

Making a big deal about Caymanian culture

Gig-maker extraordinaire Deal Ebanks talks to Business Editor Lindsey Turnbull about his special talent and showcasing it at the current National Gallery exhibition.

A National Gallery and Cayman Islands Traditional Arts Council collaboration, along with sponsors Butterfield Bank (Cayman) Ltd, '21st Century Cayman' brings together Cayman's contemporary artists with traditional artisans to collaborate in the Gallery's latest exhibition.

Deal Ebanks can certainly be termed a 'traditional artisan' with his passion for creating gigs out of Cayman's hardwood trees showcased all across the Cayman Islands, from Boatwain's Beach where he often gives presentations to visiting guests, to the steps of the National Museum, where he can be found displaying his lovingly carved gigs to tourists while at the same time blowing a conch shell to the approval of the crowd.

The hardwood gigs are spinning tops that are carefully carved from wood such as Cayman mahogany or guava, producing not just a fun toy for youngsters but also a beautiful piece of native art simultaneously.

Always an avid collector and maker of gigs, Deal recalls a childhood in Cayman where gigs played

an important role in entertainment. "I have made gigs since I was a kid," he explains. "We used to spend hours plugging each other's gigs in a bid to split our opponent's in half. That's why it was so important to make the gigs out of really hard wood. My record was seven busted open in one lunchtime, as I recall!" he confirms with a smile.

Fast forward to September 2004. Deal was living in Texas at the time and was visiting Cayman when Hurricane Ivan hit.

"There are moments in history which are defining," Deal states, "and September 2004 was one of those moments. I looked back at the devastation my country had gone through and decided that I was going to stay here. I wanted to stay to make a change."

Having made gigs on and off since he was a child, Deal's gig making took off after Ivan with the mountain of fallen trees creating a fountain of inspiration and means for Deal to create many new gigs.

"I made very good use of the fallen trees after Ivan and some of my best work has come out of the aftermath of the hurricane's debris," Deal confirms. "I only used trees that had fallen and spent considerable time carving them into their own unique form."

Deal estimates he has since made over 300 gigs, each one with its own character, he says. "I remember each and everyone," he confirms, pulling a few chestnut-coloured shiny beauties out of his

basket for me to appreciate. Each gig is a different size, but mostly all follow the same pear-shaped curves placed into a sturdy base. Their surfaces are shiny with the grains from each piece of wood swirling their unique stamp on each individual piece. Sometimes Deal has left the wood's surface raw and exposed to add a new dimension to the texture and design.

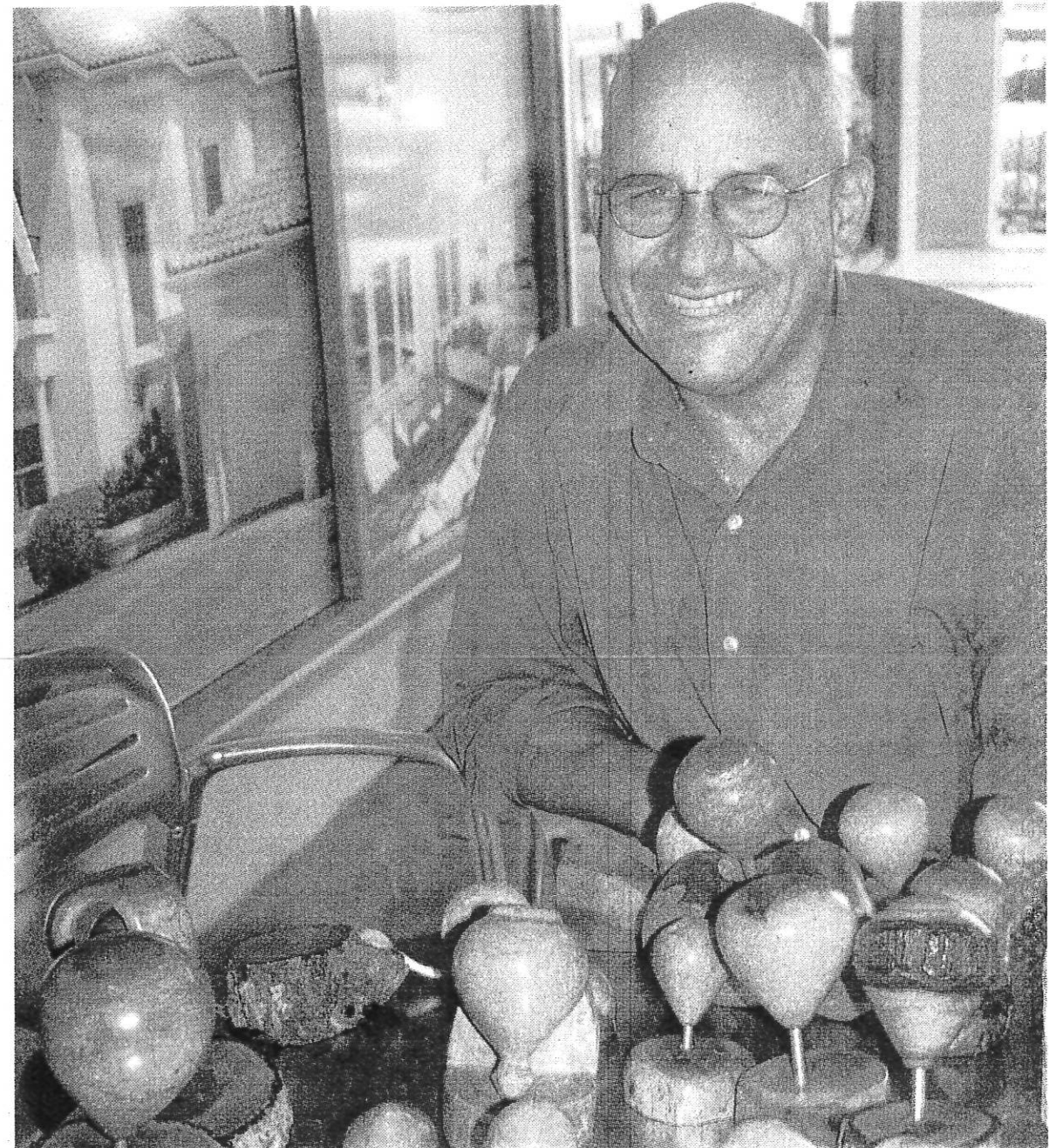
"I can't really envisage how they will look until I start to carve," Deal says. "They all begin as a bit of experimentation. But in the end they are all fully functioning, each with their own unique markings and demeanour."

Deal says he enjoys the interaction he gets when showing off his gigs to guests and visitors. In particular, a recent private showing for the new Governor and his wife was very well received.

"The Governor was very interested in what I had to show him and his wife, Mrs. Taylor was very excited to see the gigs," he confirms.

"I think gigs are extremely important because they touch a spot in many and remind them of childhoods where entertainment was made rather than switched on," Deal says. "My goal is to preserve Cayman's heritage in this way."

See Deal's exhibition at the National Gallery in Harbour Place along with the work of many other contemporary artists and local artisans.



Deal Ebanks: Each gig has its own unique markings and demeanour.