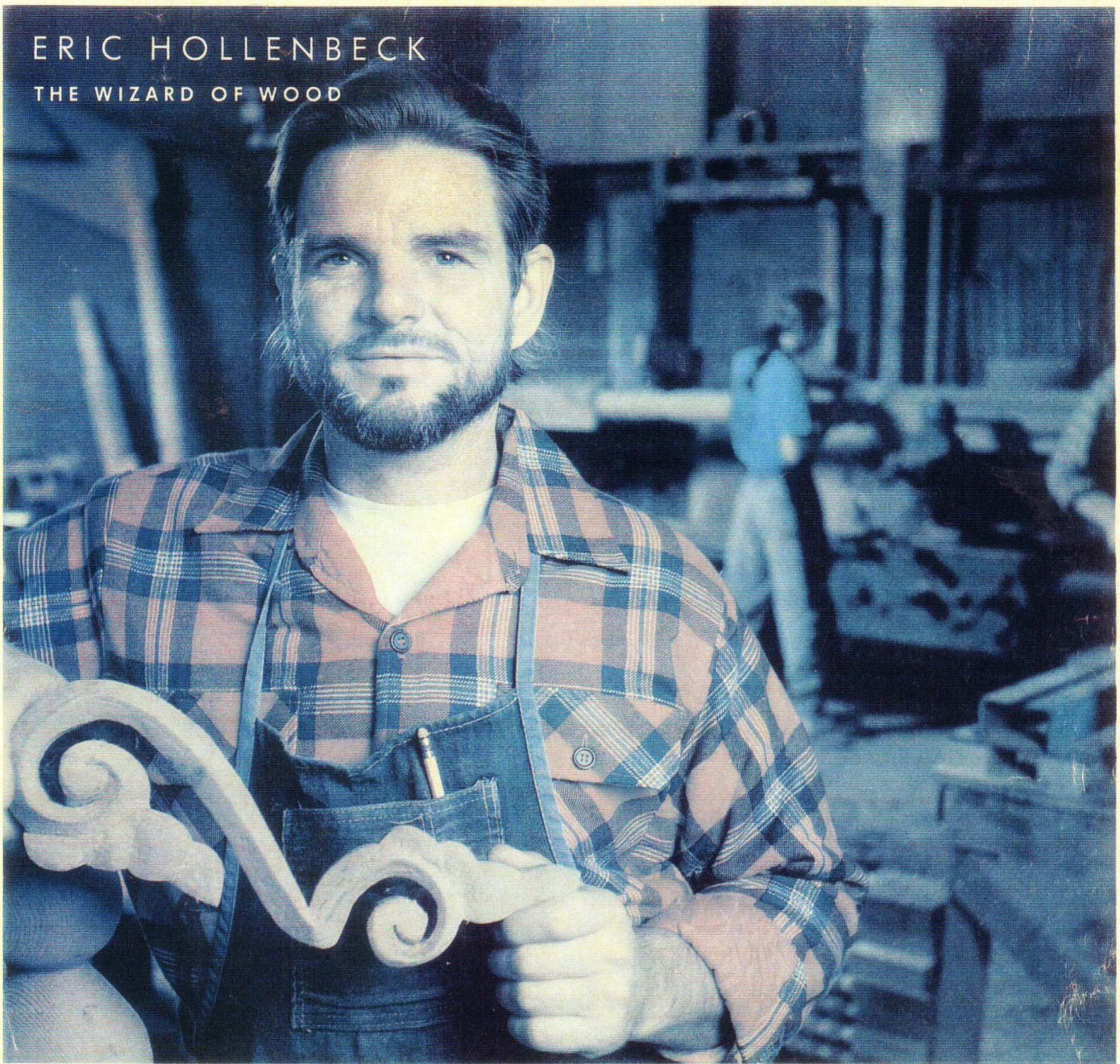


ERIC HOLLENBECK

THE WIZARD OF WOOD

NEIL GILCHRIST



Known to fellow California woodworkers as "the idiot who will buy old junk," Eric Hollenbeck uses only antiquated — 1866 to 1948 — tools and machinery to produce custom millwork in his Eureka woodshop. Specializing in historical restorations, especially Victorians, Hollenbeck spends much of his time searching for and salvaging woodworking equipment such as his two vintage wood molders, a 1921 Hermance and a 1904 Woods — items generally rescued from blackberry briars or weed bushes. "My daughters, age seven and 10, complain whenever we go on a road trip because I always stop at rusty piles to see if there's anything I can scrape up and bring home."

Hollenbeck began his career in wood when he was 14 years old — chopping brush

for surveyors — and by 24 he was running his own survey jobs. But without formal training in geometry and trigonometry, Hollenbeck could not handle the more complex survey projects where problems emerged. He began Blue Ox Millworks 19 years ago, and what started as a logging and lumber company that removed dead and diseased trees for the forest service now takes on reproduction and restoration of period homes.

"We will duplicate anything," boasts Hollenbeck. "While reproducing designs is painfully slow, at the same time it's immensely satisfying using old machines." Hollenbeck believes he is the only millworker left who manufactures wooden rain gutters. "Modern machines can't cut wooden gutters anymore, only the old machines

hold the knife in the proper way in order to produce them."

Besides having a molding plant, Hollenbeck also oversees a sawmill, where he cuts his own rough stock. "Old patterns need old dimensions, so we start with a log and saw it ourselves." When his machines break down, Hollenbeck cannot just go out to buy replacements. Instead, his in-house blacksmith shop manufactures parts for the turn-of-the-century equipment. The greatest challenge with using old machinery, however, was the trial-and-error process of learning how to operate it. "There was no one here to tell me how the machines worked, but at the same time there was no one here to tell me that it couldn't be done."

— Elizabeth Leep