

ON THE COVER

Jazz It Up by Bernie Houston

This article is based on a video interview with the artist on November 10, 2025, and information on <https://www.seadri.ftsculptures.com>.

“I bring the dead back to life.” That is how Bernie Houston, the artist featured on the cover of this issue of *American Psychologist*, describes the striking and intricate sculptures he creates from driftwood. The abandoned pieces he collects were once towering trees that grew for many years before dying and falling into the water. Houston’s imagination gives each piece new life.

Houston searches beaches around the world, using sight and sound to envision and unveil what pieces of driftwood might become. He notes that it is much like watching clouds—relax and focus—and then various shapes, animals, or objects appear and morph. So too, driftwood can reveal different shapes, textures, and objects to become sculptures limited only by one’s imagination. Houston carefully selects pieces that he finds intriguing and that sparks his imagination. He favors rootballs, the tangled and intricate parts of trees’ roots, and he prefers to work with dense hardwoods such as cedar or oak.

Houston’s art clearly connects to his childhood in coastal Georgia near Savannah. He worked and played with his family in a fishing community surrounded by water, marine life, and remnants of branches weathered by the sea. He describes observing driftwood as a child, fascinated by looking at it at different times of day, marveling at the shifts in morning and evening light. He used his imagination to envision and transform the wood pieces into

people or potential objects. He began by whittling faces into the wood. He soon found that others appreciated his work. As a young teen, he sold tables that he made by placing a piece of glass on top of a rootball in which he had carved intricate faces. This career path was not a surprise. Houston is a third-generation artist. Both of his parents painted, and his grandmother owned a boutique where she sold her hats and garments. Houston attended Savannah College of Art and Design where he majored in Illustration and began his career as a graphic artist.

Many of Houston’s sculptures, including *Jazz It Up*, reflect the importance of music in his life. They celebrate musical instruments and performers. As a child, he carried out his chores to music, marveling at the lack of words in expressive jazz music and finding himself visualizing to match the music. Today, he listens to jazz or classical music when he is doing the more delicate work of painting his sculptures but prefers rock or pop when he is vigorously carving the pieces with hammers and chisels.

Through his sculptures, Houston conveys a deep connection and engagement with nature and a respect, in particular, for water and trees. Each piece shows us how art can breathe new life into the remnants of natural objects and, in doing so, expand our horizons and rejuvenate us.

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