

CBG REVIEW

April 2023



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Editorial

One thing leads to another...

Welcome to the April 2023 edition of CBG Review. First up, we talk to singer/songwriter Cathy Grier who tells a delightful story of people she has met touring the USA and abroad, almost settling in Europe, but finally returning to the USA to become, among other things, “NYC Subway Girl” in the Music Under New York program. Cathy loves meeting people and making music, so little wonder that today she is now part of Wisconsin’s lively music scene and includes cigar box guitars in all her performances.

Moving across the waves to Germany where Boris Mattler and Wolfgang Reibl, are busy marketing “3Saiter” handmade three-string guitars. Boris will tell you that, while three-string guitars are much easier to play, they also help people to focus and be creative, and are not to be taken lightly. Read how “3Saiter” is fast becoming known for its one-of-a-kind Mercedes hubcap guitars and high-quality acoustic guitars.

US instrumentalist Brett Gardner is a lifelong student of traditional, jazz and funk music, and is fascinated by New Orleans’ legacy of handmade guitars and other instruments, which also explains why the latest album by his group the “Cigar Box Serenaders” is called “Spasm” as a tribute to the spasm bands performing in the streets of New Orleans in the late 19th century. For true music lovers, Brett believes the music will never fade.

Our next guest, Phil Bye, a.k.a. *The PHillbilly*, in the United Kingdom, has recently released an album called “Dirty Skiffle Music Volume 1” played on four different box guitars. Phil’s taste in music runs from folk, funk and rock to blues and country, elements of which all reflect in his fast-paced DIY style of music. Phil is a regular at festivals throughout the UK and also organizes his own gigs and cigar box guitar specials for CBG music lovers.

US luthier Bruce Lee Rose has spent years trying to get the best possible sound out of his guitars, including the ones he’s built from cigar boxes. His success is plain to see from all the professional guitarists who have added a “Rose CBG” to their collections. Along the way, he has appeared in magazines, newspapers, TV shows and won many ribbons and awards at fine art festivals for his cigar box guitars. According to Bruce, his CBGs are “works of art meant to be put to work.” 😊

More great music...just to let you know, on March 31st, two new albums were released – “Outside The Lines” by *Misty Blues* and “Aces Are High” by *When Rivers Meet*.

As always – read, enjoy and be inspired!

Best regards
Huey Ross

Cover image: Bruce Rose
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Cathy Grier, U.S.A.

Photo: Suzi Johnson Hass

What inspires you?

Cathy Grier, Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, U.S.A.

Asking Grier to narrow down a list of influences is like asking her to pick a favorite child. Hailing from a pop-rock age, her inspirations are anything from David Bowie to Steely Dan, Joni Mitchell to Richie Havens...Her warm-textured, Bonnie Raitt-flavored voice and slide/harmonica/cigar box guitar chops prove that blues is in her DNA – American Blues Scene, 2021

CBGR: Cathy, was it ever in doubt that you would become a professional musician when you were young?

I wasn't really sure until my teens, but once I started playing and people said you should go out and play publicly, there was really no turning back. There was no doubt in my mind that was what I wanted to do. I guess you could say the only doubt I had was if it didn't work out what would I do? There is a headline when I was 18 from a Middletown Connecticut newspaper that said "She's giving herself two years to make it as a performer."

Two years later I was finding that I needed to grow a little bit more so I enrolled in a community college in Bridgeport because there was this amazing jazz instrumentalist, Sonny Costanzo, heading the music department. After two more years, he told me I need to go to the Berklee College of Music in Boston, so

I went there for a summer program and that's how that kind of evolved. I'm still at it at 63, so I guess the doubt never materialized!

What was the chance encounter with John Lee Hooker and Bonnie Raitt?

I had traveled from Connecticut to hear John Lee open for Bonnie at the Music Inn in Lenox Massachusetts, a chance opportunity got me backstage and we connected. Back then I was also thinking maybe, in tandem to a professional music career, I could do photography. I really loved it. I had learned to sneak my camera into a lot of shows and how to get closer to the stage and backstage people. I took a lot of pictures of concerts, including a lot of Bonnie Raitt.

As luck would have it, her bass player Freebo saw me showing some of my pics to the sound engineer at the concert that night and the next thing I knew I was backstage showing them to Bonnie and there's John Lee Hooker. And we started chatting and it was amazing. He played his style for me privately and I got to see up close how he moved his fingers on the neck. His fingers were like *this* thick, you know, and that whole rhythmic hoogie-boogie thing that he would do – up so close, it really changed my world. Plus watching Bonnie play.

Did you take pics of John Lee Hooker as well?

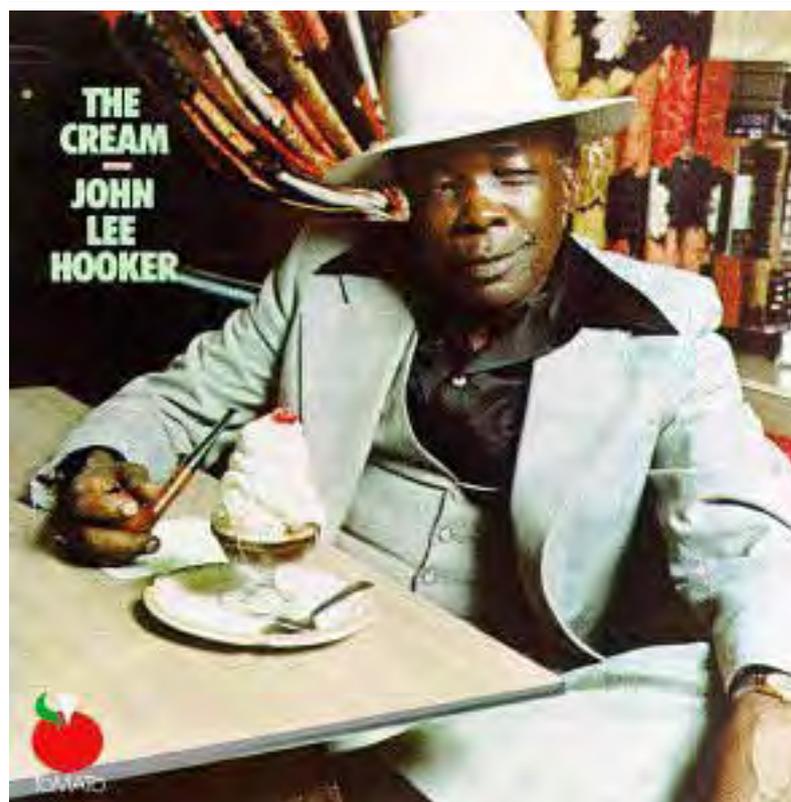
I did. I had a lot of pictures (sadly lost now to my years of moving around). That time John Lee actually handed me \$20 to take a bus and see them play in Long Island a few days later. I was there when a photography team was taking pictures for Tomato Records and his new record called "Cream." I love it whenever I see the cover of "Cream" with John Lee holding his pipe because he was always smoking a pipe, and when they were taking the pictures I said "John Lee, you gotta have your pipe (which was funny because he was eating an ice-cream sundae at the time, which is a bit unusual). ☺

Years ago, Time Out New York wrote that you mix "folked-up blues with a political mindset" – have you always been a socially conscious songwriter?

Always. The whole folked-up blues thing was because I had those blues influences in me, but also because I grew up with the Civil Rights Movement and the artists who inspired me like Joni Mitchell who could write a song about a break-up and the environment at the same time (Big Yellow Taxi). And of course the work of Phil Ochs, Pete Seager, Odetta, Bob Dylan, and others like Stevie Wonder, Gil Scott Heron, Richie Havens and Billie Holiday too.

I like funk and rhythm and blues, so it was kind of a melting pot. I was playing acoustic guitar and electric guitar and I think the folk flow came from me being socially conscious in my song-writing or things I would say on stage. I've always thought of myself as being better at live performing than recording because I really haven't had the opportunity to produce records with any support. I've always done it myself.

I could go on and on about my influences. There were so many. A lot were male artists because the women were kind of hard to dig out. But there was Bonnie Raitt for sure, Joan Armatrading, Joan Baez, Phoebe Snow, Tracy Chapman, Nina Simone, Elizabeth Cotten...they were really great songwriters that inspired me.



Do you think there were more musical “heroes” back then than today?

I think what’s happening today is that anybody with any kind of talent gets out there with a camera and social media, which waters the quality down because there are literally millions of artists. So it’s really hard to even know where to drop in and find what you’re after.

Do you play any other instruments?

I play a very bad keyboard, but I use it for writing. I really love the piano. I think I fought against having formal lessons on the piano because so many of my friends at the time were struggling with it so much. But I have one right here in my studio. I play harmonica. Every now and again I bring it out on stage. We have kind of a show trick called “Harpageddon” ☺ with the band’s harp player, myself, the keyboard player who also plays harp, and we try to bring up other people so that we might have three or four harp players playing at once. Kind of like bagpipes. ☺ The band’s called the *Troublemakers* and we like to have a little craziness here and there.

You originally teamed up with Lenore Troia and later turned solo when you moved to Key West?

Yes we were partners on and off stage. I met her in a recording studio in Bridgeport. I had formed my first band, *the Cathy Grier Band*, and went to record songs at this studio owned by Paul Leka¹, who was a great mentor for me. I spent a lot of time there and met Lenore at one of the sessions. She was more like Carole King

1. Paul Leka helped write and promote the chart topper “Na Na Hey Hey Kiss Him Goodbye,” which is still heard today at sporting events worldwide whenever a team wins a game...



or Billy Joel, and I was more like Richy Havens or Bonnie Raitt. I just loved her and said to her “we should play together!” We recorded two albums on our own record label in the early 80’s and toured up and down the east coast of the US for many years. We had a music video on MTV in 1986. We performed in Key West many times. Basically the stresses of the music industry ended our relationship and I stuck around in Key West where I found a place to return to my roots of solo performing and songwriting.

What was it like being an independent DIY artist in the 80s compared to today?

It was actually much easier. There wasn’t the internet with the constant you gotta have this new app to promote your career influence. It was me and my fans. I asked for addresses, I sent postcards saying “hey, I’m coming to your town.” I miss it. I can write copy and self-promote, but after two decades of writing songs and following the latest social media tools, I find it takes away from what I actually want to create.

How did the move to France come about?

I was meeting a lot of French tourists in Key West when I was performing in the late 80’s. The list was long with lots of numbers. There was a time when I just wanted a break and I’ve always loved France. So when I had the opportunity to go in 1989, I bought myself a ticket and traveled to France to see the country. After that I just called people that I’d met in Key West.

You were very successful touring and writing in Europe, what made you come back?

I met the French singer Nilda Fernandez who said he never wanted to record his songs in English until he came across an

album of Edith Piaf recorded in New York singing in English because she wanted her English-speaking public to really understand where she was coming from. So when we met it was like a light bulb in his head and I ended up going with him on tour to Venice, Italy for two weeks writing with him in between rehearsals translating and adapting a song into English. When it was done, he said he wanted to record it in New York, which is what rekindled my desire to return to New York. I ended up translating and adapting two of his albums from French and Spanish into English.

Otherwise you might have stayed in Europe?

I was doing a lot of gigs in London and starting to get known there. I could have gone there, but then New York won out with family and friends and all that.

“I just love the sounds of the streets and the people!”

What other countries have you been in?

Germany, England, Wales, Brazil, Australia...a friend of mine is Brazilian and we went and visited, and the minute people heard I was an American singer-songwriter, they’d ask me to take out my guitar and play. I always wanted to go back, I just love the sounds of the streets and the people! In Australia, I had friends from Key West who were living

in Brisbane. So when I landed there, I immediately started playing in little places nearby and then ended up in Sydney and other places over about eight weeks. That's another country I always said I have to go back to (although I've never had such a bad jet lag in all my life 😊).

After you moved back to New York you joined the Music Under New York program as NYC Subway Girl?

Yes. When I returned from France, I started playing in clubs like Bitter End in Greenwich Village and Arlene's Grocery in the Lower East Side. I just wanted to play. But all these clubs would do eight bands a night and you'd have your 45 minutes and that was it. So there wasn't even any networking, which was frustrating me. Then I heard about the MUNY program. I wanted to play and I had never busked

before. I wanted some support and structure that the program would give – a schedule and a location with the right to use an amplifier. Grand Central Station – talk about a great setting! 12 pm to 4 pm or 3 pm to 8 pm, that would be my spot. Little by little it evolved and actually taught me to be a better stage performer. After the New York subway for 15 years, you can handle anything! I started filling the clubs like Studio 54 and Joe's Pub – NYC Subway Girl comes above ground! 😊 So my brand worked.

You created a video mini-doc series where you asked passersby a simple question "What inspires you?"

After hearing day after day amazingly poignant comments from passersby and some of the conversations I heard, I wanted to try and capture them to share with people.



Things people said were so inspiring, not mundane. I named it the “Inspiration Project.” I asked my film-making friends and one of them suggested I get a flip camera and do it myself. This was pre iTunes. I called it “lo-fi hi-human content.”

“Maybe if people had the right music they’d be happier”

What are some examples?

Well it was a specific kind of person that would stop and take the time to talk to me and my camera. Right there in the chaos of the subway, people would say the most beautiful and compelling things like “keep love in your heart everyone, remember that.” Sherwin at Penn station told me “Joy is my inspiration.” These people need to be heard, they make our world a better and interesting place to live in. And their inspirational stories resonate with me deeply. We live in a harsh world and New York City is very crowded and chaotic. Ester shared, “Music is in my soul, I get goose bumps, I feel heightened” or “Maybe if people had the right music they’d be happier.” Don the “shoe dude” said “people that smile and see the world from a different point of view” inspired him. He’s still there today, pushing that shoe-shine thing up Sixth Avenue.

Twenty years is a long time – what are a couple of your most memorable moments in New York?

So many memories. I guess that by performing so many times in the subway I was able to sell out shows at the wonderful Public Theatre venue Joe’s Pub, where 200 and something people waited in line, so they gave me a second show. Performing at Avery Fisher Hall representing the best of subway performers. Playing BB King’s in Times Square and Radio City Music Hall when Madison Square was being renovated.

“I would never have thought I’d end up in the Mid-West”

You moved to Wisconsin in 2017 and formed Cathy Grier and The Troublemakers?

Yes there’s the Steel Bridge Songfest put together by Pat MacDonald in Sturgeon Bay. He lived in Barcelona for years, traveled the world with his band *Timbuk 3*. He had a song “The Future’s So Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades” and wrote for and got to know many, many artists, and was very inspired by the blues. Jackson Browne is a good friend of his and they were trying to save this steel bridge and it turned into a festival that takes place every year. Artists from all over the country still come for a week-long songwriting and performance festival. Melaniejane, the producer for the event, called me in the spring of 2016



Cathy Grier and The Troublemakers, Steel Bridge Songfest 2016

and invited me to the festival and that's how I ended up coming here for a week and staying. And this is where I live now. I formed the Troublemakers in 2017 with some of the musicians that I had met and written with there. I would never have thought I'd end up in the Mid-West. I would have thought France or England, but never thought I would go from New York to Wisconsin.

When did you first start playing cigar box guitar?

I started playing it in 2016 when I came to the song festival. I was introduced to guitar maker Bruce Rose at his studio and played around with his cigar box guitars and loved the sound. I bought one and took it to the writing sessions. It was featured in a song I wrote with two other artists called "Too Much Trouble," which was almost like a

mini-opera. The story behind it was three different characters seeing a scene from a different perspective and mine was from a street-performing perspective. So that's where the cigar box came in. We played it live and I played my Stratocaster with my cigar box on my back. Then at one point in the song I would slide the Stratocaster down and bring up the cigar box, which the audience thought was cool.

You only have the one?

I've got three! I have two four-string cigar box guitars and one six-string, all made by Bruce Rose. The second four-string is a back-up in case something happens to the original. My four-strings are tuned to GDGB and my six-string is in open E, and I use them with slide. They're lovely instruments. I also have a telecaster and a Stratocaster that Bruce designed and built.

What's special about the CBGs?

I think the rootsy quality of the sound and the fact that it's tuned to a chord and the use of a slide. It's primal and brings out that aspect. You've got something with any of those thumb-based rhythmic instruments. I'm a very rhythmic player, so I love the sounds that come from the cigar box. I forgot to say that when I was in France I played with a band in Morocco and I love the nights that we went out and would hear all the musicians. I was completely blown away by this instrument they play there that's basically just one string. And that rhythmic sound inspired me a lot.



Photo: Bruce Rose

But you don't have a diddley bow yet?

Not yet, but they're amazing too.

“Let the suspense and curiosity grow”

And the CBGs are a permanent part of your act now?

Yes I like to feature them on stage. Some shows I start right off with one or end a set with it. Sometimes I wait for audience members to comment about it before I play it. Let the suspense and curiosity grow.

I like to let people try and play it too. I go out into the audience with my wireless rig and hand it to people and say “wanna try it?” The band's playing and I hand it over and give them a slide, and it's just a fun thing to do. But I like it there behind



Cathy and Bruce Rose

me when I'm playing because eventually someone will say "what about that one?" And I'll use that as my cue to bring it out.

Can we hear it in the blues score you wrote for the "My First And Last Film" documentary in 2019?

Yes it is in the opening and ending sequence entitled "High Flyin'."

And no doubt in the "I'm All Burn" album you released in 2020?

Yes it is featured in "Key To My Survival" and is the only instrument on the closing song "Cathy's Bike Song." It's just me and the cigar box live in the studio and I wrote it specifically on the cigar box.

Also, right before the pandemic happened, I was contacted by a New York theatrical writer, Elizabeth Diggs, who asked me if I would write some music for a play that she was writing. And I wrote that specifically on the cigar box because it was about New York in the 1800s and it just felt right. The play was called "Glory Girls." Sadly the pandemic kind of put the kybosh on the play, but I really like the songs and I'm thinking one day I'd like to record them myself.

One of the band members also plays CBG, right?

Yes Jim Ohlschmidt also plays a Bruce Rose CBG. A six-string tuned to E, he calls it "The Count." Jim mostly plays slide on it.

The band reached the semi-finals at the 2022 Memphis International Blues Challenge – what was that for?

The International Blues Challenge is an annual gathering in Memphis by the wonderful Blues Foundation. Their



Photo: Ty Hellbach



Left to right: Larry Byrne, Deirdre Fellner, Jamey Clark, Cathy Grier, Tony Menzer, Jim Ohlschmidt

mission is to keep the Blues alive. Blues societies throughout the world have their own challenge to choose one band and one solo artist to represent their organization at the IBC. I was a soloist representing Wisconsin's Paramount Blues Association in Wisconsin in 2017 and the band *Cathy Grier and The Troublemakers* represented Paramount in Memphis 2022.

How is 2023 shaping up?

Slow but surely. The pandemic has certainly changed my ability to go out and get bookings. I believe the future will be more solo performances due to the fact that supporting a band is financially unsustainable at this point. I just really want to get back to playing and writing. I'd love to reach out to people and go to Europe some time, but you have to

organize festivals a year in advance so it might be awhile before I get there.

Any new projects in the pipeline?

Yes, I plan on writing more and working on other tunings for the CBG. I'd really like to work on a new album.

So, finally, to steal the line from your documentary, "what inspires you?"

Humanity, and our ability to rise above. To "make things better by making better things!" That to me is success and my life's quest. Just being a musician and getting up every morning and living this life. Just me finding music wherever I can find it. I could get down sometimes, but what works for me is that I love to play and write music.

And how do you define success?

When the audience feeds off of what you're doing, it's a joyful thing. And what a joy to have been brought up in a time with so many influences. Success for me is getting back to the grass roots and my core as a musician. ♦

“When the audience feeds off of what you're doing, it's a joyful thing”

<https://www.facebook.com/CathyGrier.Troublemakers>
<https://cathygrier.com>
<https://www.youtube.com/@cathygriermusic>

Builders mentioned:

Rose Instruments
<https://www.facebook.com/bruce.l.rose>
<http://www.roseinstruments.com>



Photo: Jennifer Stulo



**3Saiter,
Germany**

Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?

Boris Mattler, 3Saiter Gitarren,
Germany



Somewhere in the workshop was an old Mercedes hubcap lying around. Somehow the idea came up to build a body for it and make a guitar out of it, and we were really surprised how good this guitar sounded. And then Wolfgang refined the whole process more and more so that, in the end, the result was a fine hubcap guitar that not only looks stunning, but sounds really great as well.

CBGR: Boris, “3Saiter Gitarren” means “three-string guitars” in German – what led you guys to start the business?

Boris Mattler: Wolfgang Reibl is a creative guy who likes to build things according to his personal taste. Sometimes he equips his own motorcycle with a wooden horse saddle – self-made, of course. At some point Wolfgang also started building acoustic guitars, just for fun for himself. And when it turned out that they were really good instruments, I encouraged him to continue doing this in a more focused and professional way. It would have been a shame if such great guitars disappeared in the back room and nobody knew about it.

Why this love of three-string guitars in particular?

Three-string guitars are much easier to play. With three strings, you can concentrate wonderfully on the music and thus simply compose better. You are not distracted by the most sophisticated or complicated playing technique possible, but your head is always on the essentials. With three strings, it's much easier to be creative. And the nice thing about it is that you don't have to be a professional to make music with it. That motivates people immensely. That's why it's so important to us that three-string guitars are seen as real instruments.

“That’s why it’s so important to us that three-string guitars are seen as real instruments”

Who does the actual building?

Wolfgang is the one who builds the guitars. As a trained carpenter with a lot of experience in working with wood, he is the right man for it. Since I studied design, I'm also involved in the design of the guitars. I also take care of other things like ordering materials, maintaining the website, communication, videos, social media and everything else that goes with it. Some work we can divide up, for example refurbishing a hubcap - after all, the parts come from the 70s and 80s and often have clear signs of use, which makes some restoration necessary. But the classic instrument building (we basically build acoustic guitars) is done by Wolfgang.

Did it all start with the Mercedes Benz hubcap guitars?

Yes, and that was really a coincidence. Somewhere in the workshop was an old Mercedes hubcap lying around. Somehow the idea came up to build a body for it and make a guitar out of it, and we were really surprised how good this guitar sounded. And then Wolfgang refined the whole process more and more so that, in the end, the result was a fine hubcap guitar that not only looks stunning, but sounds really great as well.

Would you say they're like the big brother of other hubcap guitars (Radkappengitarre)? ©

No, we wouldn't go that far. There are a lot of creative minds out there making great guitars. And that's a good thing too! Maybe that's what makes our Mercedes hubcap guitar special, because it's an acoustic guitar that's built as intricately as a traditional acoustic guitar. However, this also makes it a full-fledged instrument in the common sense and not just a fun



gimmick. The eye-catching effect of the hubcap is just a bonus – after all, the guitar has a remarkable sound all on its own.

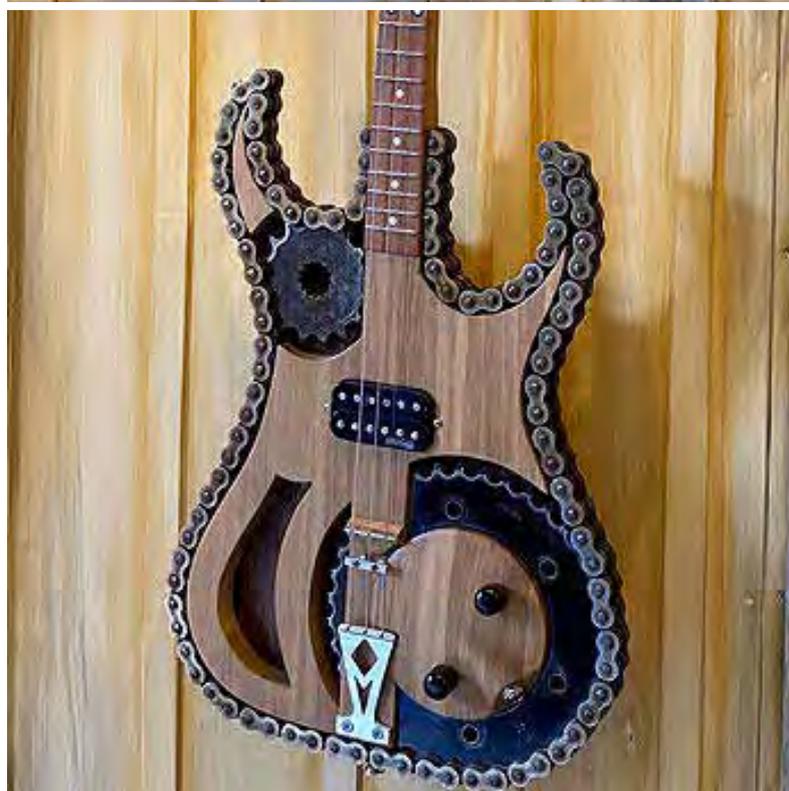
And you're continually experimenting with new ideas for different guitars besides hubcaps?

Yes, of course. We always want to try something new. And if something good comes out of it, we incorporate that into new guitars. But our focus is purely on acoustic guitars and unusual details. For us, it's always about creating a fully fledged musical instrument in the end. Whether that's a Mercedes hubcap guitar or a Parlor or a Tres Cubano guitar.

“Our focus is purely on acoustic guitars and unusual details”

And even though you already make top-quality high-end guitars, you're still learning about new materials and processes as you go along?

Yes, you really do keep learning. On the one hand, you've already gained your repertoire of experience and you know what you're doing. So our guitars are built on a solid foundation of learned craftsmanship and experience. But, given our attention to detail, there are always new approaches that need to be tried out. Also in the choice of materials.



One of your slogans is “you don’t have to reinvent the wheel, just the hubcap” – do you think the potential for different kinds of homemade guitars and instruments will ever be exhausted?

No, we can’t really imagine that. Especially with homemade instruments, there are so many people with a great wealth of ideas who have a lot of joy making them. There will always be something new. On the other hand, a lot of what seems new is basically just a variation of tried-and-tested ideas. A guitar is just a guitar – but the variations are what are interesting and new.

One can see you go the extra mile in terms of design and detail – what’s the most rewarding thing about building 3Saiter guitars?

Holding something in your hands at the end that meets your expectations. It’s a great experience when you’re satisfied with the finished guitar, especially if you have high expectations of your own work. And then when you try out a new idea and it proves itself in practice – that’s what it’s all about!

Customers can buy your acoustic guitars and then electrify them using attachable pickups – do you make the pickups too?

No. We believe that you don’t have to build everything yourself if there are already good solutions at hand. For our hubcap guitars, we’ve had very good experience with the DeArmond Rhythm Chief, which is actually designed for jazz guitars. The pickups are of exceptional quality and the sound is amplified pretty much unaltered. But we just build guitars, not pickups. Therefore, we offer them as an option, or more as a recommendation. As with the brand and type of strings, this is a very personal thing that everyone should approach individually.



What was the reaction to 3Saiter guitars at the Smokin' Guitars Festival last September?

Very pleasing. Definitely better than the weather, which could have been a lot better. ☺ But our guitars didn't exactly fit the festival because strictly speaking we don't build cigar box guitars in the true sense, but rather a range of classical acoustic guitars with only three strings and also one model with a hubcap.

“Maybe more hubcap guitars will find their way across the ocean”

They definitely made an impression on Steve Arvey during his European tour – people can now see a “Radkappengitarre” up close firsthand in Florida and festivals in the USA!

Steve is really a great guy and a class musician who is very involved in homemade guitars and especially three-string guitars. We are really glad to have met him in person last year and we continue to be in close contact. We are very pleased that Steve appreciates the quality of our guitars and are also a bit proud that one of our guitars made its way to him in the USA. We hope that people will be able to get a better idea of our guitars on site. Who knows – maybe more hubcap guitars will find their way across the ocean. ☺



So what are the plans for this summer?

We'll spend most of the summer preparing for Guitar Summit 2023, the biggest guitar show in Germany, which will be held in Mannheim, Germany, September 22–24. We will present our guitars there to be able to show them live to a larger audience. We have decided to concentrate on Mercedes hubcap guitars and high-quality acoustic guitars like Parlors. Some of our other projects like the chain and violin guitars, and the toolbox guitar with six strings in three courses were fun to do, but not what we really want to focus on.

By the way, if everything works out as planned, Steve Arvey will also hold a workshop at Guitar Summit. But until then we still have a lot of work to do.

From the flyer to the booth, there is still a lot to prepare. And there are still some guitars waiting to be finished. In any case, we are looking forward to meeting a lot of interesting people there! ♦

<https://www.3saiter.de/>
<https://www.facebook.com/3Saiter>
<https://www.youtube.com/@3Saiter>



Steve Arvey



Wolfgang Reibl



Brett Gardner, U.S.A.

Photo: Michelle Gunvordahl

New Orleans legacy

Brett Gardner, New Orleans, Louisiana, U.S.A.

Holistically, there is something that connects all the important aspects of my life – playing music, studying physics, exploring sustainability and creative reuse – and that’s the cigar box guitar. I make my living as a musician, but I try to keep my relationship with homemade instruments a passion.

CBGR: Brett, this year the New Orleans Jazz Museum hosted the New Orleans Cigar Box Guitar Festival – how did that come about?

Brett Gardner: This year’s New Orleans Cigar Box Guitar Festival was an amazing gathering of the CBG community and celebration of homemade instruments in New Orleans. In previous years, parts of the festival have been held at the New Orleans Jazz Museum, but this was the first year that we entered into a full partnership with them. This year’s festival featured 17 hours of music by 21 artists over the course of four days.

It must have had a special significance for you, given your own musical style?

I’m grateful to have been steeped in New Orleans music – traditional, jazz and funk – for the last seven years. Many of the musicians that I hold deep respect and reverence for are well represented at the Museum. This year’s Festival was exceptionally special because we worked

in conjunction with the unveiling of a new homemade instrument exhibit at the Museum. My personal favorite piece in the exhibit is a bass made from a barrel by the prolific New Orleans bassist Alcide “Slow Drag” Pavageau. The partnership is a perfect one to celebrate the legacy of homemade instruments in New Orleans music!

“After living here for seven years, I’ve come to appreciate so much about the rhythm, timing, and pulse of New Orleans music”

Was it that style of music that made you move to New Orleans in the first place?

When I moved to New Orleans, I knew that I wanted to study the music of the city. Previously, I was performing in a musical group that played songs by New Orleans artists like Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton. After living here for seven years,



Left to right: Barnaby Gold, Brett Gardner, Sarah Peterson, Hunter Burgamy and Ben Fox
Photo: Michelle Gunvordahl

I've come to appreciate so much about the rhythm, timing, and pulse of New Orleans music. Traditionally, stringed instruments like the guitar and banjo play a huge percussive role in the band. Just listen to the banjo of Johnny St. Cyr with Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers, Danny Barker with Paul Barbarin's New Orleans Jazz Band, or Leo Nocentelli's funky rhythm guitar with the Meters.

And your love of rudimentary homemade instruments?

In fact, the year I moved to New Orleans was also the inaugural year of the New Orleans Cigar Box Guitar Festival. At that time in 2016, I was working with homemade instruments, but had yet to build a proper cigar box guitar. After the first year, I bought a fretting kit from C. B. Gitty and came back the next year with a three-string CBG

that I played onstage with the *New Orleans Swinging Gypsies*. It wasn't until a few years ago that I realized how many New Orleans musicians actually grew up playing on some kind of homemade stringed instrument. Kid Ory, Johnny St. Cyr, Danny Barker and Walter Wolfman Washington are just a few of these prolific musicians.

“It wasn't until a few years ago that I realized how many New Orleans musicians actually grew up playing on some kind of homemade stringed instrument”

And these instruments played a key role in the early development of both jazz and blues?

Around the turn of the 20th century, you could find “spasm” bands performing in the streets of New Orleans with unique, handmade instruments: tub basses, cigar box guitars, washboards, musical saws and pipes. In learning about the legacy of homemade instruments in New Orleans, I am constantly surprised by how many influential musicians of the early jazz era had their first musical experiences on homemade stringed instruments in bands like these.

It was even printed in a newspaper that Louis Armstrong was gifted his first bugle and cornet after being seen playing a cigar box guitar as a child. If this is true, then three of the five members of Louis Armstrong’s Hot Five band got their start on homemade stringed instruments: trombonist Kid Ory, banjoist Johnny St. Cyr, and Louis. This is huge. If you aren’t familiar with the recordings made by this band, it’s a great place to start learning about New Orleans traditional jazz music.

“Around the turn of the 20th century, you could find “spasm” bands performing in the streets of New Orleans with unique, handmade instruments”



Photo: Eliot Kamenitz



Photo: Jim Hartzell

You played an electric “Drone-O-Mode” at the New Orleans festival?

On Saturday night of the Festival, I played an electric set with my band and brought out the Drone-O-Mode. I started by demonstrating exactly what the instrument could do – with zip-tie frets wrapped around a drumstick fretboard, the location of the frets can be altered and the scale/tuning scheme can be changed. On recent live performances, I’ve had fun showing the audience how the instrument works in an interactive way by changing the scale in the middle of the song. I can change from a major scale to a minor scale, and then to a pentatonic scale. The possibilities to explore intervals, tunings, and scales are limitless.

“The diversity of the world of homemade stringed instruments is one of its most appealing aspects”

But the cigar box guitar still ranks as your favorite home-made instrument?

There’s nothing like plugging your favorite cigar box guitar into a tube amp and letting it rip! (Extra points if you built it yourself). In all honesty, the diversity of the world of homemade stringed instruments is one of its most appealing aspects. But personally, my musical voice lies on a guitar.



Photo: Michelle Gunvordahl



Wine box drum kit

In our first interview in April 2021, you said you feel most alive when you pick up your CBG and improvise...

Holistically, there is something that connects all the important aspects of my life – playing music, studying physics, exploring sustainability and self-sufficiency – and that’s the cigar box guitar. I make my living as a musician, but I try to keep my relationship with homemade instruments a passion.

And you timed the release of your new album “Spasm” to coincide with the New Orleans Cigar Box Guitar Festival?

Yes! The CDs arrived one day before our performance at the Festival. I was so excited for the world to hear it and gave away as many as I could!

Is that your Razy Dazzy Spasm Band guitar that we hear in many of the songs?

My axe of choice for the album was a banjo CBG built from a kit by C. B. Gitty. It is their “Country Roads” banjo kit. When Ben “Gitty” Baker told me about it, I immediately got one and strung it up in my favorite tuning, DGBE. The guitar you’re speaking of is also on the album, but is played by fellow NOLA stringman Hunter Burgamy. That one’s a custom print by Ben Baker. When he sent it to me a few years ago, I mentioned that it would be cool to make a Razy Dazzy Spasm Band tribute album one day. Now, proudly, I can say we did. You can really hear that paint can lid resonator shine on the first solo of “Messin’ Around” and the second solo on “Savoy Blues” played by Hunter.



Photo: Michelle Gunvordahl





Do many people know that the origins of jazz itself are often attributed to the Razy Dazzy Spasm Band?

This year at the Festival, we had a Thursday evening cultural symposium, which featured guest speaker Michael Shurtz, who just finished writing a book on “Stalebread” Lacoume, the leader of the Razy Dazzy Spasm Band. He did a fantastic job of explaining the cultural significance of the band. His full presentation is currently available on Vimeo for anyone who missed it.¹

Three songs on the album have vocals while the rest are instrumental – is there a reason why you didn’t include vocals in a couple more songs like “Alice Blue Gown”?

On our albums, I’d like to always feature a vocalist or guest instrumentalist to compliment the band. Stylistically, I knew that Sarah Peterson, whom I have the

1. <https://vimeo.com/805641572>

honor to play with in Smoking Time Jazz Club, would be perfect. She is an expert on the vocal style of the early jazz era – studying singers like Bessie Smith, Clara Smith and Ma Rainey. With more time in the studio, I would have included her on more tunes.

Justin Johnson said that the ability to tell a story with music alone is an art form that will never fade (CBGR July 2021) – do you feel the same way?

The most masterful artists create art that has no end to its depth. It’s timeless and infinitely new every time it’s perceived. These stories take listeners on journeys that can be revisited over and over again. Sometimes I’ll listen to a song and immediately feel like I’m back in the same place where I first heard it. I don’t think that humans will ever stop seeking art’s “time traveling” powers. For those true music lovers, the music will never fade.

“I don’t think that humans will ever stop seeking art’s “time traveling” powers”

Have you ever felt like vocals might even do a song injustice?

There is something to be said about instrumental music and its ability to be understood by speakers of all languages. And there is something else to be said about musicians who can masterfully sing with their instruments. Bruce Lee once said “the highest truth is inexpressible.” At some point, the truth to be expressed through a song may transcend the limitations of language.

Like Stevie Ray Vaughn’s “Lenny” or Jeff Beck’s “Cause We’ve Ended As Lovers”?

Ah, yes, these are two of my favorite examples of powerful guitar voices playing ballads. “Lenny” was written by Stevie Ray Vaughn for his wife at the time and “Cause We’ve Ended As Lovers” was written by Stevie Wonder for his ex-wife. Stevie gifted the song to Jeff Beck, who then dedicated the song to Roy Buchanan, another incredibly lyrical guitarist. Their playing on these ballads is so powerful – they evoke emotion that is more universal than any specific human language. These have always been my favorite tracks from Stevie Ray Vaughn and Jeff Beck. Recently, I’ve been playing a classic electric guitar ballad

at every CBG festival. I played “Lenny” at Travis Bowlin’s CBG Festival in Blue Ridge, GA, and “Cause We’ve Ended As Lovers” at the Bradenton CBG Festival. Electric guitar ballads are some of my favorites to play – possibly because there’s so much emotion and inspiration packed into the original recordings. Both performances are on YouTube.²

Is the “Spasm” album the first foray into cigar box guitars for Hunter Burgamy and Russell Welch?

Yes, I believe so. They are both string players in the New Orleans community for whom I have much respect. We typically play the same role in a band, so there aren’t as many opportunities to play together. It was so great to have all three of us on tracks of the album. Check out the tune “Yes! I’m In The Barrel” and you can hear all three of us improvising on a 12-bar blues. Hunter played a four-string resonator CBG tuned like a tenor banjo (CGDA) and Russell played a three-string CBG tuned like the top of a guitar (GBE).

And it seems to be Hanna Mignano’s first appearance with a cigar box violin?

Yes, indeed! She did a fantastic job (on the album and at the New Orleans Cigar Box Guitar Festival) making that cigar box violin speak. On the album, check out the tune “After You’ve Gone” to hear how a homemade violin can sound in the hands of a professional. Thanks again to C. B. Gitty for supplying these instruments.

So you had a great start to the year...

So far, 2023 has been an amazing year filled with music, festivals, and friends. I feel like this is only the beginning of my

2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjzXiw8GiC8>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BAGOE2HF2uU>

journey as I approach my 10th year of working with homemade instruments and cigar box guitars!

“It’s great to have so many gatherings across the country where homemade instrument builders and players can meet and share ideas”

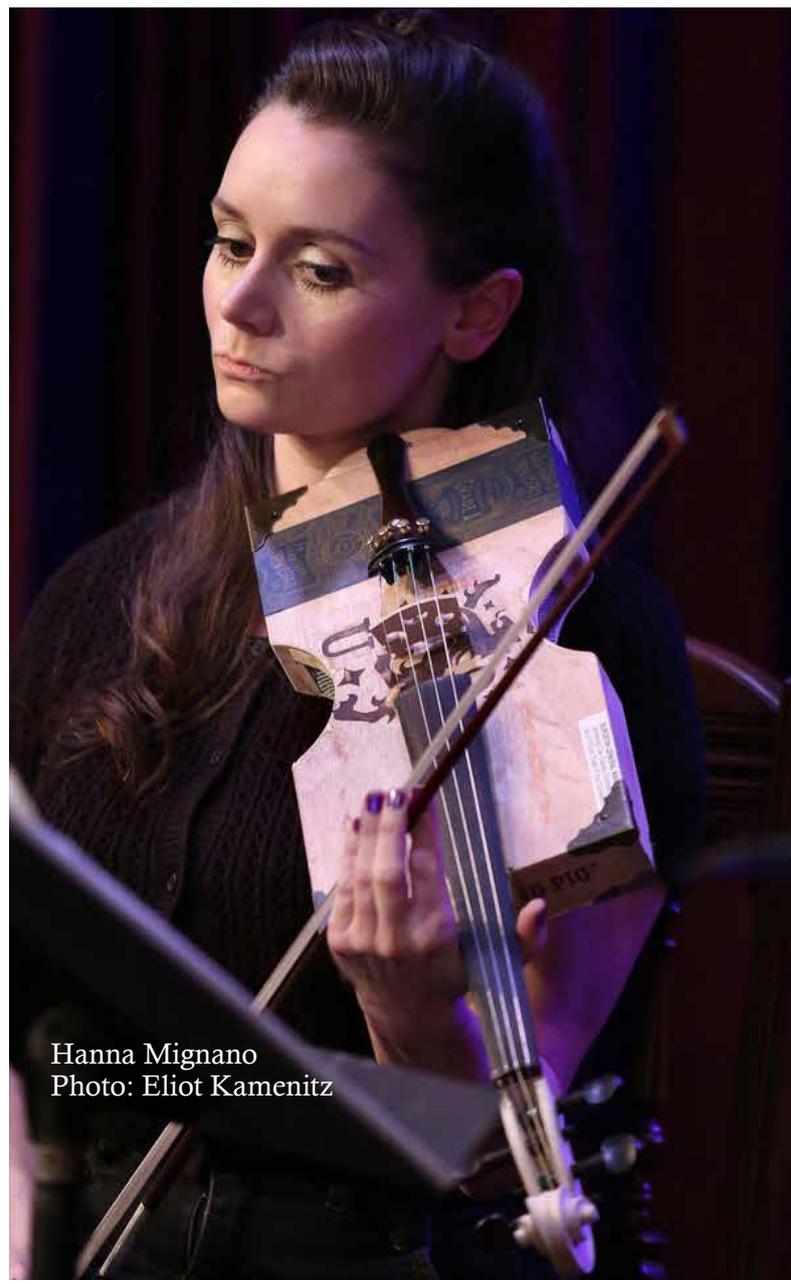
After New Orleans, Blue Ridge and Bradenton, what other festivals will you play this year?

In June, the *Cigar Box Serenaders* will be back at the 19th Annual Cigar Box Guitar Festival in Huntsville, AL, and then performing at the inaugural Great Smoky Mountain CBG Music Festival in Robbinsville, NC. These festivals will bookend our very first Cigar Box Serenaders tour. Then, in October, I will be back again for the 2nd annual Travis Bowlin Cigar Box Guitar Music and Arts Festival. It’s great to have so many gatherings across the country where homemade instrument builders and players can meet and share ideas. It’s gonna be an awesome year!

Also, related to homemade instruments, this last month in New Orleans I’ve been working on a special project at the Music Box Village. The Music Box Village is a collection of interactive “musical houses” inspired by the unique musical



Hunter Burgamy and Russell Welch
Photo: Michelle Gunvordahl



Hanna Mignano
Photo: Eliot Kamenitz

and architectural culture of the city. I reimagined two of the houses there: the “JunKit,” which is a drum set made from upcycled and repurposed materials, and the “Drum Kitchen,” which is full of percussion made from items normally found in a kitchen. Working on this project has been an amazing experience that’s stretched my imagination and creativity. ♦

<https://www.facebook.com/brettgardner>
<https://www.soundlikegarbage.org>
<https://www.youtube.com/@BrettGardnerMusic>
<https://www.instagram.com/cigarboxserenaders>

Builders mentioned:
 C. B. Gitty Crafter Supply
<https://www.cbitty.com>
<https://www.facebook.com/cbitty>



LEGACY OF CIGAR BOX GUITAR IN NEW ORLEANS

FOR MORE THAN 100 YEARS, HOMEMADE INSTRUMENTS LIKE CIGAR BOX GUITARS HAVE HELD A SPECIAL PLACE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MUSIC IN NEW ORLEANS. AROUND THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY, SPASM BANDS COULD BE FOUND PERFORMING IN THE STREETS WITH UNIQUE, HANDMADE INSTRUMENTS. TO HONOR THE LEGACY OF CIGAR BOX GUITARS AND HOMEMADE INSTRUMENTS IN NEW ORLEANS, WE HAVE CHOSEN FIVE COMPOSITIONS WRITTEN BY THE FOLLOWING MUSICIANS WHO AT ONE TIME PLAYED HOMEMADE STRINGED INSTRUMENTS ON THEIR MUSICAL JOURNEY. ENJOY!

KID ORY “I MADE A FIVE-STRING BANJO BY CUTTING A BUCKET IN HALF, AND USED THREAD AND FISHING CORD FOR STRINGS, BUT THEY KEPT BREAKING SO I STARTED USING METAL STRINGS...I MADE A GUITAR FROM A GREAT BIG CIGAR BOX. THEN I MADE A BASS FROM A BIG SOAP BOX, WITH A HANDLE FOR THE NECK, AND USED DIFFERENT SIZE CORD TO MAKE THE STRINGS.”
 - RUSSELL, BILL, *NEW ORLEANS STYLE NEW ORLEANS, LA, JAZZOLGY PRESS 1994*

DANNY BARKER “I GOT TO THINKING, AND A BRIGHT IDEA WAS BORN. I WOULD ORGANIZE A SPASM BAND. THERE WERE MANY SPASM BANDS IN THE CITY. THEY PLAYED ALL SORTS OF GADGETS THAT PRODUCED SOUNDS: MUSICAL SAWS, WASHBOARDS, SPOONS, BELLS, PIPES, SANDPAPER, XYLOPHONES, SETS OF BOTTLES (EACH WITH A DIFFERENT AMOUNT OF WATER)...ONE-STRING FIDDLES, GUITARS, SMALL BASS FIDDLES, TUB BASSES...”
 - BARKER, DANNY, *A LIFE IN JAZZ, NEW ORLEANS, LA, HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION, 2016*

JOHNNY ST. CYR “MY MOTHER WOULD NOT LET ME PLAY THIS GUITAR OF HERS, SO I MADE MY OWN OUT OF A CIGAR BOX WITH THREAD AND FISHING LINES FOR STRINGS. SOON I COULD MAKE AS MANY CHORDS ON MY HOMEMADE GUITAR AS MOTHER COULD ON HER GOOD ONE. AFTER A WHILE, SHE LET ME USE HER GUITAR.”
 - ST. CYR, JOHNNY, “JAZZ: AS I REMEMBER IT,” *JAZZ JOURNAL, VOL. 19, NO. 9, SEPTEMBER 1956*

LOUIS ARMSTRONG “MAYBE THAT’S BECAUSE WHEN (ARMSTRONG) WAS VERY YOUNG AND PLAYING A FOUR-STRING GUITAR MADE FROM A CIGAR BOX AND COPPER WIRE, THE SUPERINTENDENT OF THE COLORED WAIF’S HOME FOR BOYS GAVE HIM A BUGLE AND LATER A CORNET”
 - “LOUIS BACK FROM EUROPE TOUR,” *TUCSON DAILY CITIZEN, 3 JULY 1965*



The PHillbilly, U.K.

Photo: Grant David Read

It is what it is...

Phil Bye, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, U.K.

I call my music “dirty skiffle” because it’s not really rooted anywhere else. It’s not blues really, or country either, and its DIY homemade instruments...the whole ethos of skiffle fits really. I tune some guitars more like banjos and some in more conventional blues tuning, but I don’t really pigeon-hole my sound, it is what it is really.

Phil, you’ve become a true proponent of cigar box guitars over the years – what started you off?

I’ve always been a musician, playing in bands at school, guitar mainly. I played in a folk/punk band in London whilst at art school in the 1990s, aged around 20, then turned my hand to banjo at the age of 30 and played in a hillbilly band (that’s where the name *PHillbilly* comes from). Then when I was 38 I had a breakdown and was told by the doctors to stop drinking if I wanted to get better (I was what’s known as a functioning alcoholic I think). It just crept up on me, but during my recovery I read Keith Richards’ autobiography, and he talked about open tuning a lot. I’d never played in open tuning before and I read up on it, and how it leads on to slide guitar, and it was this that led me to discovering cigar box guitars.

More about skiffle...

“Skiffle” was a DIY music craze originating in the UK in the 1950s. New Orleans “trad jazz” set the stage for skiffle along with blues, country and folk music to result in a new up-tempo popular style of music. According to Billy Bragg in his book called “Roots, Radicals And Rockers: How Skiffle Changed the World,” skiffle was basically British schoolboys in the mid-1950s playing American roots music and was key to UK pop culture in that it introduced the acoustic guitar to the post-war youth counterculture.

Skiffle was therefore part and parcel of the teenage revolution – teenagers finding their own identity – by Bragg’s reckoning, there were around 30,000–50,000 skiffle groups in the late 1950s and guitar sales rose from 6,000 to 250,000 in the space of a few years. John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, Mick Jagger, Dave Clark, Pete Townshend, Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton and others were all immersed in skiffle when they were teenagers.

And if The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Dave Clark Five, The Who, Led Zeppelin and other bands were inspired by skiffle, then, as Bragg says, skiffle could be called “the nursery for the British Invasion” in the 1960s, led by the Beatles, which completely and dramatically affected the course of rock and roll in America.

References:
<https://www.billybragg.co.uk>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pmLLZISGyHI>
<https://bureauoflostculture.podbean.com/e/the-lost-history-of-skiffle-with-billy-bragg>

I bought my first CBG a couple of months after my breakdown from a guy called Chip Chipperfield and the following year I went to the Red Rooster festival and entered a cigar box guitar competition hosted by Four Roses Bourbon. We played in the back of a 1950s Chevy pickup to a crowd of a few hundred people and were judged by how loud the cheers were! Unbelievably I won and my prize was a CBG made by Diddley Bros. After that I was completely hooked on CBGs! ☺ That was around eight years ago and I now own about 15 of them.



“I enjoy the process of creating in any form really”

Do you build your own?

I’ve built a few off and on and sell the odd one here and there. I try and stick to “a one in one out” system now, but that’s not as easy as it sounds. ☺

Do you have trouble letting go of some of your own builds?

I’ve kept three that I definitely won’t ever sell – my first, which is actually not a great player, but was a milestone, and a three- and four-stringer that both play really nicely. The others I sold happily. I enjoy the process of creating in any form really, so to build the guitars is great. If someone else wants to play them, even better!



Ian Ladlow Photography

And you're pretty well immersed in the English CBG community?

A few years ago I decided to put on a gig on the fifth anniversary of my sobriety. This was a cigar box guitar special, with Chickenbone John putting on a make and play workshop during the day and a gig in the evening with myself, Chickenbone John and Hollowbelly, who I'd met the year before at a festival in Dorset called *Dark Holler*.

I've been lucky enough to play a few times now alongside Chickenbone John and Hollowbelly, and was honored to support Hollowbelly on his last gig at Boxstock the year before last. I'm playing Boxstock again this year too. I'm also looking at booking my friends the Dusk Brothers for a gig here in Suffolk this year.

The Barrel Sessions is about to host its second cigar box guitar special on April 19th. The first was really popular and we reached a worldwide audience, which was fantastic. The Barrel sessions are run by Brian McAllister and James Viera who assemble a mix of local musicians every week, catering for all genres. After being asked to play a couple of times, I decided to hijack it last year and put on a cigar box guitar special, which turned out to be a roaring success – it's a terrific little venue with a cracking sound, a loyal audience and it's live-streamed on their Facebook page.¹ The production quality is great and, more importantly, as a teetotaler they have a great alcohol-free ale on draught too. ☺

Who were your main influences in your younger days?

I've always had a wide-ranging taste in music, including hip hop, punk, folk, drum and bass, acid jazz, funk, rock and, most

1. <https://www.facebook.com/TheBarrelSessions>

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recently, blues and country. The only music I've never really been into is reggae. I just don't get it...ragga, dance hall and ska... yep, but reggae really not so much.

You said it's been a dream to finally be able to showcase your music with the release of The PHillbilly "Dirty Skiffle Volume 1"?

Yes, I've finally released my first album, "Dirty Skiffle Volume 1," which I'm really proud of – and there's definitely a Volume 2 in me, so keep a look out for that. The reception of the record has been great – I've just emailed out to CDs to the US, Finland, Sweden, all over the UK, and had messages from people in Australia who are listening in. I was asked to play a festival in Holland in May but it was going to be the same time as two weekends of gigs here, so it wasn't viable. But there are definitely people out there who want to hear it, which is amazing and really humbling.

Why "dirty skiffle"?

I call my music "dirty skiffle" because it's not really rooted anywhere else. It's not blues really, or country either, and its DIY homemade instruments. As well as the box guitars, I play footdrums made from an antique suitcase that I've converted to a bass drum and a snare hat tambourine. The whole ethos of skiffle fits really. I tune some guitars more like banjos and some in more conventional blues tuning, but I don't really pigeon-hole my sound, it is what it is really.

What was involved in putting the album together?

The album was recorded at Catch 21 records in Norwich with the help of Gavin Bowers, the owner, using old vintage gear. It was recorded onto reel to reel tape for that old school sound. All the tracks were



recorded live without multi-tracking, so everything you hear was played live as a one-man band. The album is released on my own record label, *Dirty Skiffle Records*, and I'm hoping to release a compilation album at some point featuring some other great players I've met, some of whom will be playing at the Banham Barrel this April.

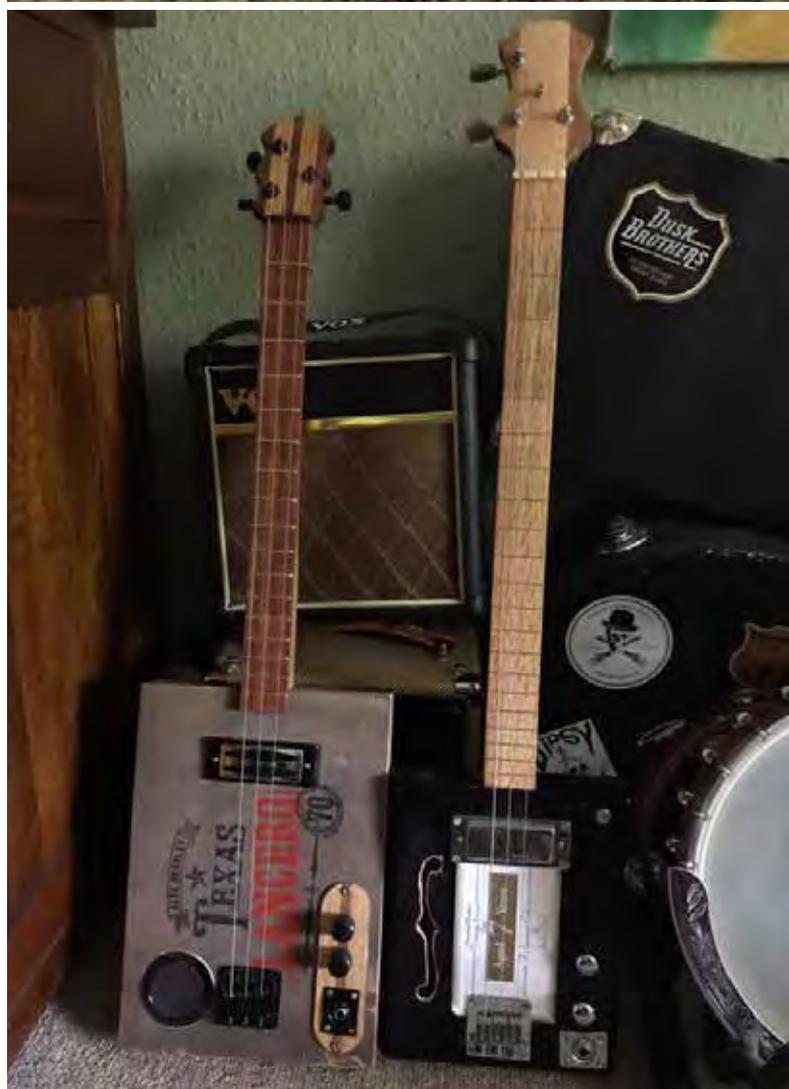
So you used CBGs for the whole album?

I played four different box guitars – two were made by Ray White of Haystack box guitars, he's a great friend who builds exquisite guitars and banjos, and the other two were built by another really good friend, Steve Chilvers from Holy Grail Vintage Roots Guitars Steve's an amazing guitar builder and has made guitars for some really important musicians. He put an album out a couple of years ago for charity, featuring guitars he'd built and played by an amazing list of musicians from all over the world, I was honored to play on it and open for Grammy winner Cedric Burnside on the Album. It's called "From a Seed in the Ground" and there a few box guitars on there.

“For me sitting with a guitar is like therapy”

And you said there'll be another one soon?

For me sitting with a guitar is like therapy... it's mindfulness and important for me to take some time out to keep my head clear from too much stress. And



sometimes a song pops out – I don't push it, it's really an organic process – it'll probably take a while before the next record, but who knows, it'll come when it comes. ☺

Where do the lyrics come from?

My lyrics are formed from ideas that I keep as voice notes in my phone mostly – little ideas that I have that I go back to from time to time. “I tried to drown my sorrows” started as a poster I saw in a street art exhibition, I just liked the sentiment.

So a busy summer ahead?

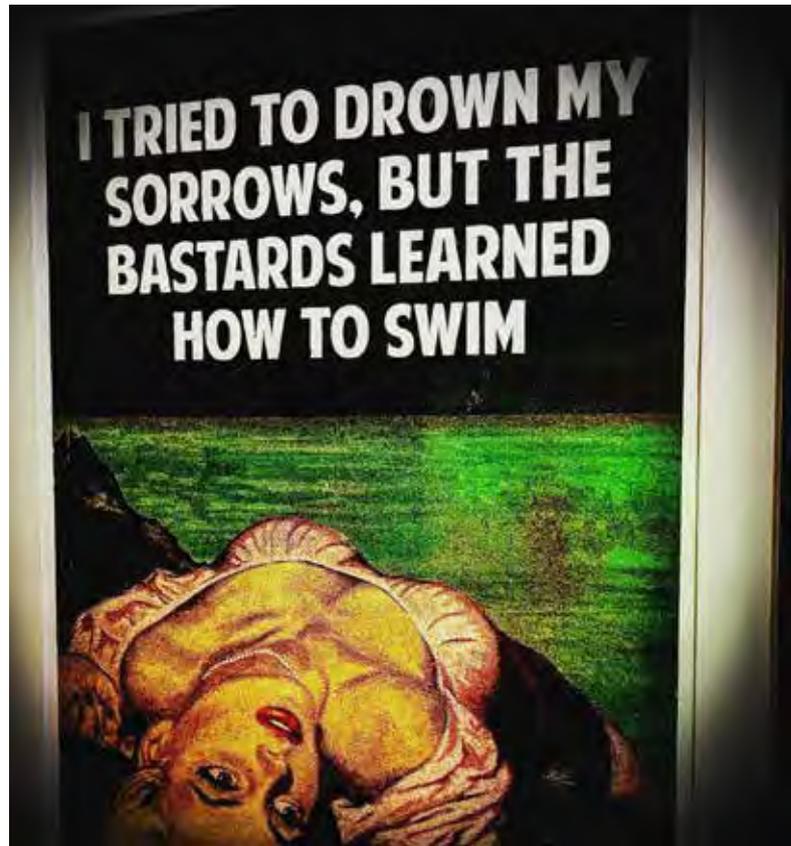
There's already a few gigs and festivals booked this summer. I'm looking forward to getting the music out there, and just enjoying the community and the music that comes with it. There's some great DIY roots musicians out there making amazing music. Hopefully my album will open a few more doors and allow for a bit of travel and music, and meeting more people. ☺ ♦

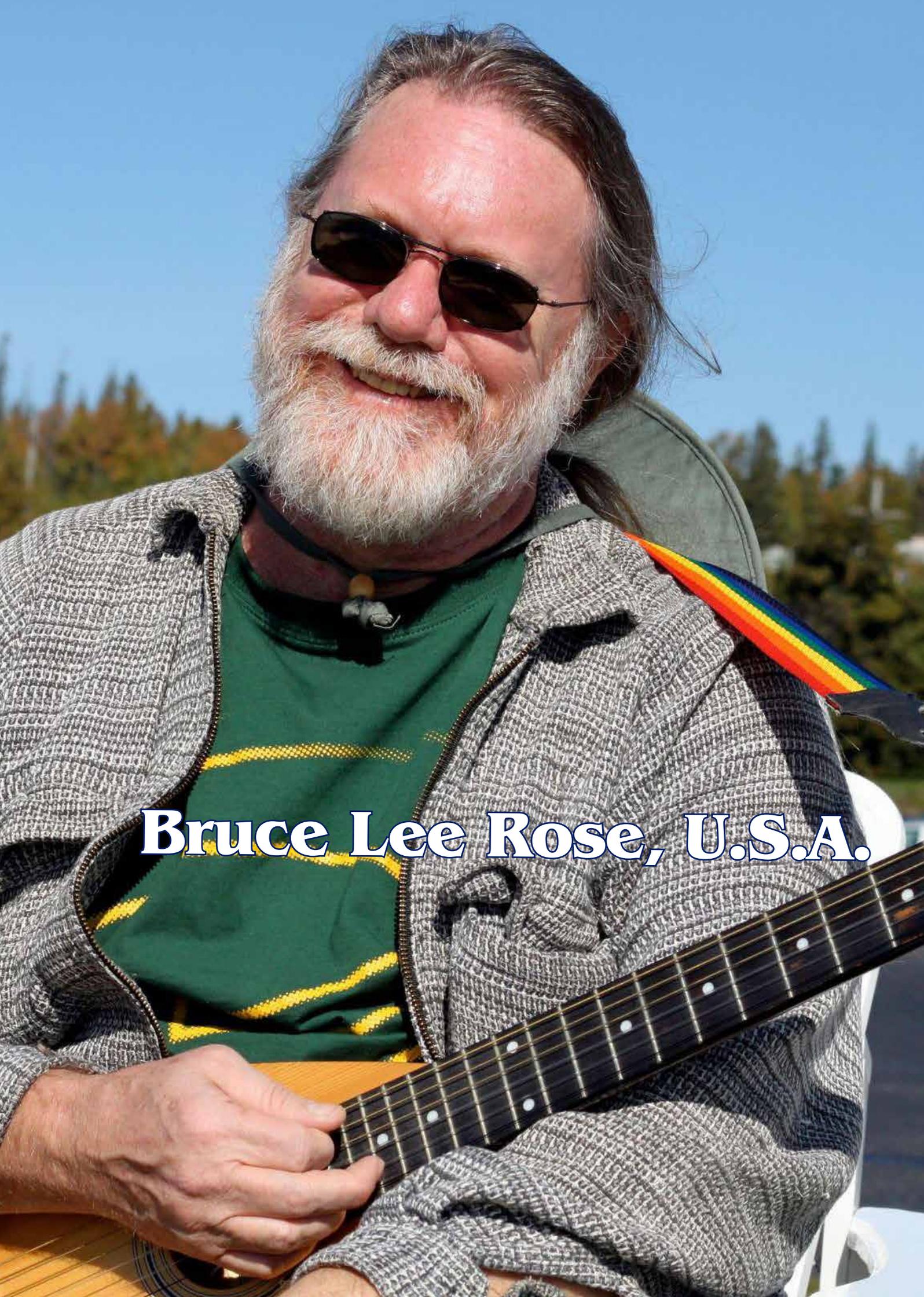
<https://www.facebook.com/thePHillbillyonemanband>

Builders mentioned:
Chip Chipperfield
Diddley Bros

Ray White, Haystack Box Guitars:
<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100057598052881>

Steve Chilvers, Holy Grail Vintage Roots Guitars:
<https://www.holygrailvintagerootsguitars.com>





Bruce Lee Rose, U.S.A.

A thing worth doing...

Bruce Lee Rose, *Rose Instruments*, Neenah, Wisconsin, U.S.A.

I'd spent years building instruments: classical and acoustic flat-top guitars, ukuleles, mandolins, banjos, as well as the occasional electric guitar, and had come to the conclusion that I was more talented in the building department than I ever had been as a player. Watching Pat play that guitar looked like so much fun, and so simple... I had to go home and build one for myself!

CBGR: Bruce, you've always been a builder/fixer at heart?

Yes, I've always loved building and tinkering with things – not just guitars, but bicycles, motorcycles, cars, stereo equipment, guitar amps, you name it. These days, besides building instruments and winding pickups, I also build and modify effects pedals, and have learned hydro dipping to finish the cases. I work on amps and recone vintage speakers. I also love photography – I spent a couple of years doing commercial photography and, despite my digital rigs, I still have an old school darkroom to go with my vintage view cameras.

But music and instruments rank pretty high up on the list...

I started playing guitar when I was 10, but after an accident where I hurt my right hand, I stopped playing for two years. As a finger-style guitarist, the accident was

devastating and, as someone brought up with the philosophy that anything worth doing is worth doing right, I saw no way I'd ever be able to play guitar “right” again, so I didn't play at all.

So what changed?

What changed everything for me was the realization that, yes, a thing worth doing is worth doing right, but sometimes – if it's important enough – it can even be worth doing badly. In other words, even playing the guitar badly was better than not playing at all. In all the years since, I've never gone a day without playing something... guitar, ukulele, banjo, cuatro, tiple, hardy-gurdy (your right hand only has to turn a crank!), but playing something...

Did the accident influence your interest in playing and building cigar box guitars?

Well, I should probably start with how I got into cigar box guitars in the first place. While I'd seen them as a boy in Camden-on-Gauley, West Virginia, I didn't get into playing or building CBGs until about 15 years ago after seeing Pat MacDonald performing with his Purgatory Hill Harp built by John Lowe. By that time I'd spent years building instruments: classical and acoustic flat-top guitars, ukuleles, mandolins, banjos, as well as the occasional electric guitar, and had come

to the conclusion that I was more talented in the building department than I ever had been as a player. Watching Pat play that guitar looked like so much fun, and so simple... I had to go home and build one for myself!

“In all the years since I’ve never gone a day without playing something”

I saw CBGs as simplified guitars, instruments that were not only easier to play for the average person, but instruments that could even be played by many who – due to hand injuries or arthritis, etc. – could not play a regular guitar at all. Having spent decades finding my way on the guitar again due to my own hand injury, this was definitely appealing.

But the philosophy that anything worth doing is worth doing right still applies to Rose Instruments and your CBGs?

Well, I got to know Pat MacDonald and played at Steel Bridge Songfest for a number of years, even shot the cover photo for his Purgatory Hill album. He doesn’t own a Rose CBG, but he does have one of my traditional guitars, a triple P90 Rose tele, which – as of our last conversation a couple days ago – he’s still very happy with. Pat was also part of the reason I ended up building CBGs on a large scale and showing them at art festivals. Early on



Pat MacDonald and Melaniejane Jane.



he'd asked me to bring some of my cigar box instruments to display at the Steel Bridge Songfest in Sturgeon Bay. We not only sold out, but while we were there, we were invited to an arts and crafts festival in Middleton later that summer. We did even better there, not only selling out, but also getting some great advice from one of the other vendors.

“One thing I truly never understood was why more CBG builders do not display at art festivals”

He told us we didn't belong there, that we should not be doing arts and crafts shows, but instead only fine art festivals, the more exclusive the better. I honestly thought he was crazy, but we went ahead and applied to Wisconsin's best fine art festivals for the next summer. And not only did we get accepted everywhere, we ended up winning several ribbons. In Madison, we won Best New Artist. After that, for the next dozen years, I built instruments every winter and then we spent our weekends all summer/fall displaying them at fine art festivals around the state. Actually, one thing I truly never understood was why more CBG builders do not display at art festivals.



Bruce and MaryAnn Rose



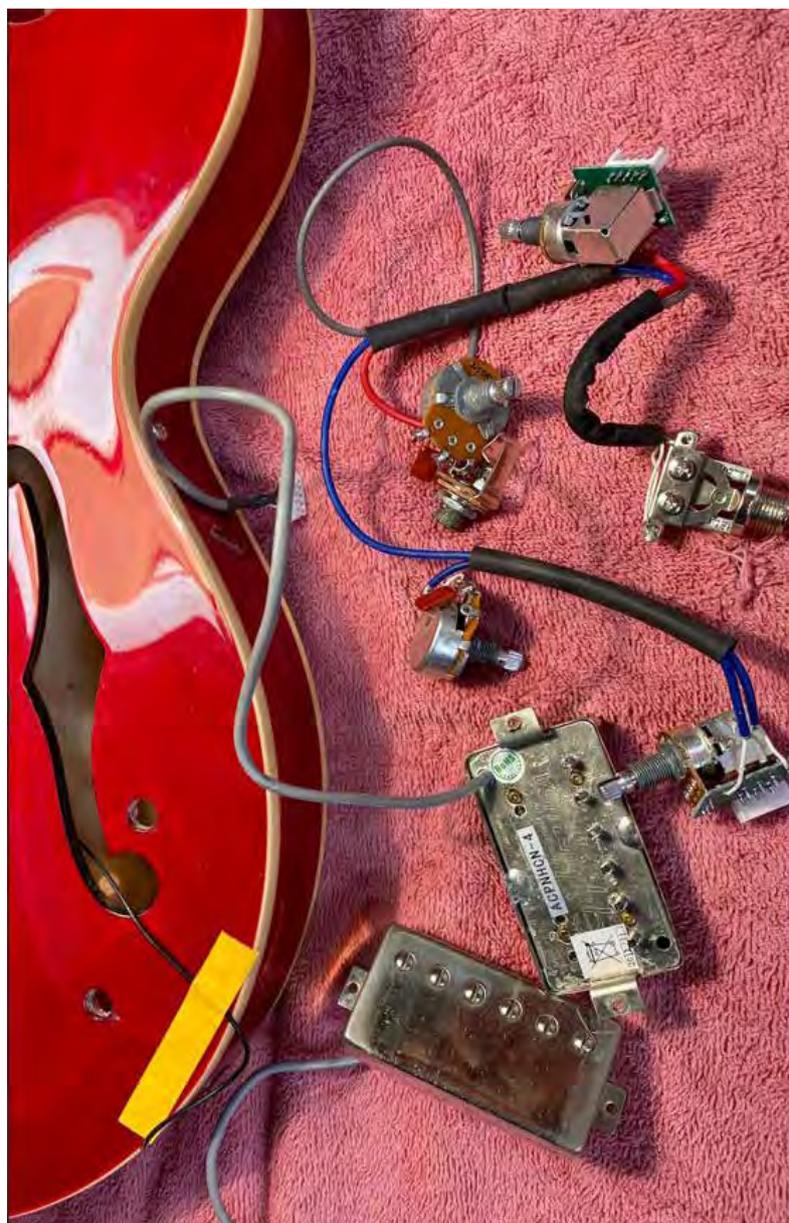
Do you think MaryAnn would have become so involved if you hadn't started building CBGs?

No, MaryAnn would never have become so involved if I hadn't started building CBGs and traveling the art fair circuit. For one thing, doing the art shows was not a one-person job. In fact, we virtually always had – in addition to MaryAnn and myself – a third helper during the shows just to keep up with the crowds. I simply could not have done it without her. As to the building, she definitely helped there too. Besides working the shows, she made all our bottleneck slides and miniature cigar box ornaments out of matchboxes, and helped me with repetitive tasks that were especially hard on my right hand like sawing fret slots, as well as helping with applying the 12–15 finish coats that went on every neck. Truth is, she was a huge support in more ways than I could count.

And will you still travel around together in summer selling CBGs?

No, our last shows were during the fall preceding the pandemic lockdowns. The bottom line is that, for two years, 2020 and 2021, all the festivals were canceled and, by the time they finally reopened last year, I guess we were past it, with health issues and such. Besides, with the art festivals canceled and all that time off, I just got involved doing other things, especially winding pickups and building traditional electric guitars. Nothing new for me, of course. It's just that over the last few years they have become the main things I'm doing. Well, actually, the pickups are the main thing. I basically build the guitars to have somewhere to show off the pickups.

The funny thing is I doubt I'd be doing this if it weren't for the cigar boxes. Spending all those years trying to get the





best possible sound out of instruments built from used cigar boxes taught me that, when it came to electric guitars, sound was really all about the pickups. I found that with the right pickup I could make anything sound good. And so the pickups themselves became my focus. This does not mean I've quit building cigar box instruments altogether, just that I'm now building a lot more traditional electric guitars and fewer CBGs.

Tell us about some of the artists playing your CBGs...

Another thing that happened at that first show in Middleton was that we met up with Aaron Williams and the Hoodoo, who won Blues Artist of the Year at the

WAMI awards in 2012. Both Aaron, the guitarist in the band, and "Z," the bassist, eventually purchased a number of my CBGs, and along the way became good friends. There are a couple videos on my website of them performing on a local TV station. I believe there's also a clip of Aaron playing "Tin Man," a guitar I built for him out of a Lonestar turpentine can.

There's Cathy Grier, of course, and Jim Ohlschmidt, a wonderful finger-style guitarist and a fixture in the Wisconsin music scene. He did the acoustic guitar playing on the radio show "A Prairie Home Companion" for several years, and has more than a dozen albums to his credit, four of them devoted to the

music of Mississippi John Hurt. I have a clip posted on my website of him finger-picking one of his Rose CBGs shot by PBS television. He also toured with WC Clark for several summers. Bassist Tony Menzer is also someone who's played with just about every major blues artist you can think of. He has owned a pile of my basses, both cigar box and traditional.

Steve Smith, a regular at Steel Bridge and the owner of a recording studio in Illinois has been tearing it up for years on the five-string fretless cigar box bass I built for him. Nate Lupi, a young guitarist who's based in Nashville now, and who was competing at the International Blues Challenge in Memphis this January started with one of my CBGs he'd found on my website, then this past year purchased one of my traditional models, a "Flat Strat" with triple Firebird pickups.

One of my favorite customers and good friend was the late Chris Aaron, who put out several great albums with Corey Sterling (from "Ledbetter Heights") on vocals. Check out "Freedom 5 Miles" sometime! Roger Adler is another one. If you've ever seen the Bill Murray movie "Groundhog Day," Roger is the guitarist/bandleader in the big scene at the end of the film. He was the music director on the film, as he was on numerous movies and TV shows. He also owned a couple recording studios in the Chicago area and was in demand as a session player for decades.

One more artist gone too soon was Gary Shaw, one of the best, and best-known guitarists in Wisconsin for nearly 50 years. Besides playing in many popular bands, Gary ran the guitar department at Northeast Wisconsin's largest music store for more than 30 years and influenced generations of guitar players in this area.



Aaron Williams and the Hoodoo



Cathy Grier



Jim Ohlschmidt



Tony Menzer



Steve Smith



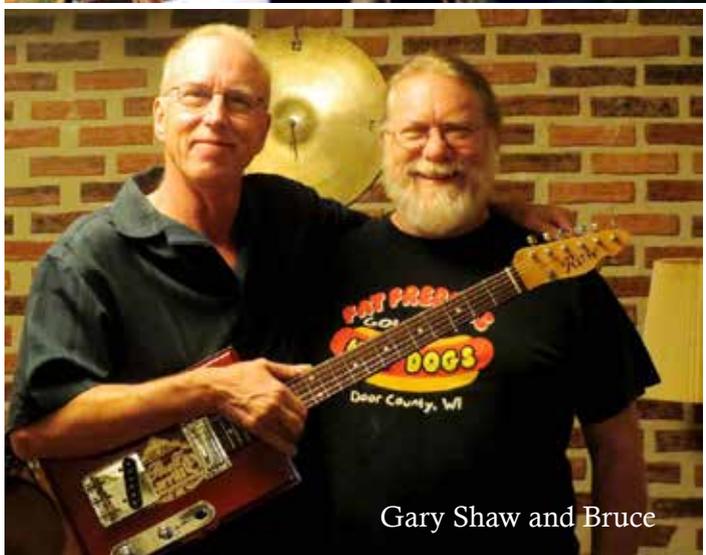
Nate Lupi



Chris Aaron and Tom Sobel



Roger Adler



Gary Shaw and Bruce



Danny Jerabek



He also not only owned and performed with a number of my instruments himself, but he also sold quite a few for me as well.

Danny Jerabek of *Copper Box* – a true Wisconsin treasure – plays one of my traditional basses, but also picks up one of my four-string models in every show. More than once Danny’s credited my little four-string CBG for saving his life during the pandemic...and his wife and bandmate Michelle agrees!

Another of my favorite players, and a close friend of Pat MacDonald, is Eric McFadden. Eric toured for years with both George Clinton and The Animals’ Eric Burdon, as well as New Orleans favorites Anders Osborne and Tab Benoit. He’s also performed and recorded with Pat MacDonald as the *Sons Of Crack Daniels*. There are others, of course. Pauli Ryan, percussionist extraordinaire who has recorded and toured with Garbage, Phat Phunktion, The Jayhawks, Son Volt, Leo Sidran, and many others. Chris Duarte is another player you’ll find on my website, Frank Childress – I wish we could list them all here...☺



Which CBGs have you kept for yourself?

One six-string nicknamed “The Count” by my friend Jim Ohlschmidt who has used this model himself performing with both WC Clark and Cathy Grier among others. It’s called The Count because it’s made by Monte Cristo. It looks more like a laptop than a cigar box, but with all those rounded edges and corners it’s easily the most comfortable CBG I’ve played. Like all my six-strings, there’s a large block of T6 – aircraft aluminum – running the entire inside length of the box, which both the neck and bridge are bolted through.

The “slab” not only adds strength and weight (which helps with the balance), but also acts as a giant sustain block. Another CBG I’ve held onto is a four-string made from a Las Cabrillas box, like the one Cathy Grier plays – and Jim Ohlschmidt and Danny Jerabek and many more. This has been one of my most popular models for years. Last but not least, I’ve also hung onto a fretless three-string built with a beautiful vintage cedar Primo Del Rey cigar box.

And have you sold many overseas?

I occasionally listed instruments on my website or Reverb.com, and over the years shipped instruments all over Europe and the Far East, but otherwise never made much effort to market them beyond the Wisconsin art festivals. The truth is, right from the start, I was selling everything I could make. ☺

So just to recap, what are some of the most memorable times you've had along the way?

Well I guess when we were accepted into our first big fine art festival in Madison and then won "Best New Artist," when we were the subjects of a Public TV episode of Wisconsin Life; when I saw Chris Aaron onstage for the first time with one of my cigar box guitars; when Gary Shaw posted a pic of his current "go to" guitar with the caption "Thank you Bruce Lee Rose – best guitar in my stable;" when interviewed by a local TV station during an art show in Green Bay and the reporter got so into it she started dancing and jamming with me on air with a cigar box thumb piano ☺; but the nicest thing by far has been all the people we've met and all the friends we've made! ♦

<https://www.roseinstruments.com>
<https://www.facebook.com/bruce.l.rose>



A cigar box thumb piano with a piezo pickup made from an Arturo Fuente Short Story box



Aaron Williams with "Tin Man"

More great music

Misty Blues – “Outside The Lines”

Release date: 31 March 2023

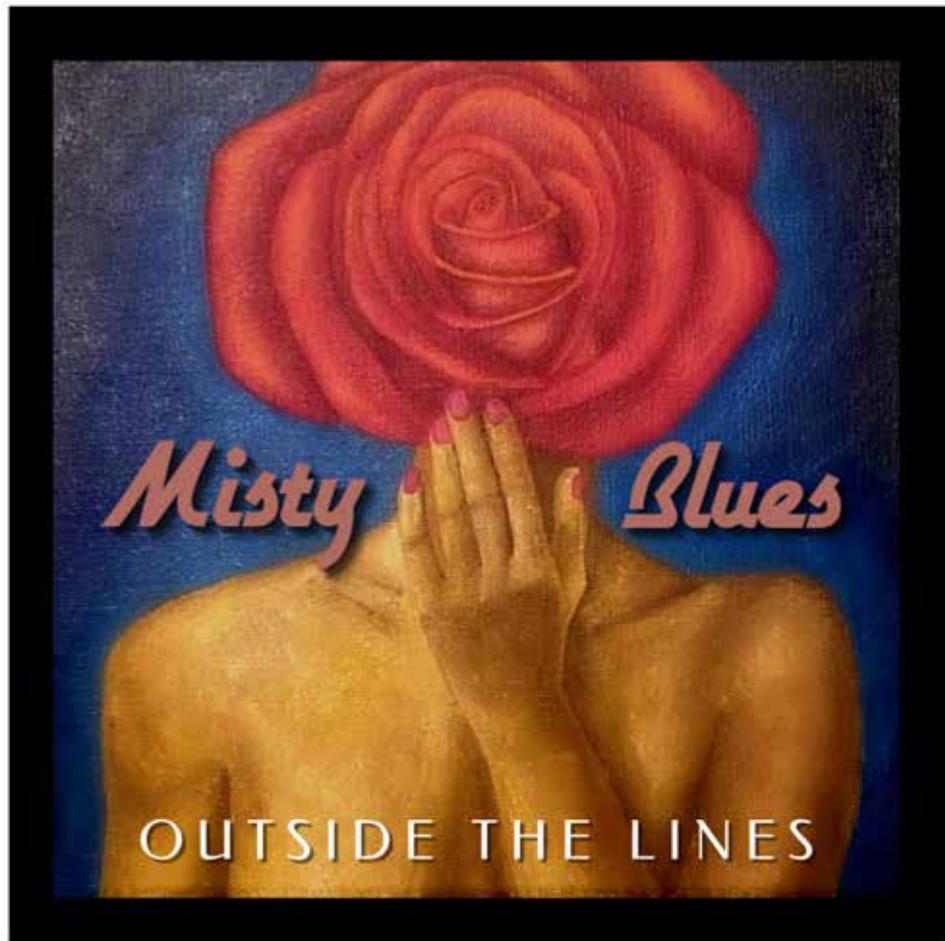
Misty Blues is a powerhouse of a band that straddles blues, gospel, funk and everything in between. The newest release, *Outside The Lines* captures the sound of this spectacularly unique band perfectly on their 12th release. Although the band is always deeply rooted in the blues it is tough to say it's a blues album in the traditional sense.

One of the things I like about this band the most is their ability to gracefully walk the fine line that divides so many subgenres of roots music... This album is such a unique set of music that goes from whispers to screams, using all the colors to paint a vivid picture of a band that can churn out some serious blues and roots music. The eleven songs are very diverse, taking unexpected twists and turns that leave the listener wondering what will be around the next corner, but still always sounding just like Misty Blues.

– Global Blues

<https://www.globalbluesradio.com/post/misty-blues-outside-the-lines-review>

www.mistybluesband.com



When Rivers Meet – “Aces Are High”

Release date: 31 March 2023



Award-winning blues rock duo *When Rivers Meet* have announced the release of their third album “Aces Are High” out late summer and available to pre-order now.

The pair lay their first hand from the new record with the scorching lead single ‘Play My Game’, a groove-laden, driving blues track with rich riffs and searing vocals... *Aces Are High* finds the duo returning with a more powerful sound than ever before. Aaron’s gnarled riffs hit harder alongside his deep vocal tones, while Grace’s vocals range wider with tantalising bite as they effortlessly climb scales like her striking slide mandolin

which accompanies the likes of ‘Trail To Avalon’...The immediacy of the new record is showcased from the off with the hard-hitting opener ‘Infected’, while no punches are pulled on the kick-out-time anthem ‘5 Minutes Until Midnight’. Nevertheless its contrasting sides find delicate moments such as the reflective acoustic song ‘Golden’ and the shimmering Americana of ‘By Your Side’.
– Maximum Volume Music

<https://maximumvolumemusic.com/ace-new-when-rivers-meet/>
<https://whenriversmeet.co.uk>

Contributors

Cathy Grier has been a professional musician since 1978. She has opened for Laura Nyro, The Band, Dave Mason and Joan Armatrading. She gigged the Key West island life in the 80's and won an MTV Basement Tape award in 1986. She wrote hit songs in France in the 90's before returning to the USA, where she was a New York City busker from 1999 to 2015. She now resides in Sturgeon Bay, WI. Cathy has always believed that the Blues is a feeling, and a way of expressing life through music.



Boris Mattler is a graphic designer in Germany, who, together with long-time friend, Wolfgang Reibl, launched “3Saiter” brand in 2022 to create and market handmade three-string guitars. He manages 3Saiter’s social media channels and public relations, and takes part in the design of the guitars, while Wolfgang concentrates entirely on the handcrafted construction of the guitars. “3Saiter” is especially known for its Mercedes hubcap guitars and high-quality acoustic guitars.



Brett Gardner is a guitarist and creative reuse artist living in New Orleans, USA who specializes in performing on musical instruments created from repurposed materials. Brett grew up in Tampa, Florida where he studied classical guitar and physics in school. After graduating, he founded the Trashtronauts, a group focused on building and playing homemade instruments. Brett currently performs professionally with several bands including his own band, the *Cigar Box Serenaders*.



Phil Bye a.k.a. *The PHillbilly* is a UK-based musician with a wide-ranging taste in music who has thrown himself into the world of cigar box music. Like others in the CBG community, Phil loves the creative side of DIY music from building and playing guitars and suitcase drums to organizing gigs and events for CBG fans. His latest venture is his “Dirty Skiffle Volume 1” album, which draws on the homemade instrument ethos of “skiffle” that originally inspired teenagers to start playing guitars in the UK.



Contributors, cont.

Bruce Lee Rose has spent years building and repairing stringed instruments of all kinds. Along the way, he has appeared in magazines, newspapers, TV shows and won many ribbons and awards at fine art festivals for his cigar box guitars, which have shown up regularly on stages throughout the USA, Europe and even the Far East. Bruce places great store in the performance and playability of his instruments as, in his words, they are “works of art meant to be put to work.”



Ross Hewitt a.k.a. Huey Ross was born in Australia in 1953 on BB King’s birthday – the same year that color TVs and transistor radios appeared for sale in stores and the first James Bond novel was published. Over the years he has worked as a tennis teacher, journalist, translator, editor and graphic designer, and now lives in a village in Switzerland. He enjoys building and playing cigar box guitars, as well as editing and contributing to CBG Review.



Back issues of CBG Review

⇒ www.cbgreview.com/back-issues



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