

The Man with the Shells



Don Chilton, BA '10

Don Chilton came of age in the U.S. Navy and retired meritoriously as a senior chief petty officer before translating his 26 years of service into college credits at TESU.

Little did he know that would lay the groundwork for a Hollywood break.

"I will never forget the day I received an email asking if I was interested in recording my conch shell music for a Hollywood film score," said Chilton, a music teacher and professional trumpeter who earned his BA degree in Music from Thomas Edison State University in 2010.

The email gauging his interest came from Jina Hyojin An, a colleague of Golden Globe,

Emmy, and Oscar award-winner Mychael Danna. A musical composer for numerous television and film projects, Danna was scoring the movie *Where the Crawdads Sing* an adaptation of the best-selling novel. Danna suspected the wind instrument in question, a conch shell, would be an ideal fit.

"They asked if I was interested in recording my conch playing for the musical score," recalled Chilton. "At first, I was convinced the message was a scam. After a quick internet search, however, I realized the request was legitimate. Working with Mychael Danna was a dream come true and it has opened up a lot of opportunities for me."

According to Chilton, the seashell theme figures prominently in the movie and the conch music lends itself well to Danna's unique and evocative soundtrack.

"I began experimenting with shells about eight years ago after watching a video of trombonist, Steve Turre performing *All Blues* on the shells. I now play shells regularly in my band performances," he said. "I also compose and produce my own music and videos. Social media helps me promote my projects and it's what led to being discovered by Danna's team."

Soon after, he was contacted by film composer Aiko Fukushima asking him to provide his shell-playing skills for the Netflix animated series *Samurai Rabbit* (Season 2 Episode 7).

"Aiko brilliantly combines traditional Japanese instruments and modern hip hop into the soundtrack," noted Chilton. "My shells were used during all battle scenes and a segment featuring Samurai ghosts."

Chilton's interest in music was

cultivated in his formative years and came to fruition during his years of service in the U.S. Navy.

"When I graduated high school my goal was to go to college and study music, but financially, it was not feasible at the time. Fortunately, after auditioning for the U.S. Navy Band, I was selected. For a long time, I assumed that I didn't need a college degree, but the closer I got to retirement from the Navy, the more I realized that a degree would be a necessity in building my musical career. My academic counselors recommended that I look into degree options with Thomas Edison."

Chilton said the academic structure made it possible to work on his degree while he was still on active duty.

"TESU understands the hardships that military members and their families face and it truly values the experience and knowledge of military personnel. My degree encompassed credits from military training, in-person and online courses, and credit for exams that I could take anywhere in the world. I completed my BA coursework in 2010 just before

retiring from the Navy and I am very grateful for the experience."

He later completed his teaching certification at the University of Rhode Island in May 2012 and was hired as the band director and general music teacher at Thompson Middle School in Newport the following year.



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Chilton also performs regularly with Down City Band and The Amy Winehouse Project and is the bandleader of the Larry Brown Swinglane Orchestra. He said that audience members are often surprised to witness the versatility of his conch shells.

"People tell me they had no idea that such a range of notes could be played on a single shell. As a music teacher, I present my shells to my students and they are simply mesmerized. One of the things I talk about in my class is how a conch shell

horn is 'the original trumpet.' The sound is produced the exact same way by "buzzing" your lips. The tricky part is knowing what note to play and using your ear and hand position inside the shell to get the note just right. One of the most rewarding things about being a music teacher is hearing former students tell me how much they enjoyed my classes and hearing about their successes," he noted.

Chilton, who resides in Newport, R.I., said that he is grateful to friends and family for supporting his music and those who have given him seashells to add to his musical collection.

"A really big 'thank you' to Will Trafton of ConchKing.com for partnering with me," he added. "Many of my amazing shell horns were crafted by him, and to

TESU for this opportunity to share my story."

To learn more about the programs available in

the Heavin School of Arts and Sciences, visit tesu.edu/heavin. To learn more about Chilton and his upcoming events, visit donchilton.com/bio. To listen to his music and witness his conch shells in action, watch youtube.com/DonChilton