is signed by the members of Yanni's symphony orchestra.

For years, George was a regular performer at Hood River's First Friday, gathering a crowd of didgeridoo admirers at the corner of Fourth and Oak streets. When the scale of entertainment at the monthly event grew to include bands with loudspeakers, the quieter charm of the drone pipe had trouble competing.

Fortunately, he has another interest that keeps him busy: travel.

When George and his wife, Cindy, moved to White Salmon 22 years ago, George was flying for Delta, based in Portland.

Before joining Delta, George was an Army pilot. Part of his Army service included a year in Vietnam in 1963 flying twin-engine Caribou aircraft that carried cargo and evacuated wounded troops.

Although both George and Cindy spent their work years on the road and in the air—he retired after 31 years with Delta; Cindy was a Delta flight attendant for 20 years—work did not dim their enthusiasm for travel.

Initially, they retraced some of their work travel routes, getting to know those places better.

They moved on to developing countries, spending time in Thailand, Morocco, India, China and Turkey.

"We spent a lot of time in Africa," George says. "That's an eye-opener for the rest of your life, I can tell you."

The couple has visited George's relatives in the Bavaria region of Germany, and this year will visit family members who lived in the former Eastern Germany.

"There's a lot of wonderful people out there and a lot of fascinating things to learn," George says. ■