

# CBQ Review

January 2019

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# Editorial

## Individuality and originality...

Welcome to the January 2019 issue of CBG Review. This edition starts off in the UK with the first three contributions from singer/songwriter/surfer James Dixon, design expert Paul Atkinson, and builder Jeff Sacree. Read how James fell into the CBG world by happy coincidence and how cigar box guitars have helped him add more individuality and originality to his mixture of folk-blues music.

Paul Atkinson draws on his research to reveal how the CBG scene grew in the UK and how CBG builders can become so totally immersed and energized when they are “in the zone” that they forget everything around them and lose all track of time. Sound familiar?

Jeff Sacree has built guitars for James Dixon and many other UK musicians and tells us how the combination of woodwork, metalwork, acoustics, art and problem-solving, as well as finding things for alternative uses is what makes building CBGs so appealing.

When a friend called to see if she was interested in going to the Smokin’ Guitars CBG Festival in Germany, Cathy Mullaert couldn’t resist! Read about Cathy’s unforgettable time meeting up with players and builders in the German CBG community who capture the true spirit of the blues with their homemade instruments.

In Switzerland, Christophe Deshayes and the *Street Lemon* band are not only wowing audiences with their amazing home-grown instruments, but also playing a blend of retro-futuristic swing, rock and roll, neodisco and even a twist of opera in what they call “Bricoswing.” Once again, leave it to the Swiss!

Lastly, south of the border, Spanish group *Four Strings* are the only band in the country solely using cigar box guitars and other novel hand-crafted instruments to play their brand of “agrosureño” blues, southern rock, folk/country and sounds of the seventies. Read more in the interview with Manol Cano – viva España!

If we are talking about individuality and originality, then look no further! As always, read, enjoy and share with your friends...

Best regards

*Huey Ross*

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*And no...I don't  
play Reggae*

# Interview with James Dixon

*Bude, United Kingdom*

CBGR: James, you're a folk-blues artist influenced by all manner of blues and roots music artists...

James Dixon: Growing up, the first music I really connected with was Led Zeppelin, Queen, Jimi Hendrix and Neil Young. These artists gave me a strong grounding in music which had folk and blues traditions buried right in their core, but with a strong emphasis on the development of melody and character on top of the basic structure. From there it was natural for me to research the roots of these huge mainstream icons and that led me to find the Delta Blues artists of the early 20th century like Son House, Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters, the rhythm and blues artists like Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Jackie Wilson, folk music from both sides of the atlantic like Ralph McTell, Bert Jansch, Tom Paxton and Pete Seeger. My taste is eclectic, but I'd say the other most important music in my life is the grunge of Pearl Jam and Soundgarden, genre crossing rock of The Band, Radiohead and Little Feat and the solo artists who defy categorization like Chris Whitley, John Martyn and Michael Hedges.

But your music tends to be more on the folk side with all the ballads and powerful lyrics?

When I was 11, my Dad had the idea to buy me a guitar, harmonica and holder and the Neil Young "Unplugged" album music book. This album was probably the root of my overriding interest in the power of lyrics and the power behind emotion in a song rather than testosterone. One song in particular being "Stringman" from that album. I don't play the piano, but the raw emotion in that song that comes from one man and his instrument

singing about something, which is at the same time soaked in metaphor, but resolves itself with the literal description of a man in great pain. There are countless other examples I could describe, but that one was the first time I noticed the power of the ballad sung by a man on his own with no one to hide behind and it hit me like a sledge hammer. It encouraged me not to hide my emotions, which is something many men do far too often.

*"I always played in some form as a soloist, bands have come and gone"*

And all your songs are true stories?

Yep. I've tried to write in the third person or about things I've heard, but I struggle to find the natural expression that comes from lived experience. I've had some pretty awesome and terrible life experiences – some people bottle them up, some people write a diary for catharsis, some paint pictures or sculpt, I write songs. It helps to get stuff out of the old brain!

What made you decide to go solo with a guitar, foot tambourine and stomp box?

I always played in some form as a soloist, bands have come and gone. Trying to organize others to be somewhere at a particular time and place just to rehearse has always made my brain hurt and I suppose I haven't found other musicians that really make the effort worthwhile as yet. The stomp and tambourine

came much later. The thing about about the stomp is that it's the best cure for an apathetic audience. Just providing a beat over the top of vocals and guitar can blackmail the brains of those audience members who aren't already paying attention into taking notice and tapping their own feet. The tambourine adds flavor to the rhythm and effectively allows me to DJ my music – bringing in drops, really satisfying instrumental breaks and even an occasional leg-shake tambourine finish, which is always pretty strange to watch. It's all a cheat to get people interested in what's happening in front of them, whether it's busking on the street or at a paid gig.

*You came back in 2017 from travelling around the world. Has solo performing been good to you?*

When I got back the first time in 2016, I had been away as a result of completely rejecting the very straight life I was living. I had a degree in Chemistry and had gone into a start-up business that had completely dominated my life, creativity and ambition for five years. I wouldn't trade it for anything as it showed me why it's worth doing what I'm doing now. So I quit and left the country, and when I got back from a bit of time bumming around on beaches and surfing, I realized that I had just busked and gigged in all the places I had been to a great response and that I already had the kit I needed at home to go out and get gigs. So I set about getting some and within two weeks I had a pretty full calendar. I played hard for about four months, then went back to New Zealand with my partner Lotte, and then came back in 2017 and haven't stopped gigging since then. As a soloist you get to make all the decisions and keep all the cash, so I'm extremely lucky to be fully supporting myself from gigging in the UK right now. Long may it continue ☺.



What did you learn from the trip?

The trips away taught me primarily that you should never be nervous in a town where it seems everyone is amazing at music. All anyone really cares about in music is that they witness something real, whether its heartfelt emotion in the playing or that you are pushing yourself to the edge of what you are capable of doing. There is always someone better than you – always a better songwriter, technician, better looking, harder drinking, more successful – but that really doesn't matter. Music is not a competition with others, despite what the mainstream would have you believe. Just make sure there is truth and character in what you do.

Do people often compare you to John Martyn?

You know, John Martyn is my hero, so that's a weird one to answer. The biggest compliment I've had in my life was from a Scottish couple in Australia who said after the gig that I was "channeling the spirit of John Martyn" – and I hadn't even played his songs or mentioned him during the show – so that was something I suppose. I have had many comparisons to him before, but I don't think it's through a similar sound, rather my approach. The thing with John Martyn was that he didn't stick in a musical box and if you came to see a gig you were open to whatever he was giving you – whether it was folk, avante garde fusion, blues,



jazz, reggae influence, soul, rock; whether he was heartbroken, ecstatic, high, drunk, angry, calm – it didn't matter, you went to hear *John* play. And what you heard was his soul coming out of him, and that is what I try to emulate – not the sound, but the approach – I want people to come away from a gig feeling like they have seen something real.

### Who else do people compare you to?

Someone said Robert Plant once on account of my hair (if you squint your eyes), but other than that I've had the obvious comparisons with the Aussie dreadlock fingerstyle players like John Butler, Ash Grunwald, etc., and always the ever-present Newton Faulkner. Others have been Luke Kelly, Stephen Stills and Martin Simpson. But most people are left scratching their heads thinking "what the f--- was Dougal from the magic roundabout doing playing a square guitar with a tambourine gaffer taped to an old sock?" ...and I like it that way!

### What do you mean when you say the "show" is more important than the "single"?

The way you play a show and connect with an audience is the most important thing. Anyone can make a record now, its everywhere and easy to do, but if you can't hold an audience's attention for two hours, then what's the point in recording in the first place? For me, at least, I would be uncomfortable promoting one song as a single over one of my live shows as the most important thing to listen to. People have been playing shows to each other on acoustic instruments for thousands of years – recording is new and exciting, but it can never trump a show .

### Do you own an electric guitar?

Yeah a couple. I've had a bunch over the years, but my baby is an early 2000s Highway One Telecaster, blonde with a black scratch plate. I love Teles – just a plain block of wood with stuff on it gives you a perfect platform to add your own character to it.

### What about a 12-string guitar or banjo like John Butler?

I had a 12-string – converted to 11 just like JB – I was obsessed with the guy for years and nearly fell into the trap of impersonation, but left that behind. The 12/11 string won't make appearances, not until I've found something new to do with it. And yeah I've played 5-string banjo for years – its having a Sixtus Flatup fitted soon, so it will be seen at some gigs for sure. I love bluegrass and Grandfather Clock is just the most beautiful tune to play.

*"I haven't found anything which allows you to add your own character to music like a six-string cigar box guitar"*

### What's the difference between your acoustic guitar and your six-string box guitar?

I suppose my main Box "The Weight" is more of an electric guitar in terms of approach. It's far better suited to fingerstyle and picking out melodies with a slide. It has a high action, acoustic neck and heavy strings, but the Sixtus flatpup really sings and allows me to really dig into the rhythm of a track. It's the most amazing instrument I have ever played, bar none, and has totally changed my life.

### The box guitar changes your style and the type of songs you write?

I've been teaching guitar to big groups recently and the way I teach my approach to music goes like this. There are three layers, pattern, groove and character. The pattern comes first – it's the chord shapes, scales, basic chord progressions, etc. They're



all patterns that need to be learned – humans are good at patterns. Next is the groove – once you have the patterns, you then lay them down with a rhythm which *if* you are naturally gifted will become a groove, a flow which brings the listeners inside the pattern and you all move together. Once those two are sorted, all that is left is for you to add your own character on top of it, not someone else's. Out of all the instruments I have played, I haven't found anything which allows you to add your own character to music like a six-string cigar box guitar. The scope for individuality and originality on one of these things is huge. It's helped me express myself over my influences in a way that I couldn't really explain any more. Like Chris Whitley said of a banjo, I think it's the most existential of the stringed instruments.

### *How many CBGs do you have?*

I have three: one true cigar box, which is a beautiful three-string with a skeleton cowboy on the back; my six-string "the Weight" (it has the lyrics to The Weight by *The Band* hand-written on the back), which is made of an old drawer from a post office; and the Weight's big sister "The Mistress," which is a great example of Jeff's work at Dirtbox Guitars, really thinking outside the box. It's an old Kay acoustic with an extension on the topside that allows me to rest my arm on it when I'm playing and also to house an all important hipflask in the body of the guitar for the gigs which need a little extra. Jeff supplies me with all kinds of other ones if I fancy a change sometimes – there are hub caps, bike seats, suitcases, walking sticks, pewter baths, skateboards,

banjolas, ammo cases...you name it, which have between one and six strings and which all have their own character and sounds. The possibilities are endless.

There is also a third sister to the Weight and the Mistress called “the Waitress,” which belongs to my best mate Chris. There is a video of me playing amazing grace on her on Jeff’s facebook page. They make an important family of instruments in my life and we will be making a short film about them in 2019.

*“I never decided to play cigar boxes deliberately, I fell into it by happy coincidence...”*

*And where do you see the future of CBGs in the music industry?*

I never decided to play cigar boxes deliberately, I fell into it by happy coincidence from surfing with Jeff and getting invited to try them out. So, with no prior knowledge and actually very little knowledge of the history and traditions behind them, I would say that I think its a bizarre state of affairs. I assume the concept of CBGs is that they are the instrument of the disenfranchised – those so on the fringes they can’t access even a banjo, resonator or acoustic and are forced to improvise. I like this idea. That continues to grow with makers like Jeff and others who are crafting one-of-a-kind instruments dripping in character and craftsmanship. You see people like Jack Bessant in the UK from Reef using them on new recordings, which is awesome. But I find it baffling that there’s a market for mass-produced



CBGs that you find in guitar shops now, where someone in China has cobbled together something out of a fake castrol can with shit pickups and a really bad neck, and think that somehow this represents the first thing about the nature of the instrument. I suppose that's the way the world works, but I hate it.

When you're not writing or performing, you're surfing or picking up bits of plastic along the beaches at Bude?

Yeah, I live in a beach community in Bude, UK and the problem of waste plastic washing up on our beaches is horrifying and isn't going away. On the new album we have used plastic collected on the beach to create a sample drum track for my song "pick it up," which is written for the cause. It's a bandwagon for sure, but one worth jumping on. There are movements afoot in our group to create CBGs out of this waste now as well, so watch this space.

You wrote "Dancing on the Water" while sitting on a surfboard...

Yeah, it's a song I wrote for my grandparents who died recently within a month of each other. The circumstances were truly tragic and it left me in shock. The most amazing thing about it was that I actually got to play my Grandad out at the moment he died. I played Amazing Grace to him while he was in his final moments, so I know that he had music ringing in his ears as he passed. It's something I am truly privileged to have been a part of, but is a strange thing to live with. So one day I was sitting on my surfboard in the Autumn sunshine trying to make sense of it all and noticed that the sunlight was dancing on the water in the same way that surfers do. It hit me that when loved ones die their soul has to go somewhere and they appeared to me in that moment and that's where the song came from. Finding meaning in the tragedy of life and expressing that through songs is the only way I know how to deal with things. Hopefully that comes across in the song.

Is it just coincidence that you played gigs in Arrowtown (New Zealand), Byron Bay (Australia) and Cangguu (Bali)?

Yeah, my travels brought me to those awesome places by happy coincidence and I ended up playing some memorable gigs there and meeting some great people. In Arrowtown I met an English drummer called Smartos (he was a great player), in Byron Bay I met one of the greatest musicians I've ever seen called Luke Ferguson of *Fergo and the Burden*, and in Bali I ended up playing the Deus Temple a few times, which blew my mind – what a venue! I hope to be able to return to these places and repeat the experiences.

Tell us a bit about your "Bromeliad Acoustic Sessions" EP...

Bromeliad is a reference to the passing of the great Terry Pratchett. The story behind that is probably too detailed to go into, but essentially it's about realizing that the world is full of experiences totally alien to you and that you can go through your whole life with no knowledge of the world around you. Once I opened my life to these new experiences, my five years of writer's block lifted and all those songs came out. The recording is deliberately basic: one mic, one guitar and one take, just playing the songs exactly as they were written with very little effort in the production value. I think it nicely represents exactly where I was at the time and I'm proud of the material on there, and I'm looking forward to showing what I've been working on more recently.

So when can we expect your debut album?

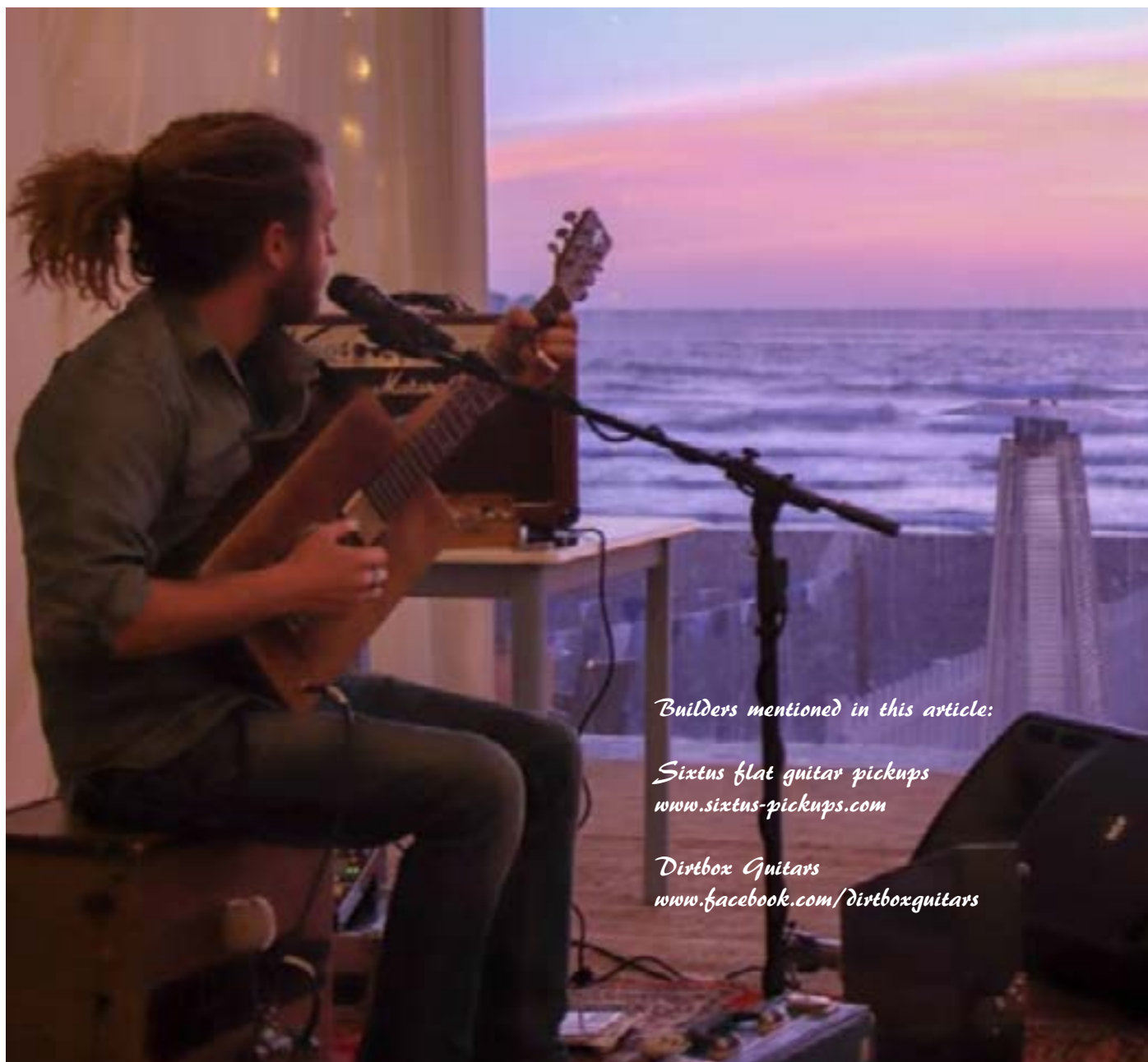
We're recording at the moment and just taking it as it comes. The producer I'm working with is amazing and is teaching me a lot about the process. I have no idea what will come out, but I think the 13 or 14 songs are strong and I'm enjoying the process of creating in a studio environment....totally different to playing

live and I'm excited to see what happens. I imagine we will be doing a launch of it in early summer 2019 and I'm hoping to get some great musicians to play on the record with me.

*And what else is on the agenda in 2019?*

I'd like to visit the states, particularly Seattle and Mississippi, to see how the real slide players do their thing. Also I have a couple of collaborations in the offing, hoping to make a blues duo with my boy Jake Landers from the *Big Sets* in the UK – the best band out there in the blues scene in my view. There's some

amazing folk music in the southwest peninsula of the UK and I'm hoping to connect more with that, but because I don't stick in one box I'm not sure the folk or blues scene here would really know what to with me. I'm booking gigs right up to the end of 2019 and would love to play anywhere that will have me. So if anyone is interested in booking me, get in touch – its all me, I don't have a manager or agent, I just like to manage myself and connect directly with anyone who is a fan of what I'm doing – so find my facebook page and say howdy. ☺ ■



*Builders mentioned in this article:*

*Sixtus flat guitar pickups*  
[www.sixtus-pickups.com](http://www.sixtus-pickups.com)

*Dirtbox Guitars*  
[www.facebook.com/dirtboxguitars](https://www.facebook.com/dirtboxguitars)

*On the zone...*



*Photo: Paul Hazell*

*by Paul Atkinson, Sheffield, United Kingdom*

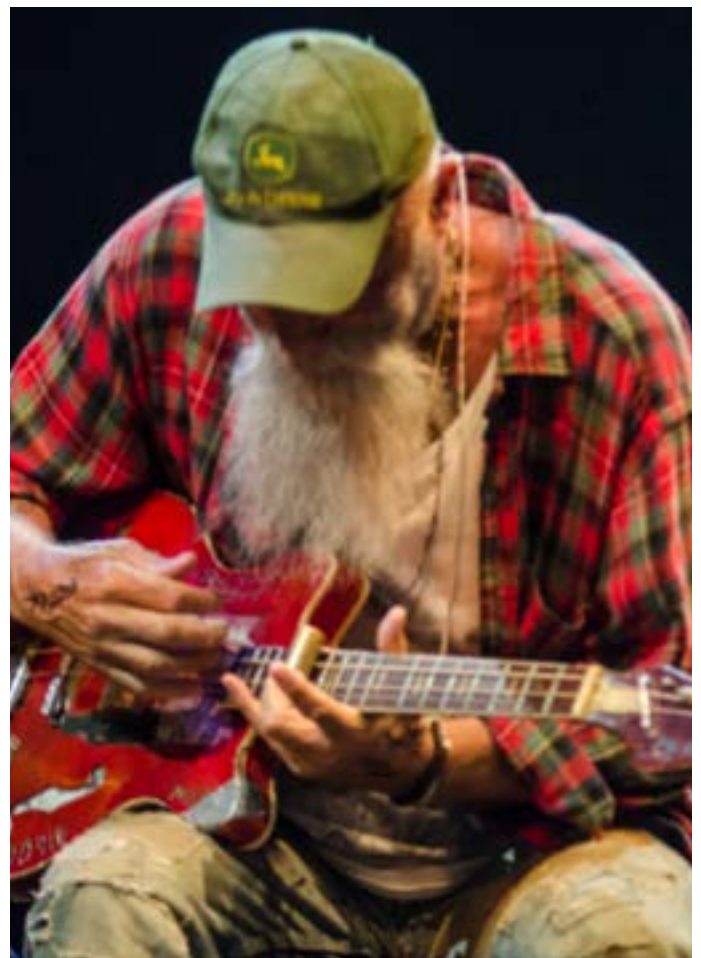
*On December 31, 2006, BBC 2 television broadcast the fourteenth annual Jools Holland's Hootenanny to welcome in the New Year (BBC 2 2006). A large studio audience watched as a variety of well-known, glamorously dressed stars graced the multiple stages: among them Amy Winehouse, Paul Weller, the Zutons, 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...*

*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.*

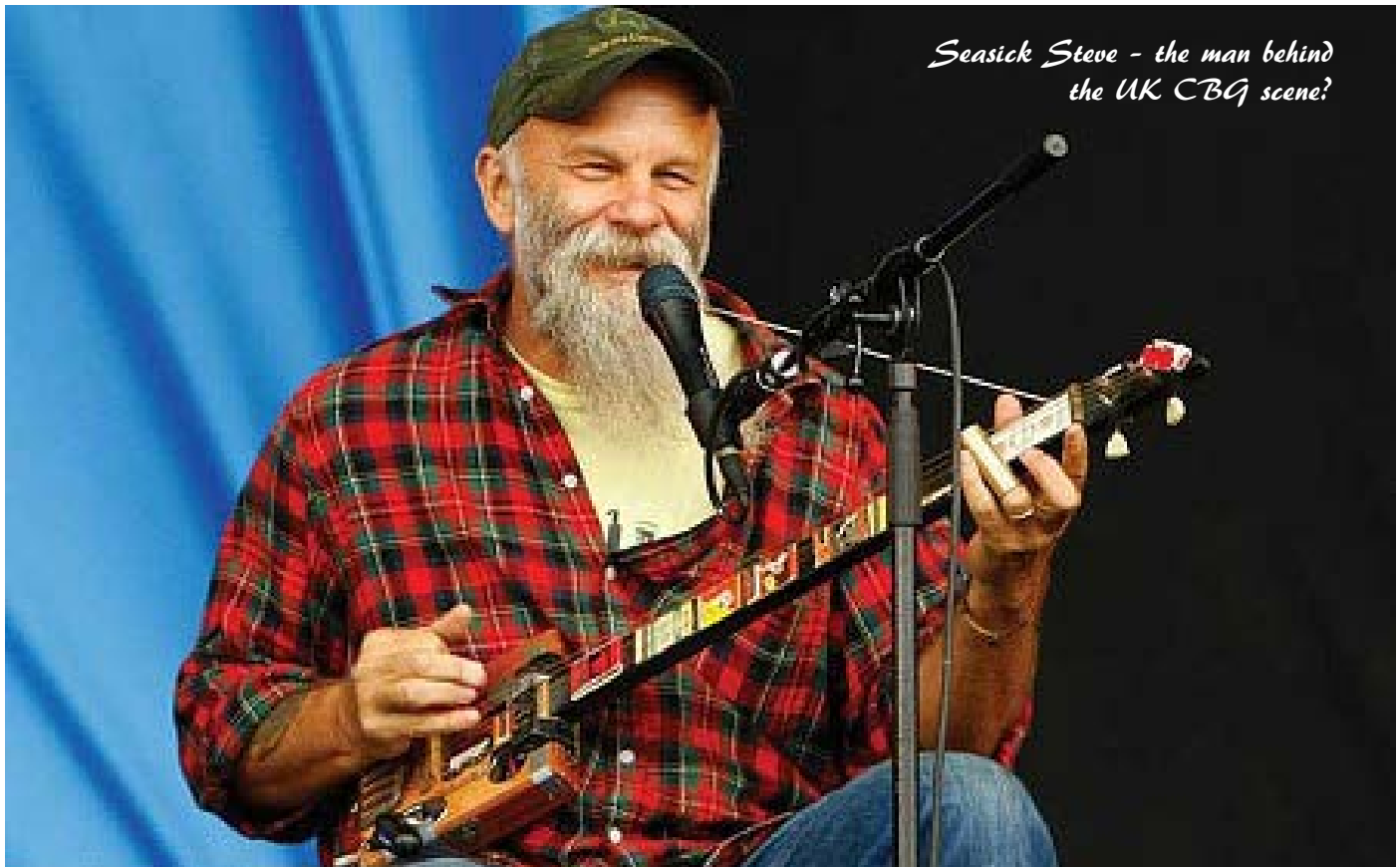
*Over the course of the next few years, Seasick Steve released major-label CDs, performed live at numerous festivals, and appeared widely on national television drawing music out of a variety of homemade instruments including basic, one-string "diddly bows," cigar box guitars, and hub-cap banjos. His 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.<sup>1</sup>*

As an academic design historian, my job is to research and analyse the relationships between people and the objects they own, and then write articles and books about them. It is indeed a great job. For example, for the last three years, I've been researching and writing a book on the design history of the electric guitar, which has now finally been sent to the publisher. It took a lot longer than I thought it would, but then I did get distracted along the way. You may well ask "what was the cause of this distraction?" The cigar box guitar, that's what.

The distraction began while I was giving a research seminar to other staff and research students, describing my progress to date on the electric guitar book. One of the PhD students asked if I had thought about interviewing



1. Extract from Paul Atkinson (2018) *Hairy Guys in Sheds: The Rough and Ready World of DIY Cigar Box Guitar Makers, Design and Culture*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17547075.2018.146772467724>



people who made their own guitars. I said I hadn't, but thought "What a good idea." I had done a lot of work on the history of the DIY movement before, and had written articles about how the boundaries between professional design and amateur design have become blurred in recent years, as the barriers to entry have been eroded with the introduction of new technologies (such as 3D printing).

I found a luthier fairly local to me who made acoustic and electric guitars, but it didn't really seem to fit with the story I was telling in the book. Then I remembered seeing Nig Richards, a musician from Manchester, play at one of my local open mic nights. He made his own guitars out of cigar boxes, broom handles and even a toilet seat! I managed to track him down and interviewed him. This was really interesting. He knew a fair bit about the history of the cigar box guitar and indicated that there were lots of people that did similar things, but he wasn't in contact with them personally. I started asking around and I came across Woofie, a guy that

makes tin can guitars under the brand name 'Spatchcock and Wurzell' in North Yorkshire. I travelled up to his workshop and interviewed him, and he put me in touch with a guy called Rob in Wigan that made cigar box guitars under the name 'Treadstone Guitars'. As usual with this type of research, serendipity started to play a big part.

I visited a guitar show in the North-East of England as part of the research for my book, and there was a stall manned by Nick Barney, selling cigar box guitars he had made. He was from the Midlands, and had got into making cigar box guitars after seeing Chickenbone John, who ran workshops showing people how to make them. Before long, I had unearthed a whole movement that was going on across the country, but about which I had been completely unaware. I was getting drawn in. I was taken by the passion all of these makers displayed about the instruments they made, and the love they had for playing them. And they sounded great! I really wanted to get involved.

My first instrument was a simple diddly bow that I made at a workshop at my local folk festival. It was great fun, but a bit limited for me in terms of what I could play on it. It was clear though, that this scene was something really worth writing about, and not as part of my book, but in its own right. So, I carried on tracking makers down and interviewing them and wrote an article about them for the journal "Design and Culture." I had obviously become aware of Shane Speal and the *Cigar Box Nation* website, and through that, how big the movement was in the USA. My article, though, was about how that movement had taken root in the UK, and how it differs from the scene in America. The introduction to the article, *Hairy Guys in Sheds*, (see text box) described Seasick Steve's first appearance on television, and the impact he had had on the public awareness of cigar box guitars in the UK.

The main findings from the article were that this particular form of DIY perhaps uniquely involves the making of an object and then performing with it. Some make just for themselves, others as a business. Some play publicly only to sell their guitars; others live for live performance. This brings with it the self-perception of the participants as being somewhere along a spectrum between "amateur," "semi-professional" and "professional" as both a maker of cigar box guitars and as a performing musician. It is possible to be an amateur maker and a professional player, or a professional maker and an amateur player or anywhere in between.

*"Before long, I had unearthed a whole movement that was going on across the country"*



*Woofie stringing a tin can banjo  
Photo: Scott Dulson*



*Chickenbone John in the workshop  
Photo: Scott Dutton*

One of the main motivations for the makers was centred around the search for an element of authenticity. They were all well aware of the instrument's roots and the fact that the old blues players they listened to had mostly started their careers on such guitars. Consequently, there was a reaction to the rampant consumerism that produced factory made guitars at excessively high prices that were devoid of any romance of the hand-made. There was also the allure of the real – the joy to be had from tinkering with something physical when so much of our lives are focused on the immaterial digital world (although, of course, they all relied on the Internet to find out how to solve a making problem or to sell their work!).

One aspect that all the makers noted, though, was the fluid nature of time when involved in the process of making cigar box

guitars. Makers would enter their sheds or workshops in the morning and then get a text from their wives or partners asking if they knew what time it was and were they planning on coming in for a meal at any point. They would step outside and see it was dark and realize that they had been so “in the zone” that the whole day had just slipped by. If this sounds familiar (and I’m sure it does to many of you), it is because of a concept called “flow.”

*“...where everyday concerns such as time, food and even the self (ego) are displaced and ignored”*

The academic Andrew Jackson discusses this phenomenon in relation to DIY as “a form of pleasure resulting from a merging of action and experience.” (Jackson 2011, 267). As Jackson notes, the term “flow” in this context stems from the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who wrote numerous books on the subject. In one of his best-known works, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Csikszentmihalyi outlines his theory that when people are fully engaged and completely occupied while concentrating on an activity, nothing else seems to matter. The positive feelings of fulfilment generated by such absorption even leads to a state of “flow” where everyday concerns such as time, food and even the self (ego) are displaced and ignored.

When I had finished the article and submitted it, I discussed it with a colleague at work, who is a film maker. “That sounds like a great idea for a film” she said. And so, we applied for some money to cover the costs of making a short documentary film, and got to work. We revisited many of the makers I had

already interviewed and filmed them making their guitars and talking about their motivations for doing it. We attended *Boxstock*, the cigar box guitar festival in Wolverhampton organized by Chickenbone John himself, and filmed the stallholders, visiting public and performers there. As I write, the film, provisionally titled “Three Chords and the Truth” after the song by the cigar box guitar player Hollowbelly, is in the final stages of editing, before being presented to film festivals next year.

*“When I play the cigar box guitar, I seem to come alive somehow...”*

The day after filming *Boxstock*, I went to one of the workshops run by Chickenbone John, where he teaches people to make a cigar box guitar in a day. I made mine, and proudly



*Dusk Brothers at Boxstock  
Photo: Paul Atkinson*

took it home and played it to my wife. I've played guitar since being a teenager, but my wife Sandra said that when I play the cigar box guitar, I seem to come alive somehow, in a way that I don't when playing other instruments. I now perform with the cigar box guitar at open mic nights and small concerts, usually accompanied by my wife on washboard! It seems to go down very well, and I certainly enjoy it. I have to make another guitar or two, though. I've acquired numerous cigar boxes and even an old hubcap to make a hubcap banjo. I just need to get in the workshop and get in the zone. And so it begins... ■

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Jackson, Andrew. (2011) "Men Who Make – The 'Flow' of the Amateur Designer/Maker." In Buszek, Maria ed. *Extra/Ordinary: Craft Culture and Contemporary Art*. North Carolina: Duke University Press.



*Chickenbone John  
and Hollowbelly  
Photo: Scott Dulson*

*Builders mentioned in this article:*

*Spatchcock and Wurzell  
[www.spatchcockandwurzell.com](http://www.spatchcockandwurzell.com)*

*Treadstone Guitars  
[www.treadstoneguitars.com](http://www.treadstoneguitars.com)*

*Barney Cigar Box Guitars  
[www.cigarboxguitar.me.uk](http://www.cigarboxguitar.me.uk)*

*Chickenbone John  
[www.chickenbonejohn.com](http://www.chickenbonejohn.com)*

# *Dirtbox Guitars:* *Recycle, reuse, rejoice*



## Jeff Sacree, Bude, U.K.

*“Cornwall’s Dirtbox Guitars have sought to continue a tradition of using what’s readily available to hand – be it in a skip, an attic or washed up on a beach – and turn it into a playable guitar of limited strings but brimming with the soul and satisfaction that comes from recycling something otherwise rendered useless into a fully working, good-looking musical instrument” – hickorynines.com*

I always had a love for guitars, but struggled with the ability to play them! Then one time we were visiting my eldest son in Australia and cruising through a craft fair north of Melbourne. A guy had what looked like sticks in boxes with strings attached – either three or four strings but not conventional at all – and I was fascinated by the look. I figured three strings had to be easier than six and on impulse bought one. I played it for about

a year and looking at it one day realized I should be able to make one using stuff out in the garage plus some strings and tuners. My first attempt came out ok, not amazing, but it played and sounded alright and a local musician friend called Stu asked if I wanted to sell it. So I did and set about making another one. Four years later, I am currently assembling # 126!

My guitars are mostly commissions and some are gifted to people I think might want to have one. Since cigar boxes are not easy finds in the UK and EBay can be expensive, I began looking for alternatives such as slide boxes, art boxes, trays, draws – anything that has had a rough used life is what I prefer. The ones that are covered in grease, grime and paint and lived in a tool shed or garage are the best for me and the necks are made from old oak flooring off-cuts and a local joinery scrap pile.



Apart from strings, everything else is sourced from smashed guitars, car boot sales and scrap yards, skips and stuff, along with stuff people discard or have found on the beach. Unless the customer specifies otherwise, I try to include Elmar Zeilhofer flatpups, which I think are genius and original.

Sometimes I think people now give me things almost as a challenge like a speargun washed up on the beach, which I accepted and returned as a diddley bow to the finder. My work has always been using my hands and making things, so I guess the combination of woodwork, metalwork, acoustics, art and problem-solving, and finding things for alternative uses is what makes this craft so appealing. The mantra is “there are no rules,” which I like, but playability, scale length, intonation and durability and tone are what makes it all happen. I tell my customers that until it’s strung up there is no way of knowing what it will sound like and that’s half the battle. Unlike manufactured guitars, the sound is a result of a lot of things and it surprises people that a cigar box guitar doesn’t look or sound like any other guitar, which gives you a unique sound every time.

*“The mantra is ‘there are no rules,’ which I like, but playability, scale length, intonation and durability and tone are what makes it all happen”*

When I started out, I would present my builds to a local musician, a talented Bass player who has backed Ginger Baker on tour and he would give me his verdict, which would be repeated until it was right, but I then knew the guitar was acceptable. Justin Johnson came to the UK and put out a call



for a bass and a lap steel to use while on tour and I responded and he used both. From there I started supplying local musicians such as Stuart Marshall, Ian Cox, Jago Thorne, Ian Macdonald and Alfie Bolitho.

While surfing at Northcott (a local beach here in Cornwall), I met James Dixon who had just come back to Bude from travelling and he told me he was a musician. And I said that I built rough-looking guitars using recycled materials! We became friends and he came over to the house one day while I was working on a guitar called “The Weight” and James commented that this song was a particularly poignant track for him. The guitar had the lyrics to the song hand-written on the back of the body, which was an old post office draw with a thin ply top, a recycled acoustic neck and saddle, a brass larder grill for a sound hole and a flatpup pickup. When it was finished, he came to the house and played it on the porch at the front of my shed. That was a turning point I think for both of us. This tatty road-worn box possessed a unique tone, which raised the level of my builds, but more importantly with his obvious talent, helped steer James down a new blues-led path.



## *“Recycle, reuse, rejoice!”*

The Weight was followed by “The Waitress” a recycled reshaped Kay guitar, along with a three-stringer – all of which are in the rack with James on stage. “The Mistress” – the last in the trilogy – resides nearby with a neutral friend, and with James behind the strings, has racked up over 110k views on Facebook. His acceptance and use of my guitars helped my confidence to push my builds further and search out other like players who are happy to play something different. As I always say: “recycle, reuse, rejoice!” ■



A person wearing a hat and a patterned shirt is seen from the back, looking at a large poster for a guitar festival. The poster is for the 'SMOKIN' GUITARS 3. GERMAN CIGARBOXGUITAR FESTIVAL' in Pleutersbach, held on September 15-16, 2018. The poster lists several bands including Garage 3, Adi Hauke, DC Snakebuster, De Herr Ruppel, Professor Shakti, 3 to 1, Captain Catfish & Mrs. Nicky.

# SMOKIN' GUITARS

3. GERMAN CIGARBOXGUITAR FESTIVAL

# PLEUTERSBACH

15.-16. SEPTEMBER 2018

GARAGE 3  
MICROSCOPIC BLUES BUNCH  
ADI HAUKE  
DC SNAKEBUSTER  
DE HERR RUPPEL  
PROFESSOR SHAKTI  
3 TO 1  
CAPTAIN CATFISH &  
MRS. NICKY

*Goin' to Germany...*

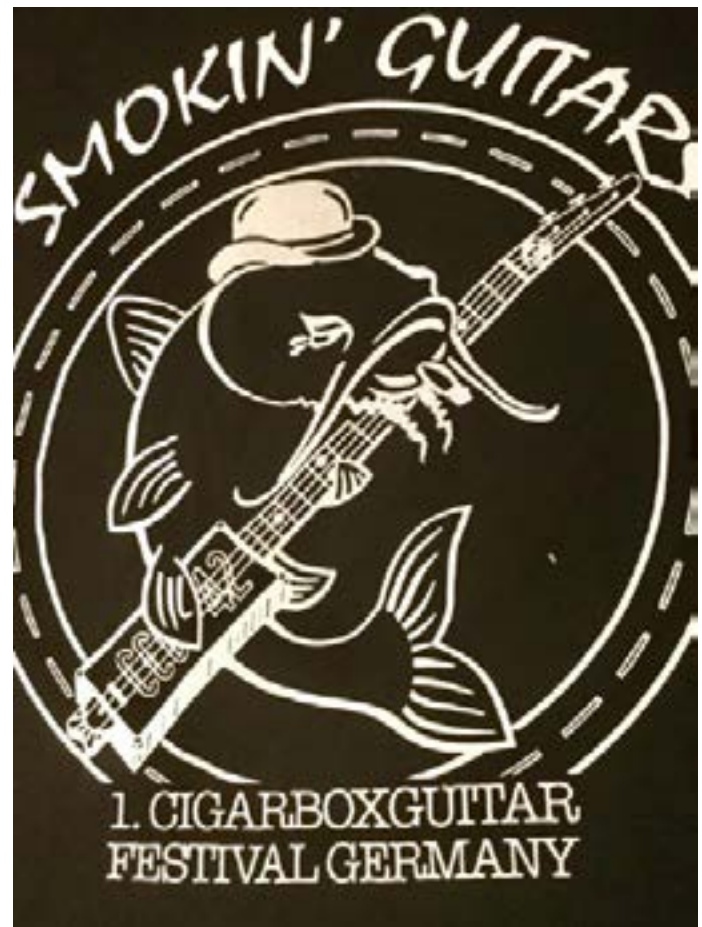
*by Cathy Mullaert, Herminie, PA, U.S.A.*

*My trip to Germany was a snap decision...a friend of mine, Jörg Metz, contacted me and asked if I was interested in going to the German Smokin' Guitars Cigar Box Guitar Festival. The idea was very appealing, especially since I had never been to Europe before and it's where my family originally came from. So a quick call to the travel agent and a bit of luck getting a plane ticket at the last minute – and off I went to the festival with Jörg and his brother Volkar!*

Up until three years ago, the cigar box guitar scene in Germany was fairly unorganized. In 2015, Fabian Fahr visited and exhibited at the Delta Calluna Dutch CBG festival where he met Justin Johnson (USA), Rocco Recycle (Germany), and a number of Dutch performers like Gumbo and the Monck, Herman Ouboter, The Boothill Stompers, Bacon Fat Louis and Cigarbox Henri. Justin Johnson even played a number on Fabian's Capt'n Catfish "polarbear" license plate guitar. All this aroused his enthusiasm to organize a similar event in Germany.

And so the first Smokin' Guitars International CBG Festival was born in Germany in 2016, featuring Chickenbone John and Hollowbelly from England, Cigarbox Don from Scotland, Vincent Slegers from Belgium, Gumbo & the Monk, Herman Ouboter und Cigarbox Henri from Holland, Fuxdeiwelswilde, Peter Ruppel, Friedel Geratcsh, the Blues Tones, Van Wolfen and Capt'n Catfish from Germany. If you ask Fabian, the idea behind the festival has always been to connect artists and builders and promote the spirit and sound of CBGs.

The festival is now held annually in September and takes place in the quaint village of Pleutersbach. This year's Smokin' Guitars Festival 2018 has made my travels to Germany unforgettable. The town is huddled on the





*From left to right: Jörg Metz, Cathy Mullaert, Onno Nicolas, Adi Hauke and Mike Helming*

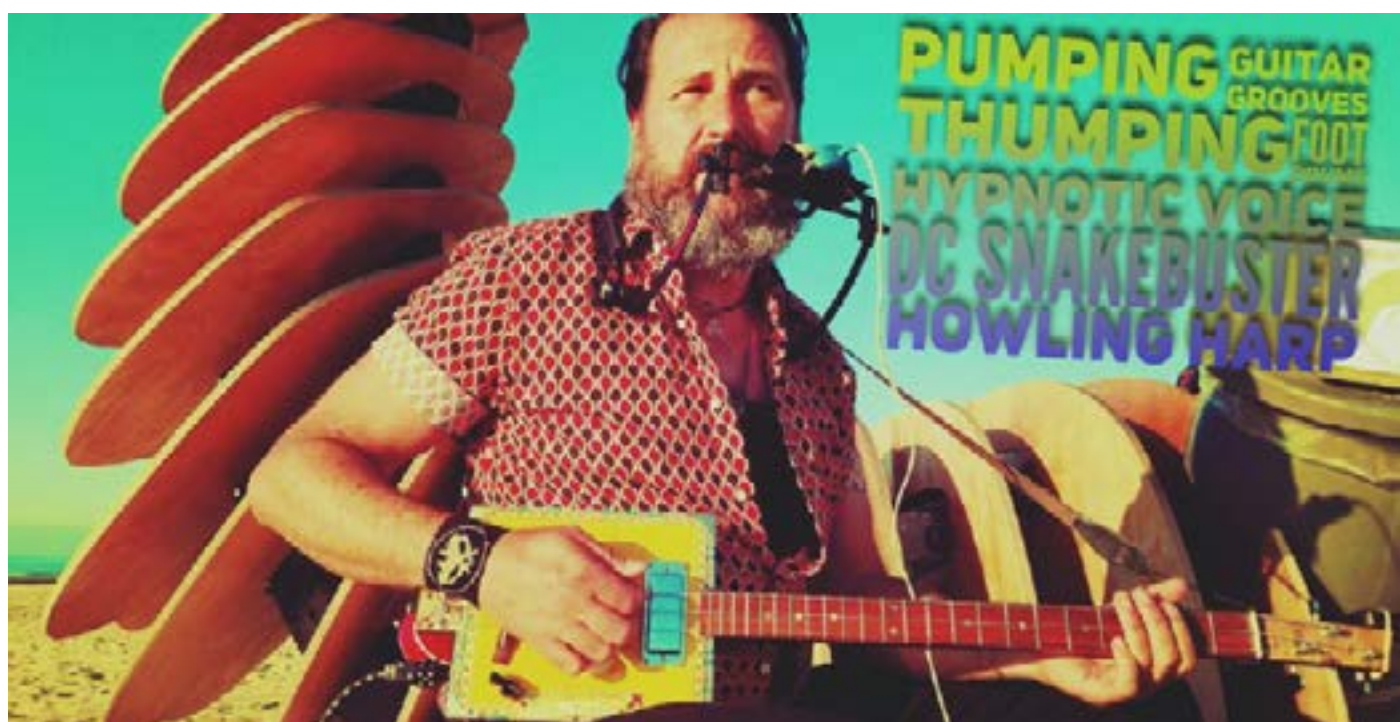
banks of the river Neckar near Germany's famed Romantic Road Castle Route. The event was combined with the annual village fair to add even more German flavor, including traditional German food, local handmade items for sale and an authentic German musical band playing in the street. The view of the moon over the German mountains and watching the tourist riverboat pass by topped off the festive atmosphere. And another highlight was the Sunday church service in the street on the last day of the festival.

Fabian welcomed me most graciously and gave me a tour of his farm and workshop. Backstage I had the pleasure of meeting not all, but several of the performing musicians and builders. Where do I begin? Along with Fabian Fahr and Nicole Guida (aka Capt'n Catfish and Mrs. Nicky), other German artists included Elke Beck, Andreas Dock, Friedel Geratsch (aka Cigar Box Gery), Thomas Wenzel, Andreas

Großmann, Tobias Langguth, Andy Saitenhieb, Keith Newman, Michael Dittmar, Adi Hauke, Wolf Estal and Peter Ruppel.

*"This year's Smokin' Guitars Festival 2018 has made my travels to Germany unforgettable"*

Then there was Todd Cecil from the USA who tours in Europe every year performing with professional drummer Benny Sapphire (originally from the USA living in Germany), Reiner Margulies (from Canada living in Germany), Frank Declercq (aka DC Snakebuster), Philippe Hombert, and Jeffrey Robert from Belgium, and Onno Nicolas from Mauritius – the performances were incredible



with all these musicians capturing the true spirit of the blues with their homemade instruments. Next year I'm hoping to hear guitarist Andy Mühlig and slide guitarist Micky Wolf at the Smokin' Guitars Festival 2019, which means I guess I'll have to start saving for my next ticket. They were not at Smokin' Guitars this year, but still welcomed me heartily to Germany.

*"...capturing the true spirit of the blues with their homemade instruments"*

Strolling through the festival, you could see CBG builders on either side of the street with the most amazing instruments for sale – so much so that I couldn't resist buying three guitars myself from Werner Wende (Törn), Bastian Ortner (Blues Bones) and Elke Beck. I'll no doubt have fun getting them back to the States. I wanted to buy one of Andreas Dock's guitars too, but figured I can't just keep buying all these incredible builds, so I resisted temptation. Two other well-known German builders I would like to mention are Peter Fleck and Jan Hummel (aka Mudcat who also makes awesome guitar pedals). Many of the builders themselves are cigar box guitar players, professional entertainers and music teachers. They all connect with one another throughout the year and are joined by a steady flow of newcomers to the German scene – now including me ☺.

All in all, I've had the trip of a lifetime and it's going to be hard to top, but I'll try... What a life and I owe it all to cigar box guitars! ■





*Tobias Langguth...*

*Other builders mentioned in this article:*

*Capt'n Catfish Guitars*  
[www.captencatfish.com](http://www.captencatfish.com)

*Törn Boxgitarren und mehr*  
[www.facebook.com/boxgitarren](https://www.facebook.com/boxgitarren)

*Blues Bones*  
[www.blues-bones.de](http://www.blues-bones.de)

*Zigarrenbox-Gitarren - CBG*  
[www.facebook.com/ElkeBeck.EB](https://www.facebook.com/ElkeBeck.EB)

*Doxen Cigar Box Guitars*  
[www.facebook.com/pages/Doxen-Cigar-Box-Guitars](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Doxen-Cigar-Box-Guitars)

*Peter Fleck*  
[www.zigarrenboxgitarren.de](http://www.zigarrenboxgitarren.de)

*Mudcat FX*  
[www.facebook.com/pg/mudcatfx](https://www.facebook.com/pg/mudcatfx)



*Street Lemon and "Bricoswing"*

## *Interview with Christophe Deshayes, Lausanne, Switzerland*

*With Street Lemon, the inventor of “Bricoswing,” even the most timorous person starts to dance! Their bric-a-brac music and contagious creativity propels audiences into a parallel dimension where biscuit tins have mutated into banjos and grandmothers’ radios are reincarnated as guitar amps. Wildly retro and totally avant-garde, it’s easy to see why people are so enthusiastic about the Lemon family. Energetic and refreshing, who can resist a shot of Street Lemon! – Festi’Cheyres*

*CBGR: Christophe, So what exactly is Bricoswing?*

*Christophe Deshayes:* Bricoswing is a subtle retro-futuristic mix of swing, rock and roll, neo-disco and, if you’re naughty, a twist of opera. *Street Lemon* is the only group that plays this style of music. The Lemon family is made up of four brothers and a sister, and their mission is to save humanity from its gloom with their music.





*Tell us a bit more...*

Bricoswing might be, for example, digging through the old stuff in grandma's attic and turning things like a tube radio into an amp or a telephone into a microphone harmonica. It is converting objects by connecting the unusual to the improbable with a piece of string. It's flying in a tin can with a teddy bear in your arms to say hello to the moon ... I think that in a world of prefabrication and standardization, the handyman is a poet who makes objects rhyme. He improvises with what he has on hand – he gives a voice to an old box and *voilà* an instrument is born.

*How long has The Street Lemon been around?*

It all began with a tragic event when our grandmother fell out of one of the family's lemon trees... While rummaging in the attic, we discovered all kinds of fascinating objects and instruments from another era and this was how *bricoswing* came about. We decided to leave the family limoncello factory to revive these instruments and to pledge ourselves only to music.

*So what kind of songs do you play?*

*Street Lemon* plays a few tracks from the 1920–30s, but also revisits other epochs by “bricoswinging” the original pieces. But mainly we play own compositions. Each title is a

universe in itself and tells a story in a very visual way. Draped in lightness and elegance, *Street Lemon's* songs deal with such fundamental themes of existence as the importance for a pig to go by air instead of along the bottom of the the sea when travelling by zeppelin or the potential consequences of a libertarian lifestyle in a social context marked by a culture of neo-social communism leaning toward Trotskyism.

*What artists have influenced the band's music?*

*Gaston Lagaffe* and *Pezzi*, which my brother Pask and I read when we went to our grandparents' house. In any case, it's this fertile naïve and overflowing creativity that allows me to create instruments and write music.

*So what instruments have you made?*

I mainly make guitars for bands, but also some nice-looking amps – not to mention biscuit-tin mandolins. I also developed a “trompettophone” that allows me to play the harmonica through a phone microphone attached to a trumpet. I make electric guitars as well as acoustic guitars.

*When did it all start?*

I've always been making things. For me it's a way of taking things in my own hands and shaping them to create my own little world. Making my own instruments came hand in hand fairly quickly with music and vice versa. One day I saw a wardrobe at the side of the road that was destined for the dump. As a former cabinetmaker, I saw the potential behind all the layers of varnish and I told myself that I was going to turn it into a guitar. Two months later, the metamorphosis took place and an instrument was born. This abandoned walnut cabinet had found a new existence. Most of the instruments I create for *Street Lemon* are made from old objects with a story behind them and my aim is to give them a new life.





*“For me it’s a way of taking things in my own hands and shaping them to create my own little world”*

*How many instruments do you play then?*

In *Street Lemon* I play guitar, biscuit-tin mandolin and harmonica with my tormpettophone. At other times, I also play double acoustic instruments that I created like the “banjouki” (with a banjo on one side and a buzouki on the other) or the “guitarouki” (two necks with the guitar on the top and the bouzouki underneath).

*What comes first – the music or the instruments?*

It’s music first, but it’s very interactive. One feeds the other. If I could, I would create one instrument per song, but that can become very cumbersome. Already today, at every *Street Lemon* concert, we’re like a travelling flea market!

*Building musical instruments isn’t exactly like cabinetmaking though...*

I learned cabinetmaking for four years, but most of my skills have been acquired on the job by trial and error. When I have an idea, I usually realize it very quickly. It’s only when a guitar is finished that I draw my conclusions and think about what I could have done differently! That said, I think a lot during the creative process. For me the handyman is a manual thinker. When I create music I compose and when I create a *bricoswing* instrument I recompose.

*I bet you get some interesting comments on your creations!*

Yes, the audience is often fascinated by our amps and instruments in concert and come to ask questions and take pictures at the end of the show.

*I guess it’s hard to stop creating new instruments?*

I only build when I feel like it, but I always have ideas in my head. That said, I also like to take time out for my family and friends because building can be quite invasive. The other thing

is that when I'm building I don't get to perform, and it does me good to play from time to time and do concerts! It's sharing with the public and putting bricoswing into action that keeps me going too.

*And what happens to the "old" stuff?*

There are some things I regret having thrown away. There are many things that I keep transforming. There are some that I sell and a lot in my trailer, in my room, in the living room, in the music room, in the workshop and everywhere!

*Your first concert next year is in Paris. Is this the beginning of a world tour?*

That would be fantastic ! But unfortunately I don't have the time or desire to search for the concerts. To really progress we would need an agent to take care of the group. Almost all the members of the Lemon family also have families and other commitments, and it's sometimes difficult to find the time needed to move the project forward. And of course we would need the money to develop all of our ideas! But if we are invited, we would be happy to do a world tour!

*And is there an album in the making?*

We've already released an EP with five songs (the last one is called "Pig in a Zeppelin") and we can do an album when we have the budget. We'll soon have all the songs written and we already have a concept for it. ■





[www.streetlemon.com](http://www.streetlemon.com)



*Four Strings "agrosureño" blues*

# *Interview with Manolo Cano, Jaén, Spain*

*"All of them have a long career in the music scene in different bands... their music is a distillation of blues songs and the sounds of the 70s... their trademark revolves around the handmade instruments they use" – Ideal Magazine, Spain*

CBGR: Manolo, Four Strings got together in 2016?

Manolo Cano: Yes, we came together in March 2016 and started working in late 2016 with Adrián Garrido singing vocals, Angel Garrido playing bass, Berna Vidal on drums, and myself playing guitar and lap steel guitar.

It's the only CBG band in Spain?

Probably not, but for sure the only one using cigar box guitars and artesanal instruments as the main element of their shows.

You have your own style called "agrosureño"?

Yes it's a mix of blues, southern rock and some folk/country sounds.

Which artists have influenced you most?

The main influence is Seasick Steve, but also Eric Clapton, Samantha Fish, Jerry Reed, ZZ Top, BB King...



*Left to right: Manolo Cano, Reverendo Killer Blues, Berna Vidal, Adrián Garrido and Angel Garrido*

All your instruments are handmade?

Yes, every instrument is handmade using recycled and antique materials.

What kind of different instruments are we talking about?

Among other things, we have a suitcase drum, an olive-tree bass guitar, a frying-pan guitar, a guitar made out of an electric brazier and a lap steel guitar made from a picket fence.

*“The blues has been making its way into this country for many years, and people have been grown increasingly interested in its roots”*

People have been building acoustic guitars in Spain since the 15th century? Do you think that's why people are into building CBGs in Spain?

That's probably not the case as acoustic guitars in Spain are mostly built for Flamenco. But the blues has been making its way into this country for many years, and people have been grown increasingly interested in its roots, which has inevitably led to an interest in cigar box guitars.

Spain is also no stranger to singing, dancing and festivals?

That's right! In Spain you can enjoy several rock, pop and blues festivals! And here we should especially mention *Blues Cazorla* as it won an award from the Blues Foundation in the USA as the “Best International Festival” in 2014.



What events did you play last year?

Private shows, Frank Festival (with Devon Allman, Susan Santos, etc...), Blues Cazorla, Fiesta del Aire (Arriate-Málaga), Sweet Cotton Blues Festival, Artesanal Beer Fest (Fuente Álamo) and several others.

Big audiences?

Yes indeed! At the Blues Cazorla festival, for example, around 30,000 people on average attend each year, and it's growing.

What do people say about your instruments?

People like their rural and artesanal look. At first they're a bit skeptical about the sound – till they hear them – then they just love 'em!

You perform covers of other artists as well as your own songs?

Yes, mostly Seasick Steve, ZZ Top, Samantha Fish, and other artist.

*"At first they're a bit skeptical about the sound – till they hear them – then they just love 'em!"*

Who writes your songs and what influences them?

We write them in the rehearsal studio and we all try to give them a personal touch, so you could say we all write the songs.

Only English or Spanish too?

Only english for now, as it's the original language for this genre. But maybe in the future we will try something in Spanish.



*Tell us about your first studio album  
“Agro Sureño Blues”*

We produced and recorded Agro Sureño Blues” at Raro Records, a small studio in our city. It includes five original songs and a Seasick Steve cover. You can hear it for free in Spotify and Youtube. Let us know if you enjoy it!

*Tell us about the Blues Cazorla Blues  
Battle competition...*

Well, it’s a long story, but to make it short we wrote, recorded and sent in our video to the contest in less than a week, and we didn’t really expect to make it to the finals. But, surprisingly enough, we made it through and ended up coming second in the competition behind the band “Maldito Swing.”

*Do you think your are influencing other  
groups in Spain?*

I think so because quite a few budding musicians have bought instruments from “LoLuthier” to use in gigs or start musical projects of their own.

*What’s on the agenda in 2019?*

We’re already lining up dates for gigs and expecting 2019 to be a really interesting year for the band. People can visit our Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/fourstringsgrupo>) and watch our YouTube videos! ■



*LoLuthier Recybox Guitar and Bass  
[www.facebook.com/LoLuthier](https://www.facebook.com/LoLuthier)*





# Contributors

James Dixon is a blues roots and folk guitarist singer/songwriter based in Bude, Cornwall playing a blend of slide guitar, stompbox tambourine and harmonica. He was a guitarist in the award-winning country/Americana band *The Chicken Slacks* before going solo. International venues include Arrowtown (NZ), Byron Bay (Aus) and Cangguu (Bali). James released his *Bromeliad Acoustic Sessions EP* at the start of 2017 and continues to gig around the country aiming to tell a story with a solid beat and memorable melody.



Paul Atkinson is the Professor of Design and Design History at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. He has written a number of books, most recently a design history of the electric guitar, which is currently in press with Reaktion Books. His interest in the cigar box guitar emerged from the research for this book, and he has published articles and presented on the subject at conferences in Oslo and New York. He has also written a short film on the CBG scene in the UK, which will be shown at international film festivals next year.



Jeff Sacree is a 64-year-old surfer living in Bude on the north Cornish coast of the UK with wife Gina and an English bull terrier called Rosie. Jeff has always worked with his hands among other things building surfboards, skateboards and marine safety helmets. Given his love for art and design, cigar box guitars were an obvious route for Jeff who spends much of his spare time cruising around boot sales, junkyards, skips and beaches looking for suitable materials to transform into instruments. His mantra is “Recycle Reuse Rejoice”!



Cathy Mullaert was born in 1955 and resides in Herminie, Pennsylvania. She is a self-taught musician since the age of eleven – playing piano, mandolin, guitar and cigar box guitars, as well as helping others learn to play cigar box guitars. She loves playing slide guitar, delta blues, rock, country and folk in her own style, and performs at local shows in her area. Cathy wants others to enjoy playing and creating music the way she does.



Christophe Deshayes is the patented inventor of “bricoswing” and an insatiable creator of musical instruments that include exotic and eccentric guitars and amplifiers, biscuit-tin mandolins, a harmonica he plays through a phone microphone attached to a trumpet and many more! A confirmed autodidact and cabinetmaker turned luthier of boxes and noble woods, Christophe is above all an enamored musician sharing his passion with the public and putting bricoswing into action.



Manolo Cano (Jaén, 1968) has been playing guitar in bands since he was 17 years old. Today he is a guitarist and luthier with a passion for the blues, and sells his cigar box guitars all over Spain. Manolo is a member of “Four Strings,” for which he has built handcrafted instruments, guitars, basses and slide guitars from all manner of materials and recycled items. The group’s “agrosureño” music ranges from the purest blues to southern rock and their home-grown instruments are their trademark.



Ross Hewitt a.k.a. Huey Ross was born in Australia in 1953 on BB King’s birthday. Over the years he has worked as a tennis teacher, journalist, translator and editor, 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.

