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Morris Township whistler blows his way to fame

'Birdman' seizes opportunities for movie, T.V., radio gigs

**BY PAUL BONASERA
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY RECORD**

MORRIS TWP. - Joe Sodano whistles like a bird -- in fact, a whole variety of birds.

"I whistle all day long," Sodano says. "It breaks up the monotony, makes the day go smoother."

Sodano is not just any whistler.

In 2004, he came in seventh in the International Whistlers Convention Competition, the world championship of whistling, in Louisburg, N.C., and has since been in three motion pictures and on TV and radio due to his whistling ability.

"2004 was the first time I performed for a formal audience," Sodano said. "I realized I was accepted, and people liked me, and I could make people smile and entertain them."

Sodano, 52, started whistling when he was four, at first mimicking a bird, and eventually teaching himself by listening to more birds and moving his mouth and lips in certain ways to get the right pitch.

He appeared in the film "Pucker Up, The Fine Art of Whistling," a 2005 documentary on whistling and the world championship, and in "Why Birds Sing," released last June in England.

"I think birds sing to make humans happy," Sodano said, commenting on the movie.

He also was filmed whistling in "Spring Break 83" starring John Goodman and Julie Brown, a nerds versus jocks film set in the 1980s. The movie is scheduled to open in the spring.

At the ShopRite in Chatham Township, Sodano is known as the whistler, said Greg Mahlis, an assistant manager.

"He often whistles while he's waiting at the deli counter, entertaining the other customers," Mahlis said. "Most of them seem amazed at how well he whistles and imitates birds."

Sodano whistles popular tunes, sometimes accompanied by music, and at times, a cappella. Among his favorites are "Amazing Grace," "The Star Spangled Banner," "Can Can," "When The Saints Come Marching In" and "God Bless America." He can occasionally be heard on radio stations WKTU-FM, and WOR 710 AM. WOR 710 introduces him as the birdman.

Sodano whistles to the Rocky movie music theme "We're Going to Fly Now" on his web site, www.joesodano.com, while pretending to be Rocky training. He believes in staying in shape, training at the Madison Area YMCA and doing 1,300 sit ups daily, no matter where he happens to be, Sodano said.

Unlike most of the whistlers in the world championship, who sound like flutes when they whistle, Sodano imitates birds. These include cardinals, blue jays, robins, hawks, northern mocking birds, chickens and turkeys. He even can bark and cry like a dog.

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DAWN BENKO / DAILY RECORD

Joe Sodano is known as "The Whistler" because of his bird calls. Sodano's cockatiel, Trooper, spreads his wings as he whistles.

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Whistler Joe Sodano

Sodano can actually communicate with birds.

One day he and his father-in-law George Thompson were out for a drive and they spotted a wild turkey about 60 feet from the car. Sodano pulled over and began mimicking a female turkey and the male turkey walked all the way up to the car window. On another occasion he drew the attention of a Red Tailed Hawk by whistling like a little song bird.

At times, his whistling has fooled the public into thinking birds were nearby. While walking through Disney World with his wife Maryellen and their two children, Thomas, 7, and Nicole, 11, Sodano was whistling.

He noticed that people around him were looking up to spot the birds. When they realized it was him whistling, they broke into laughter, Sodano recalled.

Sodano owns an organic poultry business and often drives a 46,000-pound truck loaded with turkeys and chickens.

"I whistle while I work," Sodano said, noting it helps the time pass.

Sodano has a "very strong whistle," allowing him to whistle in a large room without a microphone, says Phyllis Heil, also a finalist in the world championship. "He's very expressive. He whistles with heart, puts his whole body, his hands and face into it," Heil said.

Heil, who is from Hickory, N.C., appeared with Sodano on the "Tonight Show" with Jay Leno. They took part in an all in fun male versus female whistling contest that involved eating a cracker just before whistling.

"You can't tell a man from a woman from their whistle," Sodano said. "Nor can you distinguish race, creed or national origin either. Whistling is an international language."

He enjoys entertaining at nursing homes, especially around the holidays, Sodano said. He plans on whistling "Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer," "Santa Claus is Coming To Town," "Joy To The World," and "Noel" at the nursing homes and on the radio.

But while some people find his whistling entertaining, it is not welcome everywhere, Sodano said. He has been told on trains and planes that whistling is not permitted. And while he was growing up, Sodano's sisters would get annoyed by his constant whistling, he recalled.

"For me, I need to whistle like a smoker needs nicotine," he said.

"Whistling is good for the soul," Sodano concluded. "People that whistle are generally happy and feel good about themselves," he said. You don't see depressed people whistling."
