



## In the Workshop with Charles Neil

Monthly Newsletter

No. 10

May 2008

Welcome to all New Subscribers!

Thanks to All!

## Woodworking Safety Week

May 5-9, 2008



You may have noticed a lot of information about woodworking safety this week. Well, this is the first Woodworkers Safety Week and many have come together to promote safety in our workshops. From

woodworking video casts to magazines to forums, a lot of emphasis on safety. So, instead of re-inventing the wheel because I have clients coming on Saturday to view a project, I will give you a link here to my friend Marc Spagnuolo's website (aka The Wood Whisperer) as he has really kept up with blogs, articles and links this week.

Visit Marc at [www.thewoodwhisperer.com](http://www.thewoodwhisperer.com)

## Our Anniversary

Well, one year ago I put up my first clip on Youtube.com and in July I wrote my first newsletter. Wow, how things have changed. The number of views and newsletter subscribers are overwhelming as well as the number of countries, it is amazing, not to mention the number of new friends made.

Like the woodworking thing further down in my newsletter, it started small and grew, we introduced some DVDs, they grew, then we took on the Finishing DVD Set, it is growing and we just finished the Sugar Chest/Cellaret project. None of this without a lot of growing pains. Technology upgrades, trying to be as thorough as possible with products, filming and re-filming. Trying to get furniture orders done, it has been a tough year, but a good one. Finances took a hard hit but we knew that it would, but we didn't give up and had we not done it then there would be nothing to grow.

Last week, Sherri purchased a new computer, the old one just started giving her issues as she was completing the Sugar Chest DVD and on the day she was making the DVDs and preparing to ship, she discovered the menus were not working, don't know why, but no matter what, she couldn't get them to work, something with the memory, file size and all that STUFF! So new computer, start over, that wasn't in the budget, or time frame, the old computer had done every other DVD including the big finishing one, but that's business and woodworking. About the time you think that everything is going good, LOOK OUT!

Your gonna like this, while filming the chest, I show ya how to double check and insure your measurement is correct, I was doing the back apron and front dividers, went and cut them,

built the table base, left it to dry overnight, came in the next morning, was setting up to film some more and discovered I had cut the pieces an inch too short, in all the running around and setting up, I set the miter gauge an inch short - go figure. So I had to cut the table bases apart and make new back skirts and front dividers and re-cut all my mortises. Wow, that was fun! It's not in the DVD or else it would have had to have something other than a G Rating!

Then, I was talking to my friend Bob and he told me he was cutting a base for a cupboard he's building - the third time. I asked why 3 times. He groaned and said 'cause I cut the first two too short!' The first time wasn't so bad but I did it twice. We both laughed and said, "Yep" you'll have those days.

But the new computer is working, Bob's cupboard is complete and life moves on. I wish I had a dime for every mistake (stupid ones) I made - and for every time I wished I wasn't doing woodworking for a living, or when the frustration level was higher than I thought I could bear....I would be a rich man.

I have told you before, it is not called failure unless you let it beat you, it is called experience.

I'm very experienced and now more so.

## Dove Tails

Out on my forum, the subject came up, as Glen Huey had did a thing on using a router to cut the pins for a "hand cut" look and was quite ingenious.

Here is the link:

[www.woodworkersedge.com/DovetailRouterJig.htm](http://www.woodworkersedge.com/DovetailRouterJig.htm)

and while I have never met Glen, I have his books and find our styles and techniques very similar.

So the guys asked me about doing a video on dovetails and I agreed. So what I'm going to do is a Brightcove thing, cause I can go longer and better quality, and I won't have to do a DVD so it's FREE! We'll keep everyone in the loop when it is done. I'm also going to show everyone Smart Tails and how to make them, they really help in hand cut dovetails and perhaps it will help you guys and gals.



## In My Opinion

### How Does One Make a Living as a Furniture Maker?

*A Different Write - and a BIG one!*

I am reluctant to write this and have touched on it several times, but over the last six weeks I have gotten a ton of emails from you about using your woodworking as a means of income, the number of emails tells me that in these uncertain economic times, folks are looking to see what they can do to help supplement their income, that's a good thing!

What I am about to write is purely my opinion and my own perception. I'm not trying to tell you what to do but rather what has worked for me and how I see things, which is definitely not how the majority of others see it, but for what it is worth, here goes:

The first thing I'm going to tell you is that starting small is smart and that leaving a secure position with visions of working for yourself as a dream job is just that, "A

Dream.” But, to use your woodworking to help supplement your income or help support your “wood habit” is possible.

You have to know that being a good woodworker is only part of the picture. Marketing and promoting is to a greater degree the issue. The internet doesn’t do it. Everybody has a website and you become one in a sea of millions and millions. The internet works for those who are known and have been around a long time, as well as a means to showcase your work. We have had a website since 1997, but we also had a good name and had been around for a long time. Our photo gallery is just a substantiation of who we are, it lets folks see our capabilities.

So, since the internet isn’t the answer, what is? Here is where you have to look around at your own world and see what is available to allow you to have your work seen. We had a lot of “high end” antique malls as well as the Virginia Artisan’s Center where we could rent space and display our work, both had good location and traffic. We got a lot of exposure and sold some products, but what we found was that by having a “significant” piece in the booth, along with small items worked best. The bigger item got their attention, and they bought the smaller item because they could carry it away with them.

Now I’m simply going to tell you that consignment, where you put something in someone’s shop or store and if it sells they get a percentage, just doesn’t work. I could tell you horror stories. I was talking to Bob Kloes and he agreed, it doesn’t work.

Wholesaling is almost as bad, you can’t produce in your shop products that can be sold for double what your getting, you have to be able to produce it super fast and do a huge volume to even think about it.

So what is the answer?

Be unique and go slow. What do I mean? Many of you like contemporary styling, not a problem, but “contemporary” being anything other than traditional, is subject to a lot of interpretation, just like art that you aren’t sure what it is, you just dramatically reduced your base of customers. Like a house with a swimming pool.

I have done a lot of contemporary furniture, but usually as a commissioned piece where the client dictated what they wanted, but to put a piece or two into a display to show diversity and ability does well, but stick with what is proven as a staple and bring your own creative pieces into the mix to see what your market wants.

Here in the eastern US, where there is a lot of history, doing pieces reminiscent of that era, does well. So, understanding your local market’s interest in pieces they can identify with is good.

Now, this is going to sound like a contradiction, but not the case. Here, in my world, oak is everywhere, some walnut, some cherry, but oak grows in abundance and is not overly expensive, I do a fair amount of work in walnut and cherry but many years ago I started using a lot of the figured maples, not typical in my region, they devoured it. It was different and unique and when someone saw it in their homes, they knew it was special and the statement “No one will have one like it” carried a lot of weight, they like that.

So here is where we are at:

A. Find somewhere you can display your work, that you are in control of it.

B. Put your best foot forward and show your abilities.

C. Look for items that will appeal to your local market and make them special and/or items of universal appeal.

### Universal Appeal

Here is a win-win. Some things never lose appeal, chests (boxes), and small tables and benches are always winners. Turned bowls and platters are also well received.

Crafty items poorly done, don't make it. You can sell a ton of them but you won't make any profit. In the Adventures of Bob and Charles DVD we did Keeping Chests and Candle Boxes, we used beautiful high figured woods, priced them accordingly and they were all gone within two weeks, all sixteen of them. Why? Because people love boxes and the wood, they knew they were getting something special and unique and were willing to pay for them.

Here's what I want you to understand. There are two basic clients, just like woodworkers.

I have told you many times, I can't afford to buy cheap tools, if it won't hold up, do what I want and hang in there it's useless and my time and money are wasted. But many buy the cheapest thing they can get, then complain that it doesn't work. I'm not one of them and neither are your clients. Folks will pay top dollar for top quality and these are the folks you have to reach. My business plan has always been, "If you don't compromise on quality then you don't have to compromise on price." I have never sold only one piece to a client and my pieces are all over the world and I have always stood behind my work, it has worked for me.

Woodworking is hard work and it is a tough business and you have to treat it like a business, even on a small scale, you have to pay taxes, have materials, equipment and insurance. All of these have to be figured into

your price and the serious clients understand this. Rarely does the cost of my wood exceed ten to fifteen percent of the cost of the piece and I prefer to keep it under ten. So do I make 80% to 90% of what I do, I wish! Fixed overhead - heat, electricity, sharpening, sandpaper, the aforementioned taxes, insurance will take a much larger chunk than you will keep. Everything has to be figured in, then what's left is yours. With all of that said, you have to reach a good market.

Now, this is going to surprise you, you are probably thinking you have to reach "the wealthy." Not so at all, most of my clients are hard working middle class folks, but like the tool thing, they know if they spend a few dollars more, and get something that will last, and will increase in value, they are ahead of the game, and these folks know what they are looking at, they know what dovetails, mortise and tenon joints are, the peg thing I told you about in the last newsletter. Plywood drawer bottoms, backs, etc., don't cut it. Veneers do okay as long as they are done well. Entertainment Centers, Computer Stations, Cabinets, plywood is great, but these items are not expected to endure for generations. I call them disposable. An entertainment center you made five years ago, don't fit the bill today.

You want to keep an eye on the trends. Example: Eight years ago, everything was "Shaker," with tapered legs, then everyone wanted "Mission" or "Arts and Crafts." Today the big slabs are popular. It all depends on what furniture factories are pushing or what is being put in the decorating magazines that determines the trend. For me, good old traditional, period furniture, with a little trendy or different thing thrown in are a sure bet.

Don't go for the big ticket items, small items that can be carried out and will fit in a car work best. A nice display with pictures of other

items work helps. You also have to sell yourself.

I have never done a lot of shows and the ones I have done rarely paid off. For it to work you have to keep doing them and keep showing up year after year. Our local PBS television station used to do an annual Artist Auction, I would donate to it as well as some of the local charity auctions, that brought attention my way as well. I remember once when we donated a Keeping Chest to the PBS station, the day after the auction we had people lined up when we opened to see if we had more, so we took orders.

More often than not, the residual sales from a display booth or showing was far greater than the initial event, but word spreads. A happy customer will tell two others, an unhappy one will tell ten!

We have done some juried things where we had to send pieces to be examined or detailed slides and so forth and have always been accepted, never saw a lot of sales from it, but it substantiated us and helped build our name, that's important and takes time and is only done one piece at a time.

Don't take on more than you can do, both in skill and time. This is a hard lesson, my problem wasn't skill, it was taking on more than I could personally handle and hiring help that wasn't help. The help never had the skill or the heart, they simply looked for the simplest and fastest way to get done rather than the best way.

Why bother to finish the underside of a table top or the inside of a chest? Because it is sound woodworking and it shows you are a craftsman and take pride in your work. I have never had to worry about satisfying a client, I have to worry about satisfying me.

Now, with that said, you have to know the balance or you will drive yourself nuts. Sure, I finish the underside of a table, but I'm not going to worry if every little nick and scratch is sanded out, more often than not I'm going to put on a couple coats of finish, scuff and wax it so it feels nice and is well sealed.

I do things most won't. Screws for example, I'll use a square drive then remove it and replace it with a brass slotted, typical of early antiques. If I'm really wanting to go the mile, I'll antique them with some gun bluing. Just me.

I've written all of this to make one major point. You are going to get out what you put in and you have to be the judge of that. For me, you can't expect more than you are willing to give and you have to set your own standards.

Building pieces for sale is far easier and more profitable than commissioned pieces, the reason? You determine the outcome and you don't have to go through all the how you want this or that. Finding a really nice board and make a small chest or whatever it seems that the board wants to be is very satisfying and when you put it up for sale, the buyer accepts it for what it is and you can price it according to it's value rather than time and material as is the case with commissioned pieces.

Commissioned pieces, make sure you have every "I" dotted and "T" crossed. Size, wood, color, etc. I have had cases where people wanted a cherry something and wanted it a dark color, later, decided they wanted it natural, now that's a big difference. If it is going dark, I can choose my material differently. If you are going to use a secondary wood, make sure the client understands and it is in writing. Our standard terms are 50% deposit when placing order and the balance is paid when the build is complete BEFORE any sanding or finishing is done. At this time we have them visit and

approve that everything is the way they want, make a final decision on stain and hardware and pay the balance. Too many times we completed a piece to find they would pick it up sometime in the next six months or so, when they pay at this point in the process, they don't tend to leave it hang around. Make sure they understand your payment schedule before you undertake the project.

If they want you to do drawings and sketches, they should expect to pay for this as well. The key is to make sure they understand what is included in the price you are quoting them.

I hope that I haven't put you to sleep yet but this is a tough thing and perhaps understanding some of the things we have seen will help. I have often heard "How great it must be doing woodworking for a living." Well, yes and no. Doing it for enjoyment and HAVING to do it is two worlds apart. But I really do enjoy designing and building something just for fun. So for me its my occupation as well as my hobby.

One last thing - if you're not serious and aren't willing to put a lot of effort into it, don't risk it and start small. Don't risk any more than you are willing to lose, but by the same token, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Hone your skills, learn as much as you can, the more you know, the more you do, the more you do, the more you know.

Finally, "inch by inch, it's a cinch."

## The Finish Line

When we finished the sugar chest after filming the DVD, on the hand-planed pine one, I did three coats of pre-cat water base in a flat sheen, next day, rubbed it out with a 500 grit Abralon pad, just to insure a smooth and even sheen. Rubbed with the grain. The

already flat sheen allowed me not to worry a lot about the carving or any slight recesses.



If it had higher going would had to get into recess, A n y after a

scuff/rub (500gr) I waxed it, put it together and it's ready to go.

After construction, it took two days to finish and assemble, including dry times. Oils and Wipe-ons - two days becomes two weeks or even two months.

What I now have is an extremely durable finish that feels like warm butter and looks like a close to the wood, low satin sheen. Beautiful finish.

Now that's what I'm talking about, quick, slick and durable. Who could ask for more.

## The Weather Report

Well, it is definitely spring, the birds are hatching, I got a new pair of sneakers, fixin to

been a sheen in, I have try to every not fun. way, quick

start band sawing the sleeves out of my sweatshirts and shortly will convert the long jeans into short jeans in like manner!

Temps are in the 70's and I'm loving it. My favorite times in the shop are spring and fall when I can open the doors and let the breeze blow through.

Air is not as humid as summer or as dry as winter so it is a nice time to build. BUT....as the weather changes, make sure that you build your projects with expansion and



contraction in mind.

Summer will be here before you know it and the experts say not much woodworking goes on in the summertime. How about you? Do you give up woodworking in the summer for other stuff to do?

Watch for sales on tools, supplies etc., sales history shows late spring/summer to be the slow time of the year for woodworker supply sales, you might just find a good bargain in the "off season."

## Craftsman Profile

*Another Young Woodworker*

Recently I had the opportunity to meet, on-line a 14-year old young man who has a love for woodworking. At this young age, he got my attention. After exchanging a few emails, I asked him to send me his address (I had something I wanted to send him - a DVD set on finishing). He replied, "Why do you want to know and I'll check with my parents."

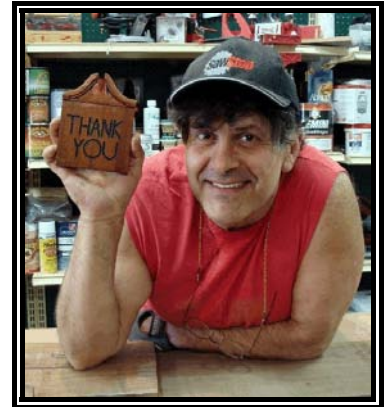
Silly me, all that cyber safety stuff didn't even dawn on me when I asked him that simple question, well, his parents said it was okay so I made sure that he received a few things to help him in finishing his projects.

I know that he blogs on Lumberjocks but I have been so busy lately I haven't been on the computer a lot. Unknown to me, he was blogging about a project and now, after the fact, I've gotten to catch up on how it all came together.

Denis, one day, when you're an ol' woodworker like me and you help some young'n out, you'll know the feeling that came over me when I opened your envelope.

You can visit Denis' Blog and see his projects at:

[www.lumberjocks.com/jocks/teena\\_gewoodworker](http://www.lumberjocks.com/jocks/teena_gewoodworker)



## Re-Sawing

Here is another area where we often have problems. I do a lot of re-sawing and so I again started on a quest to find the best and

easiest way to do it. So I got some different bandsaw blades and have been playing, as time has allowed. I have been amazed at some of the results, but one thing I have found is that setting the fence to compensate for drift is a must. David Marks did a little thing on his show that showed using angle gauges to help set the fence, worked pretty good. What I do is to draw a straight line on a piece of scrap about 2 or 4" wide x 24" or so long. Then free hand saw the line to the halfway point - STOP - turn the saw off and clamp the wood in place. Careful not to move it, then set your fence to the wood. Even though the fence is no longer square to the table, it's square to the blade and drift and ripping and re-sawing are accurate, of course, insure your blade is 90 degrees to the table vertically. Check it with a good square.

## The Tool Crib

### *Drum Sanders*

Of any single machine that dramatically improved my woodworking, it would be a drum sander. I have three. Nothing surfaces, flattens or sizes wood better. I can sand veneers, untwist, perfectly size, as well as dramatically reduce hand sanding time.

Here are a few things to know:

1. Heat and loose paper are the most common problems. Remember you are sanding and not planing. Go slow and take light passes. Keep the paper tight on the drum.
2. Next problem is skipping or improper grit. Don't skip a lot. Use very coarse for flattening and leveling (surfacing). Use superfine grits (150-180gr) are fine for very light smoothing but are not made for stock removal and produce

more heat which then causes mineral burns.

3. Mineral burns are caused by overlapping paper or being too aggressive and building up heat which causes the mineral and resins in the wood to dissolve and deposit on the paper, like a burned food on a stove or oven.
4. Drum alignment: Insure they are parallel. I take two pieces of wood and run them through the left and right side at the same time and insure they are exactly the same in thickness, if not, adjust until they are.
5. Unsupported panels on the open end sanders.

On the open end sanders, hanging a ton of weight beyond the open side doesn't work. The hold down bars are not capable of holding the weight nor should they be. Supporting the overhanging side with roller stands does better. Better yet, keep your panels confined to the capable width and glue them together after sanding. You will usually have one glue seam and nice clean and even panels.

Quick  
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Always  
rotate  
to end



Sandi  
Tips:

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run a second final pass without changing the drum height. If there is the slightest out of level it will compensate and insure all is even.

Remove any burns as quick as possible by blowing with compressed air while the drum is running and the burn is hot.

Very difficult burns can be removed with some oven cleaner. Let it soak and scrub with a soft "brass" brush, never scrape. Scraping will remove the grit and cause further burns. Rinse with water and let dry. Sometimes 2 or 3 applications are needed. Never do it on the machine, the chemicals can damage the aluminum drum.

Never sand on the ends, at the clips. It is a sure way to break your paper.

By taking a large rubber cleaning stick and running along the spinning drum from left to right it will help tighten the paper. Always adjust the securing clip afterward. Be sure to clean off any of the rubber debris as it will also embed and cause burns.

If you get a scratch or nick in your drum, simply sand and polish it out. I use 320 -600 grit. Always insure the back of your paper is clean. A chip or other debris can cause major issues from burns to gouging your work.

Run your pieces at a slight angle until your final pass which is the only time I run it with the grain. This allows a greater part of the paper to be used along the drum and helps the dust collector remove the sand dust instead of allowing it to build up.

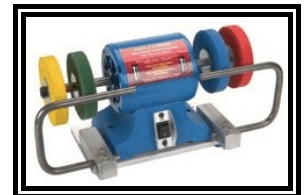
## Sharpening Systems

### *Sharpening*

Sharp tools are a must for a woodworker and everyone seems to have their favorite ways to sharpen. In my world where I have to turn, carve, saw, whittle and chop, I have to sharpen a variety of tools so I started on a quest, to say I'm well armed is an understatement. I got a lot of sharpening tools and machines, some borrowed, some I have, anyway, we've been working on using them and playing with them. Had some guys over and I'm having a few more, gonna put all of the products through the paces and we'll let you know what we find.

Now, for those of you coming to the "Cruise-In" on May 24<sup>th</sup> at my workshop, bring a dull tool or two and we'll let you check the machines for yourself. From carvers to turners, the talent will be here.

We'll have them all set up as well as my old plate glass and sandpaper sharpening system.



## Sherri's Update

*Woodworker's Cruise-In - May 24, 2008*

It's only a few weeks away now and we are very anxious to meet everyone. If you haven't heard, we've invited everyone to meet at our shop and have a fun day of woodworking talk and play. Bob will be here from Wisconsin and many of our internet friends have already said they will be here too. It will be sort of a tail gate party but the shop will be open and we can just have a good time.

A local friend has available some tables, chairs and canopy tents he has offered us for the event, it would be great if I could get a head-count of who "thinks" they can attend that day. We have given the heads ups for a local non-profit group do some b-q chicken or something like that, but I can't ask them to commit if only a very small group. Please email us if you think you might attend. Don't need exacts, only if you are trying to make it.

All you need to bring is yourself and a chair, or a tail gate! MAY 24, don't forget!

It is sure to be a memorable day for everyone.

### *In the Workshop with Charles Neil DVD Series*

The feedback we are getting from those of you who have been purchasing our DVD series has been appreciated so much. We are working on getting better clips on the preview player and a client comment page done so that you can view what others have had to say about the titles so you can decide which titles you would like to own in your woodworking library.

We have heard some grumbling about the prices of our DVDs, especially the finishing set. All we can say is that we can't cram a lifetime of experience into \$19.95. There has been a lot of expense and time put forth in bringing these DVDs to the woodworkers and know that most of you understand that. We

have gotten so many emails and have seen posts on various forums that for the amount of information, the set was a steal!

### Retiring an Ol' Friend - Update

The Sugar Chest/Cellaret DVD Set has shipped to those who pre-ordered. The set (4 discs and reference manual) is available from our DVD store. It was an exciting project and we are so pleased to bring it to all the serious woodworkers out there. We had a lot of fun



and with all of the upgraded equipment, the quality of sound and video is very much improved. We look forward to sharing this project with everyone.

### May Subscriber DVD Special

We want you to experience the intense educational factor in our DVDs, especially the set that took over a year to put together - **Finishing A to Z: Beyond the Books DVD Set**. So, until May 31<sup>st</sup>, you can purchase

ONE of the titles individually for \$15.00, this includes shipping. *(This offer is only good in the U.S., sorry to our Int'l friends but the shipping costs are prohibitive for this offer).*

We know that the set is different than anything on the market, we just have to get it in your hands so that you see the value as well. After you receive your title you can order the balance of the set less the cost of this one DVD. Instructions on how to take advantage of this will be included with the title when shipped. To order your title go to:

[www.antiquesbuiltdaily.com/may2008special.htm](http://www.antiquesbuiltdaily.com/may2008special.htm)

## Forum

The *"Ask Charles Neil Forum"* can be accessed via our main webpage, just click on the forum link.

## T-Shirt Catch Phrase

On April 27<sup>th</sup> we started a contest to find a great catch phrase for our shirts we will be offering in June. You can still submit until May 10<sup>th</sup>. The rules are posted on our forum and that is where you can make your submissions.

The GRAND PRIZE is:

Earlex HV5000 Spray System  
General Finish Product Assortment  
Worksharp 3000 Sharpening System  
Choice of DVD Title  
and of course a T-Shirt

Four runners up will receive their choice of a DVD title and a T-Shirt.

Go directly to the forum following this link:

[www.freeforum101.com/charlesneil/index.php?mforum=charlesneil](http://www.freeforum101.com/charlesneil/index.php?mforum=charlesneil)

You must register on the forum in order to post. Just go to the first Topic to read the rules and post your entry. We do hope you look around the forum and join in with others in our workshop.

## My Furniture Making World

Let's see...

Working hard on furniture orders. Finished the old pine Sugar Chest from the DVD. Built a walnut sideboard and extension table (designed by the architect client) that was commissioned.

Lots of walnut work this month.



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Goodbye  
for this  
Month*

Finished up the sugar chest/cellaret DVD, prepping for the router DVD, Thinking on and prepping for the router and turning DVDs. Trying to decide format and what to put in them.

On the turning one, we gonna do some bowls and hollow vessels and some pens, but to a greater degree, it will focus on furniture turning. Between spindles, legs, finials, rosettes, chairs, etc. There are a ton of bowl and freeform dvds out there but not much on spindle and furniture.

The Router - my second favorite tool. Don't know of much of anything you can't do with a router and some good bits. Gonna go from simple edge to carving and shaping. The router is one of my most used tools.

The router will be first, possibly mid to late summer. Kind of gonna wait and see how the finishing and others DVDs do.

*Visit My Forum* and let's chat.

Catch ya next month!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Charles". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "C" and a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.