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Hairy Guys in Sheds: The Rough and Ready World of DIY Cigar Box Guitar Makers

Paul Atkinson 

Paul Atkinson is Professor of Design and Design History at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. He has authored a number of articles, edited special issues, and curated exhibitions on the history of DIY, and written about the changing nature of amateur design and its relation to professional design practice. He is the author of two books on the design history of computers (*Computer, Reaktion* 2010, and *Delete: A Design History of Computer Vapourware*, Bloomsbury 2013). p.atkinson@shu.ac.uk



ABSTRACT The cigar box guitar has a long history in the USA, where it formed part of the culture of traditional blues music and became a popular DIY project. Despite the growth in popularity of the blues in the UK, the penchant for constructing cigar box guitars did not travel with it. This article explores the recent appearance of the instrument and the culture surrounding it in the UK as a particular form of cultural DIY activity combining individual design and production with collective performance, which has in some cases grown far beyond an amateur hobby into a professional business.

KEYWORDS: do-it-yourself, amateur making, professional making, musical instruments, DIY culture, authenticity, cigar box guitars

Introduction

On December 31, 2006, BBC 2 television broadcast the fourteenth annual *Jools Holland's Hootenanny* to welcome in the New Year (BBC 2 2006). A large studio audience watched as a variety of well-known, glamorously dressed stars graced the multiple stages: among them Amy Winehouse, Paul Weller, the Zutons, Marc Almond, and Lily Allen. Also appearing was a then largely unknown sixty-six-year-old American blues guitarist with a long gray beard, dressed in a shabby checked shirt, faded baseball cap and braces holding up worn denim jeans. A member of the invited audience that night recalls,

He was the real deal. Not like the other polished performers around him. He had the air of someone with no fixed abode. He carried his battered guitar with him wherever he went, even to the toilet! They were inseparable, like it was his best friend. (Duckworth 2016)

When it was his turn to play, he sat alone, holding his old, dilapidated, cheap six-string electric guitar fitted with only three strings and a home-made stomp box he called the “Mississippi Drum Machine.” He played a “three-string trance boogie” that included a brief history of his time living rough, and finished spectacularly by rubbing his guitar strings vigorously on the edge of his amplifier before dropping his guitar to the side and walking off to huge cheers and wild applause. His performance reminded viewers that expensive, “perfect” musical instruments were not a necessity for high-quality music, and that in fact, there might be something about such a rudimentary approach that brought the performer closer to the “soul” of blues music.

Over the course of the next few years, Seasick Steve released major-label CDs, performed live at numerous festivals, and appeared widely on national television drawing music out of a variety of home-made instruments including basic, one-string “diddly bows,” cigar box guitars, and hub-cap banjos. His promotion of rough and ready homemade instruments has been a major driving force behind their increase in popularity over the last decade, particularly in the UK, where his influence has led many people to make and play cigar box guitars. A number of these makers have set themselves up as serial manufacturers, making the construction and playing of cigar box guitars an area ripe for academic study and analysis.

Do-It-Yourself as an Area of Study

It is pertinent here to give a brief overview of how the topic of “do-it-yourself” (DIY) has been addressed as an area of academic study, as it seems that for a long time it eluded analysis. One early article on the remarkable popularity of DIY in the USA written in 1958 wondered “how any discussion of do-it-yourself could be so conspicuously absent in contemporary literature on the subject of leisure”

(Roland 1958, 156). In more recent research, a major study by the historian Steven Gelber produced a series of academic articles about the social aspects of DIY in the early 1990s and, in 1999, an oft-cited book titled *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America* (Gelber 1999).

Within the field of design history, as early as 1992, Philip Pacey (1992) wrote an insightful article warning of the potential limitations on the discipline's area of study if it were to continue to focus solely on "professional" design activity, arguing that critical analysis of the work of non-professional designers was important; and in 2000, Judy Attfield's book *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* highlighted the topic as being worthy of serious academic attention for design history. Later, in special issues of the *Journal of Design History*, I addressed the diverse nature of such amateur activity and located it in relation to professional design practice (Atkinson 2006; Beegan and Atkinson 2008). In *The Design of Everyday Life*, Elizabeth Shove, Matthew Watson, Martin Hand, and Jack Ingram examine DIY as the consumption of craft, a manifestation of "the practicalities and processes of effecting change" (Shove et al. 2007, 42). Andrew Jackson's work on DIY activity focused on two main aspects – those of the motivation and reward gained by undertaking such activities (Jackson 2010, 2011), and the role of the locations in which they take place (Jackson 2013). Fiona Hackney's work has considered the dissemination of DIY to women through analysis of 1930s women's magazines (Hackney 2006) and critiqued the recent resurgence of home crafts as a form of design activism (Hackney 2013). Also relevant here is David Gauntlett's (2011) book *Making is Connecting*, which assesses the impact of social media on the sharing of DIY knowledge. Finally, without suggesting this overview to be complete in any sense, one of the most recent relevant studies would be Stephen Knott's (2015) *Amateur Craft: History and Theory*, which, as with Attfield's (2000) work, sees amateur craft as having made "a vital and important contribution to the material culture of the modern world" (Knott 2015, xi).

There has, predictably, been even less written on the intersection between the worlds of DIY and musical instruments. One study that touches upon the amateur making of musical instruments as part of a much wider group of hand-crafted artifacts is Nicholas J. Saunders' (2003) work *Trench Art: Materialities and Memories of War*. Saunders notes that handmade musical instruments seem to have achieved particular resonance in times of great hardship and adversity. During the First World War, musical instruments were apparently made on all sides by soldiers in active service and by prisoners of war: "Percussion instruments and xylophones were made from recycled metal, flutes from miscellaneous tubes, and guitars, banjos, violins and cellos from any available scrap wood" (109). They were used to accompany traditional folk songs and patriotic songs sung to raise morale, and images of small orchestras of soldiers with

such instruments were published in various magazines of the period. As Saunders notes, the fact that these instruments were often made from the debris of war itself was an ironic twist.

Steve Waksman's (2004) study *California Noise: Tinkering with Hardcore and Heavy Metal in Southern California* relates more recent DIY activity to musical instruments. It focuses on the solid-bodied electric guitar and its associated electrical components and describes the activities of two well-known guitarists (Van Halen's Eddie Van Halen and Greg Ginn of Black Flag) in adapting existing instruments to alter their sonic characteristics as opposed to building instruments from scratch. Although both guitarists had similar aims "to gain control over the means of musical production" (Waksman 2004, 675), and both garnered a dislike of the sonic strictures of mass-produced instruments, their motivations to tinker with the technology of the electric guitar came, in Van Halen's case, from an identity-related "construction of virtuosity," (675) and in Ginn's case from a desire to be more artistically independent. As Waksman notes, the practical aptitude involved in such tinkering connects both guitarists to "broader trends in the history of technology wherein technical facility has been associated with 'masculine' virtues of knowledge, power, and self-determination." Their acts, he concludes, demonstrate "an impulse to position the male self as producer rather than consumer" (697).

In "Do It Yourself: Democracy and Design," (Atkinson 2006) I identified sub-categories of DIY activity based upon the motivations of those involved: "Reactive DIY" (the use of mediated kits and templates as a pastime or hobby); "Essential DIY" (such as vital repair and home maintenance); "Lifestyle DIY" (for example, home improvement as conspicuous consumption); and "Proactive DIY" (self-directed design and production carried out for personal pleasure). The practice of making cigar box guitars would appear to be most closely aligned with this category of "Proactive DIY," although it is a particular subsection of DIY activity that has a number of distinct characteristics.

History: Locating the Cigar Box Guitar

A cigar box guitar is a simple acoustic instrument that can easily be made from reclaimed materials. An old cigar box (or any wooden box or even an empty tin) forms a resonating chamber, and a neck is fashioned from either a dowel or a wooden board that is built through the body of the cigar box and then fitted with strings. Usually unfretted, they tend to be played with a metal or glass slide fitted over a finger. It was likely developed from an even more rudimentary instrument now known as a "diddy bow" – a single cord stretched between two nails hammered into a plank of wood, which could be hit or plucked to vibrate the cord and produce a sound. Using a slide, made of a piece of pipe or an empty bottle, at various

points along the cord would reduce its effective length and allow different notes to be produced.

As many scholars have pointed out, the precise origin of cigar box guitars is not clear. David Sutton's (2013) book, *An Obsession with Cigar Box Guitars*, identifies the earliest reference to a cigar box instrument in an 1876 etching of a Civil War soldier playing a cigar box violin. He discusses how President Lincoln's taxation of goods in order to help fund the Civil War led to an "industry standard" tax-stamped cigar box of cedar wood – which is used to keep cigars fresh, but which also just happens to be a very good tone wood for guitars (Sutton 2013, 10, 11). In 2014, the *Cigar Box Nation* website republished a story written by Daniel Carter Beard in 1884 about three boys being entertained by Uncle Enos, an African American farmhand who had built a five-string banjo out of a cigar box and a broomstick. When first published in *The Book Buyer: A Summary of American and Foreign Literature* around 1884/5, the story included plans to build the same instrument. Another early reference appeared around the same time, on April 15, 1886, in a detailed article in the *Galveston Daily News* about an African American boy who drew a large crowd by playing his cigar box guitar on an obscure city street (Speal 2016a). The very fact that this event was deemed of interest, enough to publish a newspaper article, indicates that encounters with the cigar box guitar were not an everyday occurrence at that point. By the early twentieth century, however, references to cigar box instruments became increasingly common. Plans for a cigar box mandolin were syndicated and published in various newspapers in 1922 (McNair 2015), and the artifact is also mentioned in various Depression-era newspaper articles (Speal 2016b). By the time of the DIY boom in 1950s America, cigar box guitars had become a popular DIY project, with plans for making them appearing in various books and magazines. Even Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* cartoon strip featured Charlie Brown playing a cigar box banjo.

Saunders observed that handmade musical instruments gain popularity in times or places of hardship and adversity. Indeed, it is well documented that many of the early American blues players, who came from very impoverished backgrounds yet went on to influence the development of modern music, first learned to play on simple, homemade instruments. For example, blues guitarist Furry Lewis (b. circa 1893) recounts being aged eight or nine years old and making a cigar box guitar using some two-by-four for the neck and screen wire for a string attached to a bent nail (Booth 2003, 140). At around the same time, Big Bill Broonzy (b. 1893), the son of an itinerant sharecropper, started his significant musical career by making a cigar box fiddle at the age of twelve (Farley 2003, 239). The first instrument for Texan blues guitarist Lightnin' Hopkins (b. 1912) was a homemade cigar box guitar with chicken wire strings (Beecher 2004), and later, Chicago bluesman Buddy Guy (b. 1936) who grew up in Louisiana as a poor sharecropper's son made guitars out of old

kerosene cans, nailing a stick in and using wire from the insect screen on the kitchen door as strings (Trynka 2003, 222). Shane Speal, the founder of the *Cigar Box Nation* website had his interest sparked after reading an interview in an old 1976 issue of *Guitar Player* magazine, in which the rockabilly guitar player Carl Perkins stated he learned to play on a two-string cigar box guitar his father made for him, with the article also containing the plans to build one (Sutton 2013, 14).

Though people have been making cigar box guitars for over a century, and the instruments have clearly influenced today's popular music, it is not a practice that seems to have caught on in the UK before the appearance of Seasick Steve. The advent of the Internet, though, has enabled the activity to be far more easily accessed across geographic boundaries (as will be shown), and American magazines, such as *Make: Technology on Your Time*, which is part of a much wider growth of interest in DIY and maker culture, find a ready audience in the UK (Figure 1).



Figure 1
Cover of *Make: Technology on Your Time*, Vol. 4, 2005. Courtesy of Maker Media Inc.

Methodology

Although its early history is not absolutely clear, the cigar box guitar is, without doubt, American in origin, and though it has fallen in and out of favor over the intervening years, that is where the current revival began. There is an incredibly active social scene around their making and playing in the United States, documented, for instance, in the film *Songs Inside the Box* (Shores 2009). Here, though, I am interested in how this specific form of DIY activity has been taken up in and across the UK, where it is a relatively recent phenomenon with no established tradition of rudimentary instrument-making behind it.

Because people involved in this particular field of DIY activity are dispersed across the UK, this study necessitated a purposive sampling approach. Primary data was obtained from a very specific group of respondents for qualitative analysis, and only certain practitioners could usefully contribute to the study. In addition to those described here, interviews were conducted with professional makers of acoustic and electric guitars, professional tutors of electric guitar-making, and amateur makers of other types of instruments (including wind instruments such as French horns). But the makers of cigar box guitars formed a particular group of interest, because the rudimentary nature of the instrument lowers the barrier to entry, lending itself to easy fabrication by amateur makers. Initial research identified a small number of people who had made cigar box guitars. These makers were then asked to suggest others involved in cigar box guitar culture. The suggested people were contacted and where suitable, asked to participate in the research study.

The study was intended to explore the amateur nature of respondents' making activity, but the snowball sampling procedures employed introduced certain problems. For example, the terms "amateur" and "professional" can become blurry. One traditional interpretation sees a professional as someone who has undergone extensive training, become specially qualified to a high level, or achieved accreditation by a recognized professional body in order to be able to carry out a particular, usually highly complex role (for example, the legal and medical professions, and disciplines such as architecture that are not open to untrained practitioners). But the more popular current convention interprets a person to be a professional if they derive their main income from carrying out a particular role. It could be argued that the "traditional" definition of a professional does not hold up as strongly in an age of increasing leisure, where contemporary working practices and technological developments conspire to blur the lines between "work" and "leisure," and a significant number of people hold multiple jobs, many of which involve a level of self-employment. As Stebbins (2007, 6) notes,

leisure studies researchers have been content to use the simpler economic definition of professional as a person who is paid for

the activity in question. I now see the merit of their position, for what is important for the study of amateurs and hobbyists is that some of them begin to make some sort of living at the activity.

Some of those interviewed for this study are indeed clearly “amateurs,” happily tinkering about making cigar box guitars purely as a hobby, while others either see themselves as “semi-professional” due to some income being generated or because of their increasingly professional attitude to making. Still others have made the deliberate choice to make their living purely from producing cigar box guitars, having voluntarily given up “professional” careers in other industries in order to do so.

According to Stebbins (2007, 6–7), though, the term “amateur” relies on having a professional counterpart, one who is visible to the amateur and that the amateur either looks to for inspiration or aspires to be. In Stebbins’ view, without this professional counterpart element, the leisure side of any activity, although possibly still “serious leisure,” remains at a hobbyist level.¹ If there is no “professional” cigar box manufacturing – and because of its DIY nature and use of repurposed components it could be argued that there is not – then the making of cigar box guitars is, by Stebbins’ definition, a hobby, not an amateur activity. This is rightly problematic to those interviewees who see themselves as professional makers of cigar box guitars. For them it has become a serious, full-time occupation through which they support themselves and their families. For them, the term “amateur” carries negative connotations.

The Makers

The following makers, based in various locations around the UK, were interviewed where they made their instruments. The makers ranged in age from early thirties to late sixties. The semi-structured interviews covered their backgrounds in DIY and instrument-making, their inspirations, the design and making processes they employed, and their motivations for making. Given the likelihood that makers might also play their product, interviewees were also asked whether they performed with their instruments and whether they saw themselves as amateur or professional makers and amateur or professional players. The results of each interview were transcribed and coded, and the contents analyzed.

Nig Richards and Margaret

Nig Richards (Figures 2 and 3) and his partner Margaret make cigar box guitars mainly for Nig’s use as a performer. Following a performance in which Nig used his “Crapocaster,” they sold three or four of this model. Not strictly a cigar box guitar, this design came about after Nig and Margaret received the neck of an electric guitar.



Figure 2

Nig Richards with one of his “Crapocaster” guitars.



Figure 3

Nig's one-string cigar box bass made with a broom handle.

Wondering what to use as a body, they noticed a spare toilet seat lying around.

Woofie

Woofie set up “Spatchcock and Wurzell” in 2012 (Figures 4 and 5). The company makes and sells tin can guitars, ukuleles, dulcimers, and “canjos” (diddy bows with a tin can as a soundbox). He also



Figure 4

Woofie in his workshop with a “Roberts Radio” guitar.

offers a commission service to turn customers’ own tin cans or wooden boxes into bespoke musical instruments.

It was Woofie who inspired the title of this article. In response to my request for an interview, he wrote: “I’m not sure how much use to you I would be as I’m just a hairy guy in a shed.”

Rob Stephenson

After being made redundant from a job servicing jukeboxes, Rob Stephenson set up “Treadstone Guitars” and now makes guitars to order from reclaimed materials (Figures 6 and 7). He sells them through a nearby guitar shop, or through stalls at festivals.

Nick Barney

Nick Barney is an IT consultant who spends much of his spare time teaching guitar and performing as an amateur guitarist (Figures 8 and 9). He set up “Barney Cigar Box Guitars” in 2014.



Figure 5

Woofie's "steampunk" tin guitar made from whiskey tins and copper tubing.

Chickenbone John

Chickenbone John uses the tagline "The Godfather of the cigar box guitar" on his website (Figures 10 and 11). He has been making and playing them since 2005 and has been instrumental in promoting the activity and the scene in the UK and across Northern Europe ever since.

Rob Collins

Rob Collins' website, TinGuitar.com, is named after his early practice of making guitars only from biscuit tins (Figures 12 and 13). Bespoke traditional wooden stringed instruments including dulcimers, mandolins, and guitars now form the mainstay of his work, but he still makes two or three biscuit tin or cigar box guitars a year.

Dan Price

Dan Price is a part-time primary school teacher, performer, and composer (Figures 14 and 15). He has just started to make cigar box



Figure 6

Rob Stephenson with one of his “pre-worn” three-string cigar box guitars.

guitars purely for the enjoyment of making them, and has only recently sold his few first instruments.

Standing as Makers

The interviewees have different levels of experience of constructing cigar box guitars and consequently view their respective roles as amateur or professional in different ways (Figure 16). None of them have any formal training as luthiers, but only two of the makers, Dan Price and Nick Barney, happily admit to being amateurs. Dan, using plans in a book, made a cigar box guitar with his son three years ago as a one-off summer “bonding” project, but only started making them again six months ago after earning money through publishing his music and using it to buy some tools. He is “learning as he goes” and has just started selling his work through a local music shop. Nick Barney has been making instruments for six years after seeing Chickenbone John play a cigar box guitar and then researching the subject online. His first attempt at making one went disastrously wrong, but each subsequent build went better as he gained more



Figure 7

Two of Rob's cigar box guitars ready to ship.

experience and obtained better tools. He has been making them seriously for three years and has sold around eighty guitars to date – mainly to individuals. He has sold some to a local guitar shop for resale, and has taken stands at guitar shows. Barney's self-identification as an amateur stems from the fact that "after parts, wood and other overheads, I make nothing from the sales of my guitars."

Woofie sees himself as "somewhere between amateur and semi-pro" because, though he makes tin can guitars for a living, he is self-taught. He made his first homemade instrument, a one-string diddly bow, around 2006, after seeing someone playing one on *YouTube*. Wanting to improve, he made a series of tin can guitars, and "before I knew it I had a houseful and my wife said, 'You've got to do something with these!'" He sold one or two and gave some away as presents before deciding to make them more seriously. He went part-time from his job as a landscape architect, earning the rest of his money through making guitars to order from reclaimed materials. He took forty or so guitars and set up a stall at a festival. Sales were strong and he decided to make guitars full time.



Figure 8

Nick Barney in his shed with a partly built three-string cigar box guitar.

Nig Richards and Rob Stephenson see themselves as semi-professional makers. Around 2006, Nig read about old blues players using homemade guitars and decided to have a go by attaching a neck to his wife's jewelry box. Having no formal training in design or making, he learned through trial and error and developed his knowledge slowly, over a number of years, including one spent doing poverty relief work in South Africa where music played on homemade instruments was an important part of the culture. Nig and his partner Margaret have resisted making their own instruments in quantity, as it would change the way they feel about the activity: "It's got to be fun and that's really why we don't want to, we kind of resisted becoming a cottage industry." He has made around thirty to forty guitars and occasionally gets some income from selling instruments that people have asked him to make, although "always at a loss as basing the final price on the true cost of time, effort and materials would make the sale price prohibitive."

Rob Stephenson says, "I'm a semi-professional maker as most of the time I am a stay-at-home dad." He has no training in woodworking, but has altered every guitar he has ever owned. Unlike Nig and



Figure 9

Nick's "Flying V" and "standard" four-string cigar box guitars.

Margaret, Rob saw making cigar box guitars as a business opportunity from the very start. He was let go from his job in 2012 and was considering retraining as a photographer when his friend said "Have you heard of Seasick Steve? Have you tried to make a cigar box guitar?" He researched it on YouTube, downloaded templates from the *Cigar Box Nation* website, and had soon made his first guitar. Through word of mouth Rob was soon busy with orders to make more. He set up "Treadstone Guitars" and has now made and sold over 200 guitars.

Two interviewees regard themselves as professional makers. Like Rob Stephenson, Rob Collins has "tinkered" with electric guitars to modify the sound since he was a teenager. More recently, he has built complete guitars from parts salvaged from other instruments. Around 2003, his playing got him interested in building his own tin and cigar box instruments. He started with a ukulele made from a Yorkshire Tea tin, posted it on *The Musical Instrument Maker's Forum* (<http://www.mimf.com/>), and went from there. Though initially a hobby, before long there came "a point where you've got to get rid of everything before you've got space to make any more." He sold



Figure 10

Chickenbone John with a guitar made for him by a friend.



Figure 11

A row of John's cigar box guitars ready to go.



Figure 12

Rob Collins with a cigar box guitar kit designed for a workshop.



Figure 13

Some of Rob's more traditional wooden ukuleles in progress.

some of the instruments he had made, which gave him the confidence to invest in better tools. Soon it had evolved into a self-funding hobby. When his full-time job as a chemical engineer was reduced to part-time, the instrument building became a side business run out of his loft conversion. He continued to grow in confidence and ambition, adding to his repertoire more “traditional” instruments such as all-wood ukuleles, dulcimers, mandolins, guitars, and tenor guitars. Three years ago, he left his engineering job and went full-time as an instrument-maker and moved into a small workshop unit on a local trading estate. He has made around 400 instruments, 100 of which



Figure 14
Dan Price with one of his first cigar box guitars.



Figure 15
A cigar box ukulele Dan helped his friend's son make for a school project.

have been biscuit tin or cigar box guitars. He says, “As a maker, I am most definitely professional – it is my sole source of income and I’m supporting a family of four from my luthier business.”

Chickenbone John made numerous instruments as a young boy, producing his first electric guitar at the age of fourteen. He left music while he trained professionally as an architect. After being in practice for a number of years, he discovered cigar box guitars through the Internet and decided to make one. He then offered to make cigar box guitars for people who asked after seeing him play them, and then sold them through eBay. He treated it purely as an interesting hobby until an economic recession hit his architecture practice hard. By 2014 he had begun earning more money from making and selling cigar box guitars than he did in his professional practice, and gave up architecture altogether. He now makes between 200 and 250 cigar box guitars a year which usually sell for between £200 and £300. At the time of this writing, he was coming up to making his 1000th cigar box guitar. Being seen as professional is important to him because,

making guitars and everything associated with this is my sole source of income. The business is run by myself and my daughter. My wife is retired and so apart from my wife’s pension, the cigar box guitar business is the only earned income that supports our household As for making guitars, both me and my daughter are professional in the true and full sense of the word – it’s a set of skills that we’ve learned and by those skills we earn our living. Chickenbone John is a UK registered trademark and we are VAT registered.

Standing as Performers

The interviewees also have different levels of experience performing live in front of an audience, though these levels do not align with their experience as makers (see [Figure 16](#)). Even though Woofie, Nick Barney, Rob Collins, and Rob Stephenson have all played the guitar or banjo for many years, all describe themselves as amateur or even reluctant players, only really playing cigar box guitars in order to demonstrate and promote them to potential customers. Rob Stephenson has played electric guitar in heavy metal bands since the age of fourteen, and Nick Barney teaches guitar on a part-time basis. Woofie even has a “stage” in his stall when selling at festivals “so people can play and I don’t have to, which is my plan.”

Playing music live is a much more important part of life for Dan Price and Nig Richards, both of whom describe themselves as semi-professional musicians. Dan describes himself as being “obsessed” by music, having played guitar in bands for many years. After cutting his job as a primary school teacher down to a part-time role, he now spends half his week writing and successfully publishing music with a song-writing partner. Making cigar box guitars has allowed Dan to

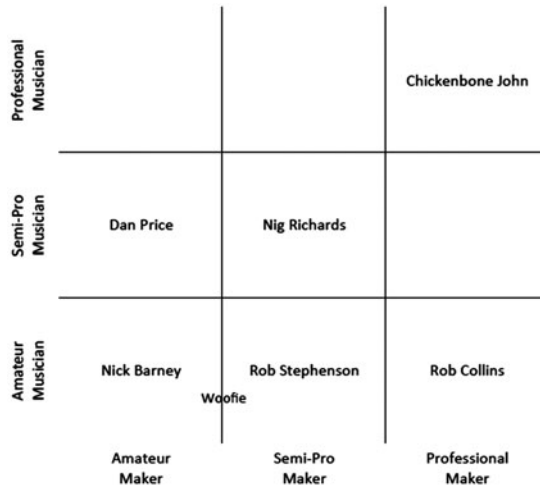


Figure 16

Map of interviewees' perceptions of their standing as players and makers.

learn how to play slide guitar, which he says “is great. I’ve been able to test-run my own stuff!” He is also now experimenting in making glass slides from the necks of old wine bottles. Nig admits to being a player first and foremost, and has played in numerous bands since the 1970s. He has now gained a reputation for performing live with his own, homemade instruments. He says:

Guitar players will always tell you, and it is certainly true for me, that what I play will depend on the instrument I’ve got in my hand. So, if I’ve got the Telecaster in my hand, it will be very “Country” kind of licks, you know. If I’ve got the Strat in, it’ll go very kind of “soul music-y.” If I’ve got my cigar box it’ll be full-on blues bottleneck sort of stuff, you know, so the instrument determines the kind of music I’m going to play.

Both Dan and Nig perform on stage regularly, Dan with his skiffle band The Original Black Diamonds and Nig with his rhythm and blues band The Primates. They get paid to perform, even if, by their own admission, they probably don’t charge enough for their gigs.

Chickenbone John is an experienced player and gigging musician. He has played stringed instruments since childhood, and in college he was in a number of punk bands, one of which recorded a song that was played on the John Peel Show on BBC Radio 1. He regards himself as a professional musician, even though he earns very little income from the pursuit. He says live music is “essential to what we [his family business] do” and is a paying member of the Musician’s Union. John is heavily invested in the culture of cigar box guitars. In 2009, he organized Boxstock, a cigar box guitar festival that was the first UK event to bring cigar box guitar players together. It is now an annual event and all performers are paid. He has received a lot of

international publicity over the years, and as a cigar box guitar player, has toured with Seasick Steve. As with Nig Richards, the connection between making and playing is particularly strong for Chickenbone John, and he is part of a network of players, some of whom play his instruments, which he understandably finds rewarding. In response to being asked about the difference between playing an off-the-shelf instrument and a homemade one, he answered,

You are connected a bit more when you've actually made the thing yourself. ... I love playing cigar box guitars and I love to see what people can do with it. That's the other cool thing. There's one or two pro artists – a guy called Brooks Williams ... [and] Hollowbelly, a very good friend of mine ... And it's great when you see that or hear a record and think, "That's the stuff that I made".

The Design and Construction Process

With none of the makers having had any formal training as a luthier, it is perhaps inevitable that there would be significant variation in the design and construction processes they each employ, especially given the varied nature of cigar box guitars. Only one of the interviewees – Rob Collins – creates detailed preparatory drawings. He uses CAD software to create templates before making anything, be it a biscuit tin ukulele or a traditional tenor guitar. When the others begin a project, they do not make any detailed plans of what they are going to do, but just "get stuck in," sometimes scribbling an idea down on a back of an old envelope (Nick Barney). Apart from carefully measuring the scale length, which needs to be accurate so the instrument will play properly, they just go by what, as Rob Stephenson says, "feels right." Woofie's approach is "organic": "You have an idea what goes where but the bits in between sort of grow as you go." He admits the rest is designed "on the bench." Despite being a trained architect familiar with drafting plans, Chickenbone John takes the same approach and designs his guitars by eye, "under the tools, under the saw." As a form of DIY, the cigar box guitar, by its very nature, affords a high level of creative freedom and exploration. The use of found objects, reclaimed materials, and the huge variety of boxes or tins that might be used as a soundbox require that almost every item be made as a distinctive, one-off piece. The enjoyment and freedom of this amateur approach was best conveyed by Nig Richards and his partner Margaret:

There are no plans, you know. A real luthier would sit down and pull out a roll of wallpaper and draw in full size exactly what you want. We just sit here with a load of parts, don't we? And scratch our head and think "how are we going to stick this on that?" ... [then, at the end], "Look at that, it's brilliant!" and then realise you've screwed your shirt to the worktop. You know, all these

little things that amateurs get involved in! I'd like to think that Leo Fender was the same, with his shirt screwed to his prototypes! It really is sort of just untried and untested.

The making process for the guitar usually starts with whatever receptacle is being used for the body. It is cut so as to allow a single-piece through neck to be fitted into it. (The body not usually being strong enough or suitable for a separate neck to be attached and take the tension of the strings.) The strings – sometimes two or four, but more usually three – are then attached to the bottom end of the through neck, raised over the surface of the body by a bridge – often a bolt, piece of rod, or even an old key – and stretched over the “nut” at the top end of the neck before being threaded through machine heads or tuners to allow tightening of the strings and their tuning into an open chord to allow slide playing. Sound holes are often cut into the top of the body (especially if it is purely an acoustic model), and if using electrics, the pick-ups, control knobs, and jack socket are wired in place inside the box before it is finally sealed. The fact that the same parts are rarely used twice in making cigar box guitars means this process always involves experimentation and an element of trial and error.

Authenticity

The participants clearly stated that their interest in cigar box guitars stemmed at least in part from notions about their “authenticity.” The instrument’s appeal appears to be constructed around the very fact that it is handmade without the need for specialist equipment. This distinguishes the instruments from professionally made or factory-produced guitars. The search for authenticity is in some cases a deliberate attempt to generate kinds or qualities of sounds close to those made by early blues guitar players, without spending money on expensive pick-ups, valve amplifiers, or a range of effects pedals. As Nig Richards says,

They don't have the character, you know. The thing for me is the character ... people have spent a fortune, and probably still do, in studios, trying to recreate an authentic blues sound. And you know, really, the authentic blues sound is a cigar box and a cheap amp, because that's what those guys had! You know, the sound came out of poverty, so trying to recreate it with buying more and more sort of stuff for your Apple Mac isn't going to do it.

In other cases, the quest for authenticity is a reaction to the excessive costs of factory-made guitars, especially since some of those costs are seen to arise from brand name recognition and association or with celebrity players rather than the “real” cost of manufacturing a factory instrument. As Chickenbone John says,

I was about to buy a good guitar, thinking I can actually afford to buy myself a Martin or a Lowden or a Gibson or something. I thought, all the guys – the music I’m listening to, the old-time blues stuff – they didn’t have fancy guitars. They were just street singer performers. All those players would have had cheap guitars really – the classic one is the Sears Roebuck catalog where you’d put 50 cents down. [I thought] I don’t need a fancy guitar. Then I think I was online or something and I heard about the idea of the cigar box guitar. I think it’s the ultimate cheap guitar. A stick in a box. A box that had been thrown away and a broom handle or something like that. Made myself one. Then I played it at a jam session or whatever, and people would say “that’s really cool.”

A real paradox emerges here: a cigar box guitar made today may differ very little physically from one made at the end of the nineteenth century, but, in reality, it is still not the same thing. One major difference lies in the reason for their production. Today’s cigar box guitars, despite their individual nature, could be argued to be mere reproductions. They do not arise from necessity, as did the original instruments made by poverty-stricken musicians. They arise instead from desire, made deliberately to recall an earlier age, to reject mainstream mass production, to stand out from the crowd, or for the sheer pleasure of making. As Dan Price – whose guitars bear a sticker referencing Woody Guthrie’s famous slogan “This machine kills fascists” – contemplates:

I think people are genuinely looking for something a bit more, aren’t they, something a bit more bespoke? I think it’s part of that sort of hipster thing of having craft beer. There being a story behind it. That’s what people have told me – oh, people need to see the story behind it. For me, I’m forty-nine so that doesn’t really matter to me, but I think people younger than us are more interested in the story of how things are made. Which is a really interesting thing when you think about the world we live in, where you can basically buy anything mass produced. Go online and you’ve got Amazon Prime and you get it the next day! It’s bizarre, isn’t it, in that world. That something bespoke made by some guy like me in a little studio somewhere in West Yorkshire is of interest to anybody, but I suppose it is.

This penchant for authenticity and bespoke production drives some members in the scene. Perhaps blind to their obvious status as a reproduction, cigar box guitars are often seen as a deliberately handmade, one-off object that is neither a monetized nor market-driven product. So much is this the case that those involved in serial production often experience a backlash. Chickenbone John describes this as follows:

The whole Internet phenomenon is very curious on things like forums and that, because there’s a lot of people who spend a lot of time on there. But the people who are actually doing it don’t

spend any time on there, because they're too bloody busy. ... You get this peculiar reversal of things where everybody wants to create a cottage industry and then the people who actually take off – they're almost rejected by the people who aspire to doing it. When one of their kind actually does something, they all think "sold out," he's making a bloody living! So that's not right, I want to do that, he's done it. So there's people like that. ... I think for most people it's just a little hobby, a bit of pocket money. Whereas there's just a few of us, it's our livelihood, we do nothing but. I haven't got a day job; this is my day job. So it's a different kettle of fish. It's curious. It's an interesting phenomenon. There is a handful of people making a living at it.

This "authenticity" paradox is further complicated by the components makers use to fabricate cigar box guitars, and how they finish them. Some of the interviewees expressed ethical preferences for repurposed parts, salvaged from broken or discarded instruments, or for new parts purchased from local suppliers. However, when certain parts are needed, or costs need to be kept down, parts are regularly bought from China. When interviewees were asked where they get the parts to build their instruments, the majority replied "eBay". Even a cursory eBay search reveals that a whole infrastructure of suppliers has emerged to cater to the hobby. Any part required – be it the cigar box itself, the electrics, the machine heads, sound hole bezels, or string sets – can be bought from a range of companies, with the vast majority produced in China. In fact, complete kits to make a one-off cigar box guitar are readily available, which many purists would argue kind of defeats the point. It is now even possible to custom order specific parts for one's unique design. For Chickenbone John, who is operating at a larger production scale, component supply has a particularly international flavour:

These [pickups] come from China, these particular ones. But we have them made. I try to source stuff as near as I can to here. Tools are made in Sheffield. The saws are made in Sheffield of course. The special fretting hammers, they're made in Birmingham. The other tools we actually have them made in Wolverhampton. A lot of machine heads, the tuners, and the fret wire, that all comes from Holland. Some of the electrics come from Liechtenstein of all places. Cable from Holland. Some parts come from America. We do buy a lot of machine heads and pickups from China, but what amazed me ... I thought they would have warehouses full of this stuff and I started negotiating with people and they said this is the price, we'll be shipping it in about three or four weeks because we're going to be making them. What plating do you want on it? It's pretty cool. I thought there would be some vast warehouse. It's obviously a relatively small enterprise that can do all this stuff and it's custom-made for you, which is fantastic.

The hobby has now become so popular, and people are making them in such numbers, that finding cheap, used boxes has become

quite difficult. Casual discussions with tobacconists shows they used to give them away freely, but, as demand rose, began charging for them. Now they sell them as soon as (or even before) the last cigars in the box have been sold. There are not only companies online that sell used cigar boxes, but also companies that sell virgin boxes in quantity that have never seen the inside of a cigar factory. Some of the makers interviewed have used these suppliers when other sources have run out. Rob Stephenson, for example, often resorts to brand new cigar boxes in order to meet demand, and then goes to great lengths to “age” them by covering the boxes with boot polish or with black spray paint and then sanding them. Rob is convinced that these homegrown methods produce the effect that buyers want:

It seems to be my forte – it can be quite a drawn out process, especially if you’re doing multi layered stuff. Waiting for boot polish to dry is a nightmare. I have sold ones that are pristine but it’s not something I make a big habit of. I think they’ve got more character.

Rob has even developed his own “rust compound” – a mix of ingredients that he applies to any polished or chromed components in order to make them look old.

The Church of the Three Strings

As might be expected in relation to a purely voluntary activity, the makers all stated that they were very happy to be doing what they were doing, with some recounting almost obsessive behavior in making their guitars. Most spend long periods of time carrying out construction in their sheds or workshops, where focused concentration places them in a world of their own and time passes unnoticed. Andrew Jackson describes this phenomenon in relation to DIY, referring to Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “flow” – “a form of pleasure resulting from a merging of action and experience” (Jackson 2011, 267). Dan Price says,

the great thing for me about doing it is that it’s such a solitary endeavor really. ... But that’s what I love. I come here on Thursday. I stick some music on and I just do. ... I get a text, my phone goes at 6.30 – are you coming home for your tea?

Similarly, Woofie states, “I go in the shed about 8am and I’m there till 9pm much to my wife’s infuriation. ... It’s like a time warp in the shed, come out and its dark, how did that happen?” The making process was inevitably described by all as “a labor of love.” All the makers experienced the joy to be found in “tinkering” in the physical aspects of construction. Woofie said,

I think the fun comes from solving little problems as you go along. Genuinely, the research and development time I tend to enjoy

much more than [being] out on the road flogging ... I can't lie, I mean I have to pay the bills, but now I've been doing it for a few years I can't imagine wanting to do anything else 'cos I love it. It is the joy of someone giving you a tin then you give them a guitar in return – it's quite satisfying.

There also emerged a motivational element of altruism running unexpectedly through a number of the interviews, with makers fondly recalling the feelgood factor of working to help others. In some cases, this was simply a case of helping someone make a guitar, such as Dan Price's recollection of jointly making a cigar box guitar with his son or helping a fellow band member's child make a little cigar box ukulele for a school project. In others, altruism operated on a larger scale, as with Nig Richards carrying out poverty relief work in South Africa. He explains,

In all the townships and the squatter camps, music was very big. But people couldn't afford instruments, so they were making them themselves. And we came across so many amazing instruments, you know, that people were getting music out of. ... We made ukuleles and had a go at violins – all sorts of things. But the rule was, we had to use, as far as possible, unbought materials. The kids were doing it for fun.

Other philanthropic activity is also carried out by makers. Woofie offers a "make and play a canjo day" to schools, but often finds they can't afford it. Nick Barney, Rob Collins, and Chickenbone John each run workshops for different groups of people, wherein attendees, often youths, learn to make and play a cigar box instrument. While there is admittedly a financial element involved, these workshops are clearly not very lucrative. The motivation for running them clearly lies in the emotional rewards they generate. The most experienced in this respect is Chickenbone John, who has run workshops with over 1,800 people:

If they come to make a guitar, in a day we can teach them how to make their instrument from a stick of wood and a box and then learn how to play it. It's very satisfying. Those are really hard days, because we spend a lot of time preparing all the parts, loading the van up, driving, set everything up, then once we start, it's full tilt from 10am 'til 4pm, with hardly a breath taken. But at the end of the day, you've got twenty happy people who've built an instrument and some of them have never even played an instrument and they're going home and they can play it. That is ... an evangelical thing. You're going out and spreading the good word of the Church of the Three Strings. It's a really nice thing. It does keep you going.

The Role of the Internet

One of the most striking aspects of these interviews is the extent to which the Internet has been central to the makers' activity. They

seem to recognize that “the ‘making is connecting’ power of the internet ... offers us a potential way to disrupt the inevitability and dominance of the one-size-fits-all broadcasting and consumerism model” (Gauntlett 2011, 231). They have all, in one way or another, resorted to online resources to either source information about how to make cigar box guitars, find inspiration for designs and to source components for making them, identify places and events at which to perform or to sell, or contact other makers or performers that use cigar box guitars.

The interviewees were well aware of a number of websites, but all were most familiar with *Cigar Box Nation*. Most cited it as the place that they found their first plans for constructing an instrument, and recognized it as the go-to place for anyone interested in the subject. *Cigar Box Nation* emerged from a single-page website set up by Shane Speal in 2003. It received so many followers that it kept moving hosts to accommodate its size. By 2008 it had 3,000 members and at the time of writing it has 17,602 members, making it by far the largest online resource for cigar box guitar-making, with an online forum and a repository of videos and downloadable plans.

The use of YouTube as a source for instructional videos has been of huge value to all interviewees. It has provided practical advice on everything from building a simple one-string canjo to constructing complex scarf joints for guitar headstocks and wiring electrical circuits connecting pick-ups to the control knobs and jack sockets. Dan Price found it enormously helpful when he was first beginning to make cigar box guitars. Others, like Nig Richards, really appreciate how much easier it now is to find obscure information that was once very difficult to track down. YouTube was also used by Chickenbone John, who searched for online video of players’ performances in order to generate the network that led him to organize the Boxstock festival.

Nick Barney uses Pinterest regularly as a source of inspiration for new designs. As described above, eBay is used regularly by all the makers to source components for producing cigar box guitars from all over the world. It has also been used by many of the makers to sell their finished products. Dan Price sold his first guitar by posting an image of it on Facebook, and others such as Rob Collins have found that social media sites often lead directly to requests to purchase or to have a bespoke guitar made. Of the makers, Woofie, Rob Stephenson, Nick Barney, Rob Collins, and Chickenbone John all have their own detailed websites to promote and sell their work online.

Conclusions

The above findings describe a very particular form of do-it-yourself activity that coalesces around a subculture of musical performance or participation. Perhaps uniquely, it combines production with public performance, often disseminating the aspects of the culture to a non-DIY related audience.

Why the making of such an anachronistic, basic instrument should have become such a popular pastime in an age when high-quality instruments are readily available, and digital music formats have threatened to remove physical formats is another of the paradoxes surrounding the cigar box guitar. As some of the makers have hinted, their popularity may very well be a reaction to this state of affairs – an active resistance against the homogenizing nature of global capitalism and passive digital culture. It is ironic that even though the instruments are not complicated to make, it is digital technology that has lowered the barriers to participation and spread the necessary knowledge to spark their construction around the world.

The Internet and social media clearly play a huge part in bringing the people involved together into an active community, regularly exchanging news, events, performances, and know-how. All of the participants in this study were aware that they were part of a growing scene based around an interest in cigar box guitars in the UK, and while they all admitted the Internet had played a key role in promoting the making aspect, most identified Seasick Steve's celebrity as at the heart of the movement. The majority of the makers said that when they talked to new customers or to audiences after a performance, Seasick Steve would inevitably be brought up by people who had either seen his live performances, seen him on TV, or watched his YouTube videos, and were well aware of his association with homemade instruments.

For most of the makers, the activity had grown and expanded much further than originally intended, becoming a side business for some, and a sole source of income for others. While the construction of cigar box guitars is clearly a DIY activity, the research here shows that it cannot be dismissed as purely a hobby or amateur activity. Leaving aside arguments about the DIY nature of the object negating it as a "professional" instrument, the makers see themselves on a spectrum stretching from amateur to professional, largely based around the amount of financial return gained from their production and the amount of time they devote to the activity. At a time when self-employment is seemingly becoming a de facto position for younger generations, the distinctions between amateur and professional status is becoming a moot point.

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Notes

1. Stebbins (2007) describes the three forms of leisure activity as “serious leisure,” “casual leisure,” and “project-based leisure”. The differentiation between the three depends on the frequency of activity, amount of skill required, and the level of reward in terms of fulfillment (xii).

ORCID

Paul Atkinson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6633-7242>

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