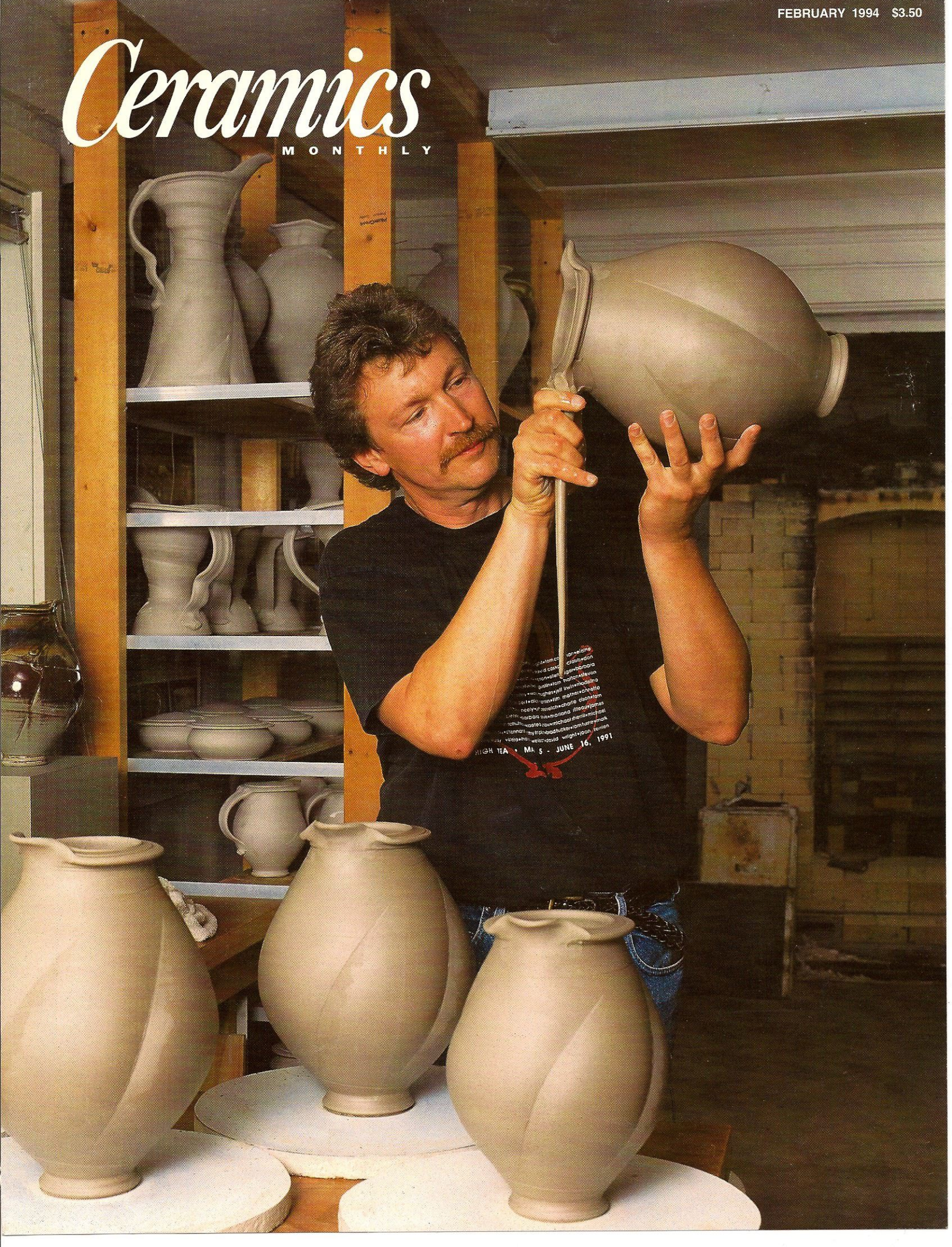


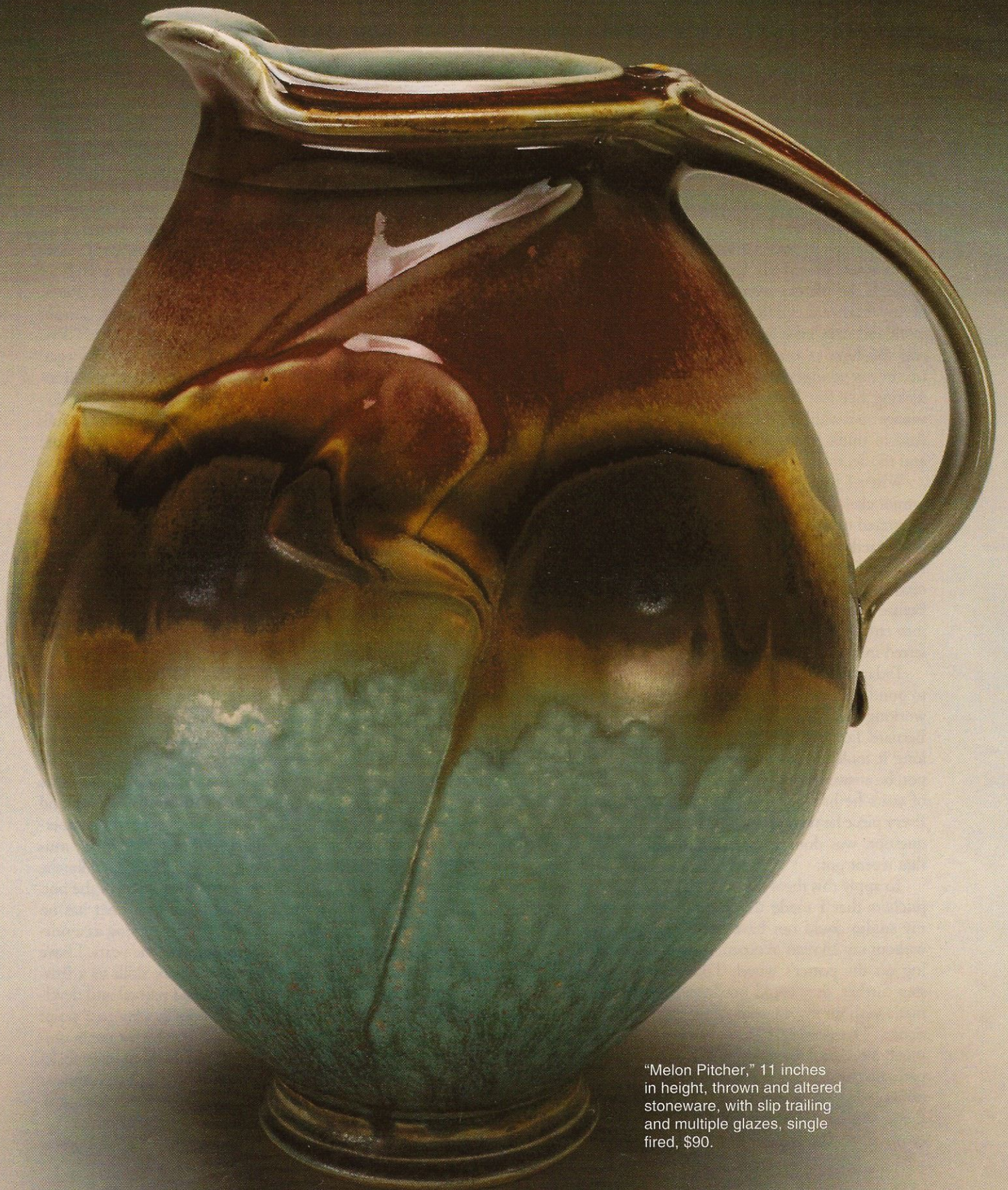
Ceramics

MONTHLY



Don't Put the Flames Out

by Steven Hill



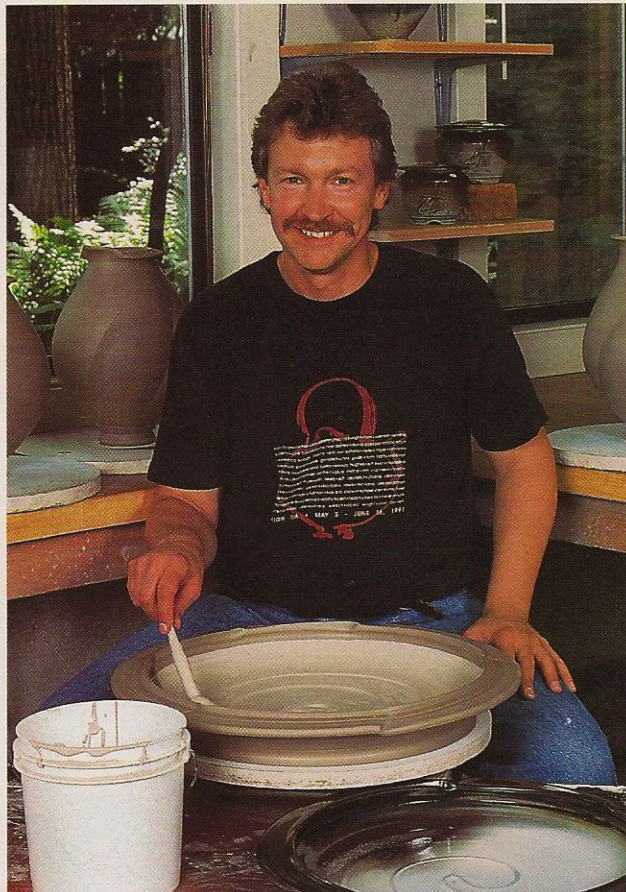
"Melon Pitcher," 11 inches in height, thrown and altered stoneware, with slip trailing and multiple glazes, single fired, \$90.

If I had to choose between music and clay, there would be no contest; my soul would die without music. My first studio was in a dungeonlike basement where there were few distractions. Pots quickly filled the ware boards while music continually pulsed from the speakers. Now I can look through the picture window of my backyard studio as I work and watch the ferns caress the base of our walnut tree or my youngest daughter kicking her feet high as she swings up toward its branches. And to think I can have *this* and music, too!

When I took my first ceramics class in 1970, I was a frustrated musician, but soon discovered that my aptitude for manipulating clay exceeded my ability to bend guitar strings. Before long, the energy I was putting into emulating Eric Clapton got transferred into making pots.

Today, as I lean back from my wheel to ponder a new pitcher form I've been working on, I think about something Bernard Leach said. When asked how long it took him to make a particular pot, he answered with the total number of years he had been working in clay. Every piece he made prior to the one in question was done in preparation for that recent pot.

To apply this theory, the table full of pitchers that I made this morning in my studio could not have been made without my 23 years of experience working on the potter's wheel. Taken one step further, they could not have been made without my 42 years of life experience. The pottery I make is not so much a product line developed to fill a particular utilitarian need, but a functional reflection of my personality, aesthetic sensibility and maybe even a bit of my soul. The way I handle the clay



Steven Hill applying slip to a thrown and altered platter in his Kansas City studio.

while throwing or handbuilding, along with how I use slip trailing and glaze embellishments, gives the user a glimpse of Steven Hill. I am not unique in this; the same is true for anyone who places the process of making pots at a higher priority than that of developing a product line.

So what does it take to make pots that are rich in personality? The first thing is to make enough pots so the process itself becomes second nature. The clay must flow with ease through your hands. If you are still fighting the process, the lack of technique will create a blockage that can only be overcome with a greater knowledge of materials. Michael Cardew once commented that it took seven years to make a thrower. Some might consider such comments as pretty rigid thinking, but it took me that long.

Next, it's important to have at least a vague idea of what to express in clay. What is it in life that makes you tick? How can that essence be translated into the clay? Many can learn to make tech-

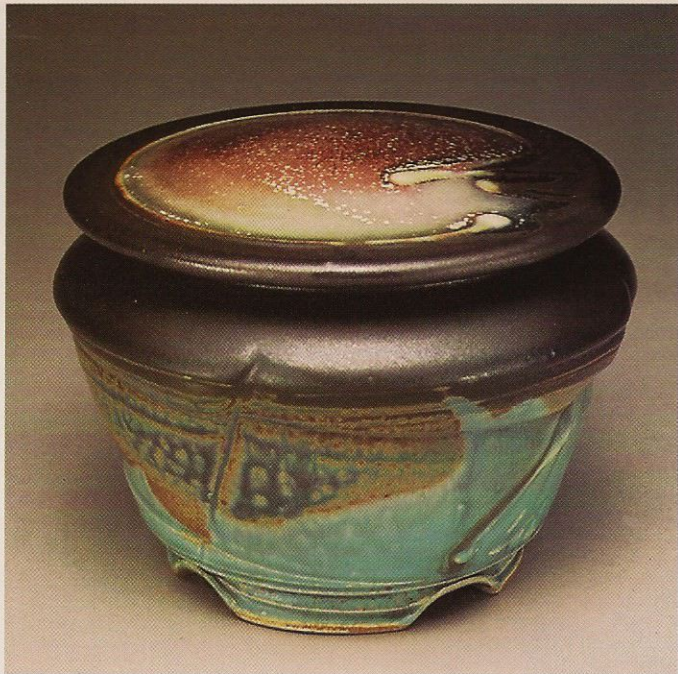
nically proficient ware, but finding personal expression within the realm of functional pottery requires digging much deeper.

The most obvious influence on my work has always been other contemporary potters. Early on, it was my teachers Angelo Garzio and Peter Sohngen; then Don Reitz, John Glick and Mick Casson; and, most recently, Chris Staley and Brad Schwieger. I've also absorbed various attributes of Chinese Song-dynasty ceramics, Japanese folk pottery, German salt-glazed jugs and Early American salt-glazed crocks. However, it is my love of music and nature that enables me to take these direct influences, digest them and transform them into

something uniquely my own.

Many of the qualities I incorporate into pots, such as balance, tension, movement, rhythm, harmony and even dissonance, have direct correlations in music. When fluting the rim on a bowl, I am creating rhythms and harmonies that contrast one side with the other, building tension in the piece. In a similar way, the inherent tension in the blues is created by contrasting the pain and sadness of the lyrics with the exuberance and utter joy expressed in the music. When trailing slip, I try to make the line dance across the surface of the pot, bringing life to a material that has no life of its own, merely serving as a mirror of its maker. Over the years, I have taken my rudimentary skills as a frustrated musician, and refined and developed these qualities in clay to a point that seemed unattainable for me in music. I'm quite content these days to let recorded music be my studio partner, at times a distractor, but mostly just guiding the rhythms of my work.

Nature has also played an important



"Covered Jar with Cut Feet," 5½ inches in diameter, single-fired stoneware with slip trailing and multiple glazes, \$45.



"Twister Pitcher,"
13 inches in height,
wheel-thrown stoneware,
with slab spout and
pulled handle, single
fired to Cone 10, \$100.

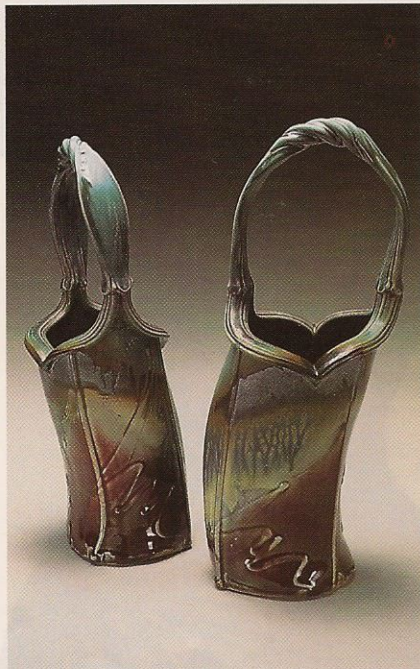


PHOTOS: AL BURRATT

"Fluted Bowl," 15 inches in diameter, wheel-thrown stoneware, with altered rim, impressed textures, slip trailing and multiple glazes (inspired by a Florida swamp), \$140.

role in my development as a potter. I have long reveled in the grand symphony of the West, and enjoyed the string-band intimacy of the Ozark hill country, but was unprepared for the profound impact of the southern cypress swamp's lone slide guitar. Like the blues, the swamp never hits the note straight on, but toys with the melody line, bending notes as if they were vines, reflecting in pools of mystery and intrigue.

My first trip to the deep South, with its stately rows of live oak trees, Spanish moss and bald cypress trees, left me with a powerful feeling of *déjà vu*. Being in a swamp is a bit like seeing the world through a microscope—an overwhelming concentration of life, both flora and fauna, and the sheer variety of visual textures. Looking through tannin-colored transparent water, partially obscured by floating plants with roots extending downward through schools of small fish, next to the massive fluted



"Dancing Baskets," 19 inches in height, extruded stoneware with impressed textures, slip trailing and multiple glazes, single fired in reduction, \$500.

trunk of a 600-year-old bald cypress, has inspired me for nearly 20 years.

When making pots, I aim to connect my varied influences by the way I manipulate both form and surface. Using transparent and matt glazes (water and shoreline, balance and tension, harmony and dissonance) next to each other, along with impressed textures and slip trailing, is an attempt to create my own little ecosystem. However, it took an art-fair customer at the "Lakefront Festival of Arts" in 1980 to make me realize what I had been doing. After making numerous return visits to my booth over the course of the day, he finally said, "I have to have this pot; it's like a pond with frogs." Immediately I knew what my subconscious had known for years. From that point on, I have felt an unwavering clarity of purpose. That's not to say I haven't stumbled into a few blind alleys, only that I've never lost sight of the direction my work is headed.

Or have I? This lifetime commit-

ment stuff is never really that simple. It's taken many years to realize it, but at this point I'm feeling a need to simplify my surfaces. I want form to speak with a dominant voice, but sometimes my complex surfaces partially obscure the form and confuse the viewer. Simplification sounds easy, but I don't want to give up the richness obtained by combining many glazes. I'd never be content just putting one glaze on a piece. It's just not me.

A recent series of platters accomplishes this objective. They are very much a statement of form, but with surfaces that are in keeping with my other work. I'm also making some new ceremonial pitchers, whose forms are inspired by the fluted trunk of the bald cypress tree, with surfaces that mirror the swamp's textures. Actually, it's a further development of a form I explored years ago. Exciting, yes. Frustrating, immensely. Although I've been pretty happy with them so far, I haven't yet figured out how to simplify the surface of these pots without making them boring.

Rock artist Lou Reed has always been good at simplification, distilling his songs down to just the essential elements. I find inspiration in his skeletal arrangements; completely devoid of excess, they ring true with astounding emotional impact.

The other day while throwing bowls and listening to Reed's "Magic and Loss," a powerful song about life and death, I was struck by the lyrics and their potential relevance for potters. Maybe it's a little presumptuous to make this comparison, but after all, making and firing pots has many parallels with human life. So for all of us involved in one of the most frustrating creative endeavors:

*You have to start at the beginning again
And just this moment*

This wonderful fire started up again

You find that that fire is passion

And there's a door up ahead not a wall

And if the building's burning

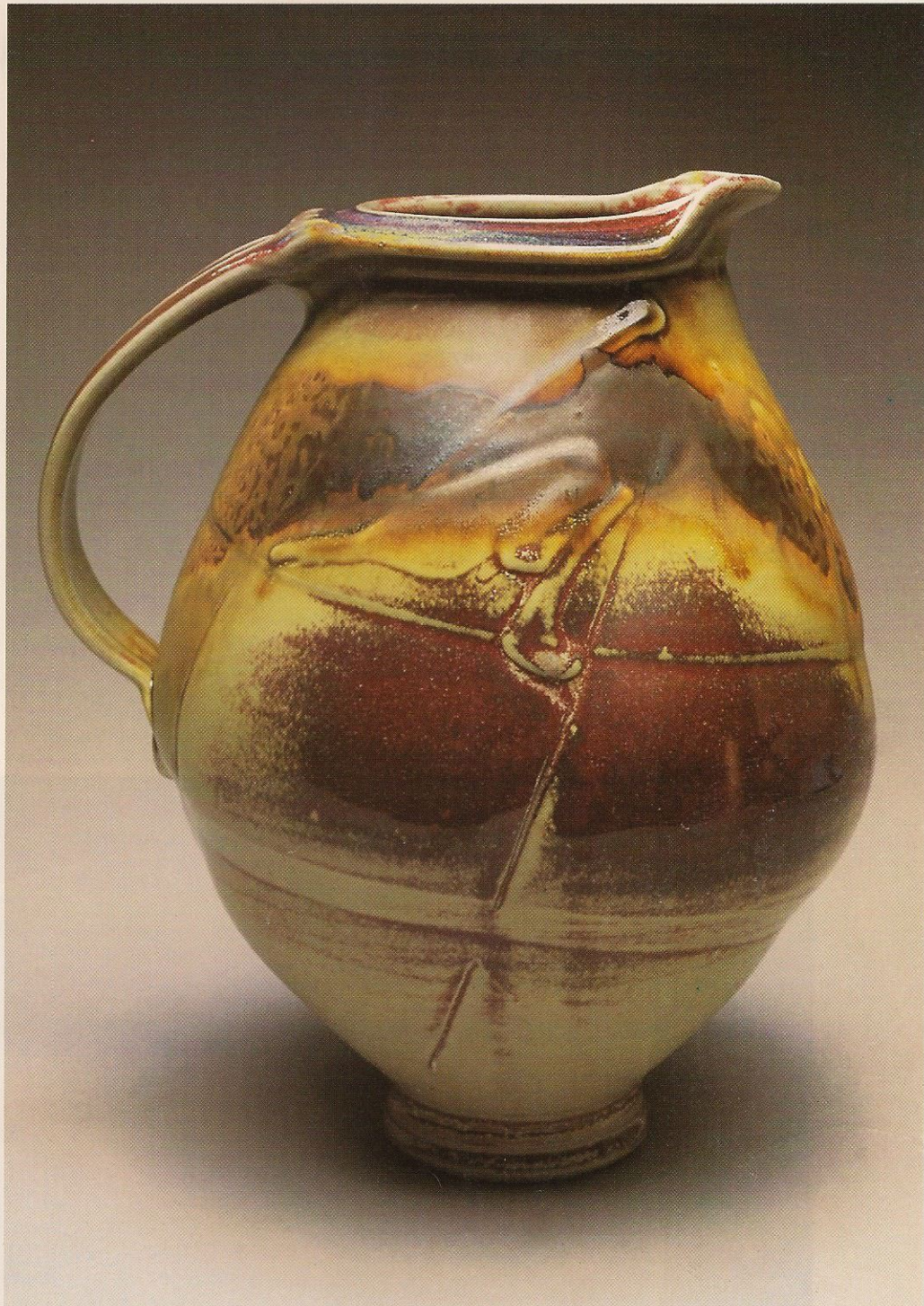
Move toward that door

But don't put the flames out

There's a bit of magic in everything

And then some loss to even things out

Being a good potter requires continual development over a lifetime. You



"Melon Pitcher," 11 inches in height, stoneware with trailed slips and multiple glazes, single fired in reduction to Cone 10, \$90.

can't make the same pots over and over forever, no matter how good they are. Inevitably, they will either evolve or lose their vitality, even though you won't always see changes from day to day or even month to month. A favorite analogy of mine is of a mountain climber slowly making his way up toward the peak, dreaming of the summit. I hope

to never reach that peak, because from that point on, it's a long downhill slide.

The author *A full-time professional potter and free-lance music critic, Steven Hill resides in Kansas City, Missouri. (Also see his article "An Approach to Single Firing" in the January 1986 CM.)*