PHIL SEARS /Democrat

Damon Victor draws a trim line recently on an orthotic walker he built for a diabetic person. The Alaskan Pirate spends his days running his orthotics shop, Damon Designs.

PIRATE

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blue jeans and a cowboy hat. He hears a connection between the Alaskan Pirate's sea shanties and Appalachian folk tunes.

"Usually you have to go up in the hills to hear this kind of stuff," Thompson shouts. "But this is music. It's the universal language."

Yeah, a universal language that uses the word "Yaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrrggggghhhhh" a lot.

He really is from Alaska

A few days later, Victor, 37, calls to set a time to meet for lunch and talk about his life as the Alaskan Pirate and the new CD (which just got picked up by the national Redeye Distribution company). By pure coincidence, it's National Talk Like A Pirate Day.

"Avast, me hearty, this is Cap'n Victor, where would you like to eat?" he says.

Uh-oh. This could be a long lunch.

Instead, Victor arrives out of character and turns out to be the most affable, polite pirate you'll meet this side of the Barbary Coast. When he walks into the Main Ingredient wearing a T-shirt he bought at a Flaming Lips concert, he's clean-shaven and looks like he just turned 21.

"I had to lose the beard," he says. "Well, I didn't have to, but I did it because I'm going to a big convention in Hollywood in a few days. I didn't want to scare anyone."

When he's not singing about whaling or walking the plank, Victor works as a registered orthotics technician at his own shop, Damon Designs. He builds customized braces for patients who have injured, deformed or missing legs. The urge to make a peg-leg-pirate joke is almost impossible to resist, but it's obvious Victor is dead serious about his orthotics career.

"The first time I got to see a kid walk to his mother . . . let's just say I have the zeal of a freshman about my work," he says.

When it's time to order, Victor passes on the pirate-worthy keg of lamb and quizzes the waitress about the daily special of tofu, veggies, noodles and tempeh. He wants to know if it's vegan-friendly, and it is.

"I've been a vegan about 10 years now. It's a total spiritual thing," Victor says after placing his meatless order.

"I'm not preachy about it, the way a lot of other vegans can be. It's just, why do you have to have to whack something on the head just to have a snack? I'm pretty hard-core, though. If it's not vegan, I won't eat it. . . . But when I was a carnivore, I was really into it. That was in Alaska."

Victor grew up in "an old hippie community" called Girdwood outside of Anchorage, where his Swedish grandfather started a retail fur business that still operates today. His early childhood was spent fishing, hunting and skiing in the wilds of the 49th state.

"I remember watching our neighbor standing in his bathrobe and shooting a moose from his front porch," Victor said. "He killed it, and cut it up on the spot — all before breakfast. That image has always remained with me. That's Alaska."

When he was 7, Victor's parents divorced. The courts gave him a choice — he could move to Florida with his mother and sister, or stay with his father in Alaska.

"It's ridiculous for kid to have to make that kind of decision," Victor said. "But there I was in court, having to choose. I stayed with my dad. What did I know?"

Life with father was not exactly stable. Victor describes him as "a playboy who was always away on business in Japan or Las Vegas." There was plenty of money, but no discipline. After living as a latch-key kid on skis for a few years, Victor bounced around living with his dad's friends in Los Angeles, Seattle and Sarasota. He finally dropped anchor in Anchorage and was taken in by his paternal grandmother.

"She taught me unconditional love. She's the one who held my family together," he says.

'Yelling in key'

In the early '80s, Victor was one of the few kids in Alaska listening to New Wave bands such as the Police, Devo, Oingo Boingo and Blondie. During a trip to Florida to visit his mom and sister in 1985, Victor was introduced to the hard-core punk-rock scene that was blossoming like a black rose around Tampa Bay. He caught live shows by such smash-mouth bands as Suicidal Tendencies, Belching Penguins and Blemish on Society.

"My sister's boyfriend was in the band Jehovah's Sickness, so that bought me some cred even though I was this little kid," he says.

"I got to jump on stage at one Jehovah show and sing 'Institutionalized' and then dive off. That was it. I was hooked. I took the word back to Alaska and told my friends, 'We are hot hard-core.' We became the first punk rockers in Alaska."

At 18, Victor moved to Largo to live with his mom, Sharon Parsons; her new husband, Robert Parsons; sister Michelle Victor; and two half-brothers, Brian and Jesse.

"They had a structured family, and it appealed to me," he says. "But I really moved because I wanted to go to punk-rock shows."

By 1989, when the family relocated to Tallahassee, Victor was sporting a mohawk. He was obsessed with nihilistic, hate-spewing "skinhead" music.

"I had gotten infected with the skinhead thing. I admit it. I was an idiot," he says. "I was just a lone dude with a mohawk when I got to Tallahassee. I wanted to be the guy who people would be scared of . . . But hate just takes so much energy. It doesn't make any sense. A couple of epiphanies later, and I was all right."

One of those life-changing moments came when he met a paraplegic Vietnam veteran at a beer bash. The vet, who used a wheelchair, told him the skinhead track was a dead end. He also told Victor all about the work it took to build prosthetics. It was the first time in a long time that Victor had thought about how he could actually help other people.

"It was this guy's suggestion at a (expletive) keg party that eventually ended up changing my life," Victor says. "How random is that?"

At the same time, Victor became the lead singer — "It wasn't really singing as much as it was yelling in key," he corrects — in a string of Tallahassee bands such as Phlegm, Teenage (Expletive) and the Plug Uglys. They performed in now-defunct clubs Planet 10 and Ca Chapel with other hard-hitting local groups of the time such as Sector 4, Paisley Death Camp, Gothic Playground, Darth Vader's Church and Insect Fear.

"We (the Plug Uglys) were living like Neanderthals in a huge warehouse off Bloxis Street," Victor laughs. "We even had drawings on the walls like cave drawings."

In 1992, Victor had met his wife-to-be, Rory Krivit, and was working during the day loading papers on the docks at the *Tallahassee Democrat*. That's when he noticed a knot at the base of his neck. What he thought was a pulled muscle turned out to be thyroid cancer.

"The doctor told me there were three different types of thyroid cancer and if you had to choose one, mine was the one to have," Victor says as he pulls back his collar to show off a scar that would make any pirate proud.

"They told me I would never sing in a band again."

He would sing again — only not in the same high, screeching voice that he used in short-lived punk-funk bands such as Mudflap and Spas12 during the early '90s.

PHIL SEARS /Democrat

The Alaskan Pirate and His Salty Seamen slav the Beta Bar.

The surgery to remove the cancer was successful, but Victor's vocal pipes would never be the same.

"One review of our first CD," Victor says and he begins to laugh, "said I had a voice that sounded like a cross between Popeye and — what was the name of that fat kid from 'The Little Rascals' with the deep voice? Froggy? Yeah, they said I sounded like Popeye and Froggy."

Pirates forever

In 1997, Victor's close friend Travis Folmar threw a birthday party with a pirate theme.

"We wanted to have a casino night but we were broke, so we went for pirates," Folmar says. "You get an eye patch and a plastic hook. It's cheap."

The pirate party was such a success they played pirates again the next year at the Cow Haus in the All Saints neighborhood. That was the night Victor first took the stage as a solo act and performed an acoustic song he wrote called "Sperm Whale and the Squid." (Sample lyrics: "Now 12 men, one boat, what could be better and my first mate kind of looks like Eddie Vedder.")

Folmar — who produced the memorable Yar-2K pirate party in 1999 — is credited with inventing the name the Alaskan Pirate and His Salty Seamen.

"That's what he called us on the poster for the party and the name just stuck," Victor says. "After that, it really started snowballing. Every year, there was another layer. The band kept growing."

"By the third year, Ethan (Shaffner, banjo) and Elisabeth (King, accordion) and Jordan (Myers, guitar) were playing with Damon," Folmar says. "All of sudden it was a full-on pirate band. It was pirates all the time."

The band began performing around the state as well as around Tallahassee. The Alaskan Pirate and crew have played on hills with such national acts as Rilo Kiley and toured with Southern Culture on the Skids. When one of its members (costumer Kim McShane) ended up as a contestant on "Jeopardy!" the pirate band got a nationwide shout-out.

In 2003, the Alaskan Pirate and his crew released its first full-length CD, "Come Aboard." It was the same year that Disney rolled out a little movie called "Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl." Overnight, pirates were all the rage.

"That movie could've been a lot worse, and I still would've loved it," Victor says. "It's just helping raise pirate-awareness, man. There will be a time when pirates aren't cool. But when we're 60, we're going to be cool all over again. It goes in cycles."

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