

# CBG Review

July 2019

## **FEEL-GOOD MUSIC !**

INTERVIEW WITH MATT ISBELL,  
GHOST TOWN BLUES BAND, USA ⇒ P.3

## **MAGICAL MARVELS**

INTERVIEW WITH RICH KENNEDY,  
DEEPSEED GUITARS, USA ⇒ P.13

## **CUSTOM PLAYABLE ART**

CRAIG KOEN, CK INSTRUMENTS, AUSTRALIA ⇒ P.21

## **WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT ?**

INTERVIEW WITH GABRIELE DODERO, ITALY ⇒ P.27

## **PEOPLE AND PLACES**

INTERVIEW WITH TODD CECIL, USA ⇒ P.32

## **PRESS RELEASE**

DAVID (DR. EASY) REED ⇒ P.38

CONTRIBUTORS ⇒ P.39

# Editorial

## Endless possibilities...

Welcome to the July 2019 issue of CBG Review, heading off once again from Memphis, Tennessee. “Feel-good music from the heart” – that’s the way Matt Isbell describes the music of internationally touring Ghost Town Blues Band because of its “melting-pot” nature and diversity of instruments including cigar box guitars made by Matt in person. Matt’s motto is “Don’t worry, don’t fret!”

New York’s Rich Kennedy talks about his mission for experimentation when he started creating CBG-related guitars with original wood-burned and hand-painted designs, as well as intricate hand-carved headstocks, bridges and tailpieces – each one indeed a “magical marvel,” with a promise of more to come!

Australian Craig Koen will tell you “everything’s a guitar part, it just doesn’t know it yet,” which explains how he has ventured from cigar boxes, hubcaps, shovels, cricket bats, skateboards and bedpans into “steampunk” CBG-related guitars made from cogs, chains, gauges and industrial scrap parts. It all comes under the heading of custom playable art.

Two years ago Italian Blues player Gabriele Dodero won a cigar box guitar at the *Blues Made In Italy* festival. Now his CBG goes everywhere with him as he travels back in time playing roots, folk and traditional blues, making it a perfect fit. And all because of a surprise coincidence!

“When it’s on, life is magic!” – says Todd Cecil, US Blues artist from the Smoky Mountains, as he travels around the world with his collection of hand-made guitars. Todd gives us his unique and light-hearted take on people, places, music and self-expression.

Press release: David Reed & The Introverts bring their eclectic mix of new, old and borrowed songs in their new album “Gypsy Davy,” featuring “*Doctor Ea\$y’s Sonic Boxes...*”

As always, read, enjoy and share with your friends...

Best regards

*Huey Ross*





*Feel-good music!  
Ghost Town Blues Band*

Photo: Nick Harding



# Interview with Matt Isbell

## Ghost Town Blues Band, Memphis, TN, USA

*Steeped in history with an eye towards the future, the Ghost Town Blues Band represents the best aspects of both conventional and contemporary blues. An exciting mixture of North Mississippi blues, New Orleans style brass, and an Allman Brothers style approach to improvisational jams, the Ghost Town Blues Band has something to offer anyone who has an appreciation for traditional Southern music. The band features a unique array of instruments, including organs, cigar box guitars, harmonicas, electric push brooms (!!)* and plenty of funky brass and percussion.  
– Memphis Music Hall of Fame

CBGR: Wow, already the tenth anniversary of Ghost Town Blues Band. Do you get the feeling that time has just flown?

Matt Isbell: Time flies by when you're having fun (burning gas and kicking ass)! We've learned a lot in ten years. Learned a lot of what not to do and how to do things better...

Awards and nominations aside, tell us more about some of those amazing support acts you guys have played...

One of my favorites was Steve Miller Band. I didn't realize until we played that show with him how many hits he's got. At the Memphis in May festival, we played the same time slot as Dave Matthews. It's crazy. Neil Young was also the same time as the Beale Street Music Festival. Buddy Guy was up at the Trois-Rivières festival in Québec, and we play at his club in Chicago. We opened up for John Mayall in Vegas, same with Booker T. It's nice to mix with these guys and an overall good experience.

So you've built up some serious momentum over the years...

Yeah, really, ever since 2014 when we were runner-up at The International Blues Challenge, it's just really ripped the top open and we're going places. We've done everything from the Montreal Jazz Festival and played seven years in a row at the Beale Street "Memphis in May" music festival, which is rare for a local band. We play a lot in Canada now – I attribute all that to that International Blues Challenge second place.



Photo: Frank Muggianu

We've had some offers to play Europe before, but it's never really worked with our schedule. And with such a big band, it's pretty hard to get us over there. But this year I think the Grolsch Blues Festival in Germany will be very helpful in opening up our European market big time.

*"I think that Ghost Town Blues Band is a melting pot"*

You've called the band "a hodgepodge of different backgrounds" – do you want to elaborate on that a bit?

Yeah, I think we are a great representation of Memphis. Memphis to me is a melting pot of culture. It's a river town where many cultures have come together in the mid-South to develop real grit and salt-of-the-earth type people. And if you think about some of the best bands in my opinion in history, they've been a great mix of guys that came from different backgrounds, and music brought them together. Booker T. & the M.G.s is a great example – I think they've even got an album called "Melting Pot," right? And I think that Ghost Town Blues Band is a melting pot.

I'm the front man, the song writer, the idea guy, you know, and it takes my team to make it all happen. Solo, by myself, I don't think I'm that great; I've always considered myself to be a "tunesmith," you know, a songwriter. I take some leads and I play little bit of guitar, but Taylor Orr (we've been playing together since we were 14 and written songs together for years) is our lead guitar player. He really comes from that classic rock, southern rock, Allman Brothers jam band kind of vibe.



Our bass player, Matthew Karner, has a big jazz background – he loves everything from Frank Zappa to Modeski Martin and Wood, to Les McCann and Eddie Harris – you know that old school awesome jazz. Our keyboard player, Cedric Taylor, his dad is a pastor. He also has a jazz background, but he's a church player. Suavo Jones the trombone player – he's got a hip hop background. So we've got a rap song like "I get high" and a new song called "Dirty" that's going to be on our new record. He's kind of our "hype" man on stage – he's a visual show, always just moving around and bringing energy out. Our drummer, Andrew McNeill, is a big fan of Prince and a huge fan of Stax. His favorite drummer is Al Jackson and he's the Booker T. drummer (played with everybody).

We are a seven-piece band, except that our saxophone player, Kevin Houston, is actually a nine-time Grammy-nominated recording engineer, mentored by Jim Dickenson and father of the North Mississippi Allstars. He's always recorded our albums, but as the years progressed he just kind of naturally became a part of the band. But he doesn't really tour with us too much because he's kind of locked down being an engineer in Memphis and North Mississippi. So we normally just travel as a six-piece band.



Wasn't Josh Roberts in the band for a time?

Josh Roberts is a good friend of mine. Twenty times better than me on the guitar. He was in the band for about a year, but he moved on. After that I called Taylor in Colorado and said "hey man, this is your last chance to move back to Memphis!" He toiled with the idea a lot, and it was a hard decision for him to make. On this new record of ours in October – "Shine" – we co-wrote everything together, but a lot of his tunes are about his struggle in the decision-making process of moving back.

*"It's feel-good music  
from the heart"*

Backstage Pass" made No. 4 on Billboard's  
blues album chart – why do you think "Shine"  
is even better?

Our new album is a departure from your normal blues music (well we're obviously not a normal blues band because of our eclectic nature). We've always kind of been the misfits of the blues world, but we're just being who we are and we don't quite fit the mold that the blues world possibly wants for us. We recorded 15 songs and we cut a few of them off the record that were actually more blues. We've been recording since last October and just finished around six weeks ago, and as the record developed, we just decided (or the record decided for us) that it's not really a blues record, it's everything – it's us – like AAA or Tedeschi Trucks, Marcus King, Government Mule, The Allman Brothers...it's feel-good music from the heart.



I'm trying to get the right publicist just now, not just a blues-world publicist – I need everybody to hear this record. It stands up to a lot of good quality recordings out there and I think it has “legs.”

*Blues is evolving too, right, not standing still?*

I hope not. It's got to evolve if we want the next generation to latch on to it. Some people might not think they like blues because they have a preconceived notion of it – you know 1, 4, 5, monotonous and sad, but blues isn't that at all – it's feelings from the heart and American roots music. If it wasn't for the blues, none of the popular music we listen to today would exist. Rock, country, jazz...it all came from blues – it all came from the same back porch in Mississippi.



*“It all came from the same back porch in Mississippi”*

*Not just the USA and Canada, you fit in a quick tour of Germany this year?*

Not really a tour, it was really just about us going to play the Grolsch Blues Festival. I had hoped to do more of a tour, but in the grand scheme of things, not a lot of people know us over there yet, and it's going to need this first show. That's how it happened in Canada. We played our first show in Canada and then all of a sudden for the next two or three years we were playing every festival there is on the eastern side of Canada – from Ontario to Calgary to the Montreal Jazz Festival, Mont Tremblant, Donnacona – you know all these Quebec festivals. Grolsch Blues Festival was everything we could've ever imagined. We played in the best time slot

imaginable and managed to get the non-English speaking crowd chanting “we want more” when we hit the last note! It was definitely a memorable experience! We were put in touch with a European promoter and can't wait to get back over there again.

*And then of course there's Matt Isbell's Memphis Cigar Box Guitars – all starting out with Grandma's silverware chest?*

I have this little story on stage where I mention that my grandmother was born in 1900 and lived to be 103 years old and how she'd have my ass if she saw what I did to this thing. And then I sing a song that's the title track of our last studio record titled “Hard Road to Hoe,” which is a nice remembrance of my mom and dad, and then we do another song called “The Road Still Drives the Same” which features that silverware chest guitar. I'm not the only one in the band that plays homemade instruments – I'm trying to incorporate in the next year or so where we all play a homemade instrument at least for one song, just to do something different. The fans love it!



I started this thing around 2010 about a year after I started Ghost Town Blues Band. The way it kind of all began was that we were playing on Beale Street and on a beautiful day everyone's hanging outside, walking down the street window-shopping, looking for the band they want to go see. If you're not interesting, at every moment of your show, they can turn around and go to the bar right next door and watch a band there. I started making cigar box guitars, really just one for fun, and a friend of mine liked it and kind of took it off my hands and I had to make another one. So I made another one and I took it downtown and played it in our show as a way to stand out.



It actually started with that Beatles tune we do, "Come Together," in kind of like a North Mississippi hill country style, and that one tune was my intro into performing with the cigar box guitar. And then I just kept making and making them, trying to do something different from what all the other guitar players were doing on Beale Street because, you know, in Memphis you can't swing a dead cat without hitting a guitar player that's better than you. I'm not the best cigar box guitar player either, but it's something different and people latch on to it.



*"Don't worry, don't fret!"*

I've always made three-string cigar box guitars tuned EBE, so I like a low open E tuning that sounds like the Delta to me, like the music from where I'm from. No frets, that's my motto – "Don't worry, don't fret!" I always joke around that the reason I don't make frets is so you have to buy my slides too. I probably make a thousand slides a year. Stax, for example, (the music label) are one of my local clients just ordered two dozen for their museum.





I like all the assemblage art that I do – the instrument making. It doesn't just stop with the cigar box guitars, I also made this electric push broom with a piezo pickup and that's part of the show as well. The drummer uses it from time to time as a percussion instrument.

*Your first guitar only had three strings and your harmonica holder was made out of a coat hanger – that suggests a little old-style ingenuity?*

When I was a kid I had a hand-me-down acoustic guitar... a little red and black Dreadnought guitar. I was a little boy running around and being crazy, pretty rough on things, and I knocked it over. Three of the tuning pegs broke off and all I could do was get three of the strings to tune up. I ripped off the other three strings, tuned it to some type of open tuning (I don't know because I wasn't taking music lessons or anything), I put my finger on there like in a bar, and just played what I could. I was easily playing 1,4,5 back in the day without even knowing it and I think subconsciously that's what has me making three-string guitars today. It all goes back to my childhood.

I had a harmonica just like everybody did... a little Marine Band harmonica. I had watched this guy named Todd Snider who's one of my favorite songwriters of all time. Todd lives in Nashville now, but he's from Oregon and he's lived in Texas and moved to Memphis for a little while. I saw him at a bar when I was maybe about 12 years old, 1992, when my brother (who's 11 years older than me) took me to go see him.

And here's a blond-headed guy up on stage with a harmonica around his neck, playing acoustic guitar, singing his heart out, bare feet – and there was something about that where I related to him, maybe because I have blond hair (laughs), but I was like “wow, I want to do that, that's what I wanna be!”

I was so turned on by the music that literally I was back home that next day and had fashioned a harmonica holder out of a coat hanger and duct tape. I had that harmonica around my neck and have probably never stopped since then.





*The Beatles surely never imagined “Come Together” played on a CBG!*

Really all I did was take that vocal melody and make that the guitar part and put a 2/4 country beat to it. And it's just that minor third, the root and the seven. And that to me sounds like R. L. Burnside. They could have easily been influenced by that southern blues kind of thing and just put their rock beat with it. But I kind of took it back and stripped it to what I thought it might have come from. In fact we do it, and often live in the middle of this tune, I'll play the R.L. Burnside song “Rolling and Tumbling.”

*How did the “Once There Was A Cigar Box” album in 2014 fare with the fans?*

I cut that in one day with my engineer Kevin Houston and it was kind of really meant to be a demo for our “Hard Road To Hoe” record. I ended up calling it “Once There Was A Cigar Box” after the short film that Alex Conrads put together. I didn't put any publicity behind it. I really did it just to document that moment in my life.

If people are interested in the cigar box guitar when I play a show and they talk to me on the side, I usually just give them a copy. Also anybody that buys a guitar gets a CD and a DVD, but, you know, it's not a record that I try to push. The goal was just for me to record myself playing all these homemade instruments and leave something behind. Often people come up after a show and say “tell me about this crazy square guitar, I've never seen this before” – they're always fascinated by it. So during a show I'll mention what it is and kind of explain it, and talk about how I make the slides and all that. It's very common for me just to give the slide away that I was playing for the night to whoever might be interested in talking to me after the show. It's cool, I'm just sharing something that I find interesting and that I'm passionate about, and it's nice to have people have a common interest.

*And how did that short film come about?*

I called Alex (he was a student at the University of Memphis on an exchange program) as I'd heard he was talented on the camera. I called him to see if he could make a music video for



the band. He took a little time and researched who I was and what I was doing, and came back to me and said he'd rather do a short film about my cigar box guitars and maybe my philosophy on life and that kind of stuff. I said "sure" and he tagged along and watched me through the process of building a guitar, and lived my life with me for a couple of days. That little short film ended up being in 17 or 18 international film festivals and won a bunch of prizes. It's funny to me that anybody would want to come to my garage and watch me build a guitar and listen to me babble on about what I think life is, but hey, to each his own.

*"I'm just sharing something that I find interesting and that I'm passionate about"*

*You're always the first to say that Memphis has been good to you...*

Memphis prides itself on its "grit," and I mean that in a good way. We've got roll up your sleeves, don't mind getting dirty, hard work grit. We don't get enough credit unless you look at the roots of Memphis and what's happened here. Every major musician wants to come to Memphis because it's the "Mecca" of rock and roll and blues. Beale Street's an iconic street, probably the most iconic street in the world as far as entertainment goes. You've got Bourbon Street in New Orleans, Music Row in Nashville I guess, but I've traveled around the world and never seen a street like Beale Street where, at the right time of year, every single club has a good band playing.



*Do you have a favorite club?*

There's a lot of great clubs on Beale. Right now my flavor of the week is the Blues City Café. Honestly I think they have the biggest and best ribs on Beale Street (*laughing*). That's probably not the reason I play there – it's a great room, right across the street from BB King's, it's not commercialized, privately owned – it's just got a vibe about it. We've got a good relationship with them and they pretty much let us play there whenever we like. But we're traveling so much during the summer time that we don't get to play there as much as I wish we did.

*What was it like to play at BB King's funeral?*

One of the things about Memphis and living here – the Blues Foundation called me and said "hey, would you guys like to perform at BB King's 'Celebration of Life,'" which was basically the big press conference on Beale Street and the procession. I've never seen Beale Street that crowded in my entire life, with news cameras

from all over the world at Handy Park, right on Beale Street, and we basically played right before Keb Mo and Bobby Rush, and we got to perform a BB King song in his honor.

It was pretty nerve-wracking, I bought his book when I was 14 years old and sat down and read it cover to cover. Probably one of the few books I couldn't put down. To get to play his funeral was a huge honor. It was awesome!

I met him about ten years ago at the Blues Trail historic marker presentations in Memphis. I asked him "hey, any advice for a young blues musician?" and he said "never make your move too soon!" I didn't know at the time that it was one of his tunes and that's what we played at his funeral.

*And you're good for Memphis too, right?*

I'd like to think so. We travel so much that, whether I'm official or not, I consider myself an ambassador of Memphis and I know there's a lot of people where I've traveled to their country, city, town, and they've loved the band and the conversation or two that we've had, and they'll start making plans to come to Memphis to encounter the culture. I should be on the city payroll (laughs). I'm kidding you know, but like I said, there's that Memphis grit, there's a lot of pride. Me, personally, I don't think I could ever live in any other city in the world. ■

ghosttownbluesband.com  
facebook.com/GhostTownBluesBand  
memphiscigarbox.com



Photo: Nick Harding



CAMPBELL'S

Magical  
Marvels

AND

MYSTERY  
TONICS



Satisfaction  
GUARANTEED





# *Interview with Rich Kennedy*

## *Deepseed Guitars, New York, USA*

*“Kennedy is...one of the new masters of cigar box guitars-as-art. Deepseed Guitars takes old-world cigar box guitar ideas...and uses them as a canvas for a new and exciting guitar style” – Shane Speal, Guitar World, The DIY Musician*

*CBGR: Rich, people keep asking you, but why again did you choose CBG-related guitars over other art mediums?*

Rich Kennedy: What I love most about this question is that the answers continually grow and evolve for me on a personal level. Initially, the notion of creating a stringed instrument with its central resonator for sound being something as utilitarian as a box seemed so brilliantly enticing in its simplicity. Historically speaking, the origins of instruments like the cigar box

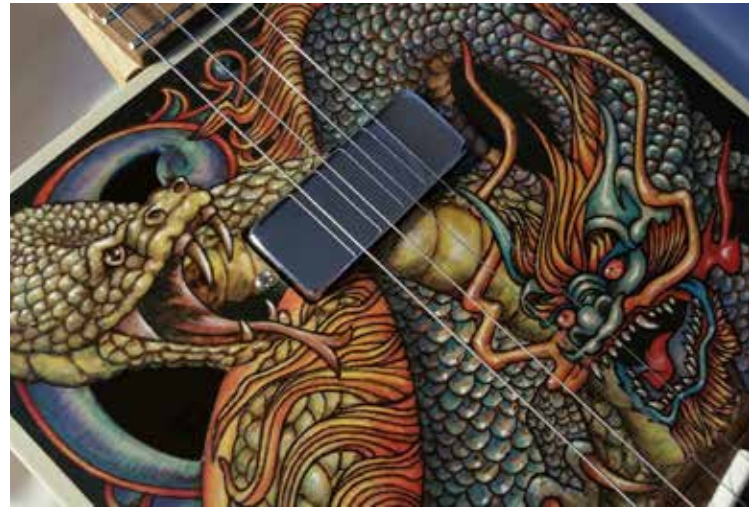
guitar are ripe with creativity stemming from an unmistakable desire to express and share music by way of any means available. Music starts in the heart, and can manifest anywhere through anyone and anything. A stone, in the right hands, can be an incredible instrument. To think of plucking notes or strumming a chord across any object which began its “life” in a way never intended for music leads one to feel that possibilities are endless.

When I became aware of the idea of the CBG, I had already been playing guitar roughly 35 years (since the age of seven), and already loved, had written, and performed music in live settings. The new and exciting inspiration here was to feel that I could possibly build the very instruments I played, with resources available





around me! I proceeded to build my first guitar - at the center was a common Macanudo Cigar box, and my world shifted in a beautiful way. That first project led me to challenge myself with questions. I had read about the historical accounts of the cigar box guitar. I had seen these instruments in books, and at this point even built one. But I was now pulled toward a pathway for expression that struck me like a lightning bolt. Why not incorporate original artwork within the instrument itself? What are we capable of when we truly put the heart, mind and soul to the test?



*"But I was now pulled toward a pathway for expression that struck me like a lightning bolt"*



I was a musician who also loved painting and designing, but I became curious about things specific to wood working in order to be able to do what was inside my mind with respect to the instruments I wanted to create. I decided to learn about things like pyrography and carving. I was neither a trained luthier, nor a trained artist in any formal sense, but I had a passion and was pulled toward a mission for experimentation to accomplish what I wanted to do. I started developing original woodburned and handpainted designs, and handcarving intricate headstocks, bridges, and tailpieces. I had not yet seen anything done in this way for these types of instruments, and I strived to have a unique and different approach to things.



I was hooked on the happiness others found in my humble work. Further, in cases of creating



custom instruments that catered directly to the lives of individuals by way of concept, design, and build, it brought me such joy through the feedback I received. I also felt sincere human connection. I have yet to discover another means of experiencing art that is more multi-layered, incorporating so many forms of expression within one pathway. I get to imagine, develop, sketch, burn, paint, carve, compose, play, share, meet and enjoy time with others, and form sincere personal relationships. I am grateful for each and every experience I've had since I started.

*"I get to imagine, develop, sketch, burn, paint, carve, compose, play, share..."*

#### Who influenced you along the way?

Once I initially got past the "I can do this!" moment (notable thanks to Mike Orr for inspiration with his book "Handmade Music Factory"), I approached my own take on things, and experimented further with goals, construction and design. I was also greatly inspired later by the remarkable accounts found in "One Man's Trash, A History of the Cigar Box Guitar," by Bill Jehle. I put forth that both of these books are fantastic resources for anyone searching for valuable education regarding CBGs and their history. These books had an impact on me. My working concept was then to take things to a different level, not only striving to build well playing instruments, but to offer pieces that made unique and original artistic statements. I am honored to say that both authors mentioned above have become customers of mine, and I am proud to have made their acquaintance and call them friends.







*Why do you describe the history of American musical roots as magical?*

No one gets to pick to whom or where we are born. We all are pushed out (or plucked out) and instinctively make some noise (thank you to moms everywhere!). I have been fortunate to witness the incredible impact of the diversity of America in terms of music, especially living in New York. To look back in time, I am thankful to be aware and appreciate how much beauty has spawned from the fusion and collaboration amongst varied cultures in terms of expression. Blues, jazz, rock, country, bluegrass (and so many variations) find deeply planted touchstones and origins across this nation. My use of the term “magical” is purely a representation, for me, of the indescribable feeling I associate with how much has happened here as a resulting seed for so much music.

*Meticulously hand-carved headstocks, bridges and tailpieces, inlays, wood-burning and paint – front and back – how long does it take from start to finish?*

So much depends on the objective, and the intricacy of each design. There have been times

when it has taken months from start to finish (actual working time), and other projects when less involved designs (with minimal graphic elements) take only weeks. I gained my work ethic from my father, and I start early and most often work late into the night on any given day, especially if I’m in the flow of a phase. The fact is, to this day, I have never priced anything to even remotely reflect the extent of time I put into my work. I know that anyone may logically feel they are taking a risk in purchasing something, especially from afar, but I take great pride in what I do, and I feel blessed to say my work has only been met with complete and utter satisfaction well beyond expectations.

*So it’s a labor of love, not just a business...*

I have a true passion to create, and to do so in ways with the goal of achieving something special. The “business end” in terms of making money – what most associate with regards to that term, has always been a distant second for me. I am blessed with a wonderful wife and an incredible 7-year old son (both amazingly musically gifted – we are very much a musical family) and I am so grateful for their belief and support in what I do.

*Are there any that you can't bring yourself to sell?*

That's a complicated question because I have loved each one in a way as if they were children! I did initially offer the Harp Guitar I built for sale, called "The Reckoning," but subsequently decided to keep it for several reasons: first it's a very successful prototype after spending several months in developing its physical design. Second, it is quite elaborate, representing a great example of possibilities in terms of artistic design – many people have enjoyed being able to see it in person, which has only been possible because it remains in my possession. Third, I personally love it! ha ha... And, fourth, I plan to build more based on its design at some point in the future, and as a successful prototype, it would be my reference. Overall, however, the greatest thrill for me is actually found when others find inspiration through owning my guitars.



*You talk about "wandering through discovery" – where do all the ideas come from?*

Ideas come from everywhere and everyone, sometimes when you least expect it – much like writing a song. Its all about what inspires you – circumstances, people, state of mind, feelings.... Custom designs present the challenge of capturing, specifically, what someone proposes in terms of their individual thoughts and directions – often diving deeper exposes things that ring truer than they even realized in finding what may be right to resonate for them. Custom designs are intimate, and when you dedicate the time to finding the right details, it can be so uniquely personal and incredibly powerful.



*And not just works of art, they sound delightful too, before you put them through an amplifier...*

Thank you! First and foremost, before consideration of aesthetic details, I strive to build excellent, well playing instruments. As a seasoned guitar player, I wouldn't be happy with a "wall hanger" unless that was all I knew I was looking for, as a decorative item. I make





an effort to post videos for most instruments I build in order to demonstrate how they sound. In fact I usually write and perform original pieces specifically inspired by the individual instrument. Most are amplified in order to demonstrate the pickups (equipped in most), but I'm more than happy to provide acoustic videos upon request for any guitar I build. The fact is, as a rule for me, I build my guitars with acoustic properties in mind, I want them to perform well plugged AND unplugged.

*"It is all about what sound you are looking to achieve"*

*You're probably a little reluctant to put magnetic pickups over some of the intricate designs – are piezos better?*

When I design, I take pickup type, and orientation into consideration in order to plan accordingly. I apply a similar train of thought regarding scale in terms of bridge placement. I make every effort to maximize available space when developing themes and layout. Because I know where I will be placing a pickup or bridge, I position important elements of the design such that they won't be obscured. The time and place for choosing piezo pickups or magnetic pickups is often misunderstood. So many people summarily are under the assumption that magnetic is better. The fact is, it is all about what sound you are looking to achieve. Magnetic pickups have strong response, and offer great tonal variation. Magnetic pickups can run the gamut in terms of style and tone. Piezos, in contrast, will generally give you an "amplified acoustic" sound. Basically, if you want your instrument to capture the sound of the body, and generate amplified acoustic tone, you probably want piezos. If you want your

instrument to behave like an electric guitar, with more varied intrinsic tonal options, you would most likely want magnetic pickups. It's all a matter of choice.

*So it's not just about artistic expression, you go to a lot of trouble to make them play well too...*

Yes. In fact, for me, it starts there. As a player myself, I want to bring a great playing experience to others. The quality of the instrument comes first and foremost. The rest, in terms of all the details, is then what makes each one so unique.

*And even if a customer buys one purely as an object of art, you're confident it will be played sooner or later?*

What a customer chooses to do is certainly up to them, but I always hope that my guitars will ultimately be played. In the end, I am happy when my creations bring inspiration to someone on whatever level is most important to them.

*What happens to the ones that don't make the grade when you're building?*

Trial, error, and experimentation are the greatest learning tools. I am extremely careful in developing builds, and I tend to think things through from every angle I can conceive of beforehand. I am a perfectionist, almost to a fault. While my guitars have become even more and more refined over time since I began creating them, I have yet to build one that hasn't made me happy.

*It's hard to believe we're not seeing them played more by professionals?*

That's kind of you to say. I have had the privilege of creating custom guitars for such incredibly talented touring artists as Jeff Campbell and Megan Slankard. I would certainly be proud to see and hear my instruments played by even more professionals. I look forward to exciting things on the horizon for Deepseed Guitars.

*You must get a lot of feedback from buyers?*

I am happy to say that I've been fortunate to have nothing but wonderful feedback from buyers. Customers have also graciously sent me pictures and videos after receiving their guitars. It always fills my heart to see them in the hands where they were meant to be.

*Are they all four strings or do people ask you to build six-string guitars too?*

I typically build with four strings, but I have built with three strings upon request from a customer who became a repeat buyer. The Harp Guitar I built has eight strings – four on the guitar neck, and four on the harp neck. I haven't built with six strings, in the conventional sense, as I have always loved the romanticism in the history of the CBG as a platform, where three or four strings are more traditional.

*Are you sending many overseas?*

I've had the pleasure of sending my work as far off as Australia, though most of my customers thus far have been located in the USA.

*“Anything is possible  
when you apply your  
heart and mind”*

*What else have you created over the years  
besides Deepseed guitars?*

I have always loved projects of all sorts. I've created countless decorative items, built tables and other furniture pieces, and have modified or customized many things around the home. I try to instill in my son the philosophy that anything is possible when you apply your heart and mind. To be truly honest, the greatest creation I've ever been a part of has been him. ■

deepseedguitars.com  
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contact: Rich@DeepseedGuitars.com





*Custom playable art  
CK Instruments*



*by Craig Koen, "Guitar Steampunk Slide Cigarbox,"  
Port Lincoln, Australia*

*I guess it all started with a biscuit tin ukulele I made back in 2007. I had bought a ukulele for my daughter and didn't know how to tune it...so I went online and found a guy using a cookie tin uke. I thought I would give it a crack and make one. It turned out ok. I was happy, I was hooked and made another one. Then I was really hooked. Over time I came to realize that "everything is a guitar part it just doesn't know it yet!"*

Since then I've made instruments out of cigar boxes, hubcaps, shovels, cricket bats, skateboards, bedpans – you name it! Most of the timbers I use are recycled from door frames, skirting boards, bed slats, broken furniture, etc. There is some beautiful timber just laying around out there... re-purposing/recycling and do-it-yourself are an adventure from the start. Good cigar boxes are hard to find in Australia, but there's plenty of other good materials lying around for the taking. I go around to garage sales and scrap yards looking for all kinds of objects that other people regard as junk, but that I find eye-pleasing



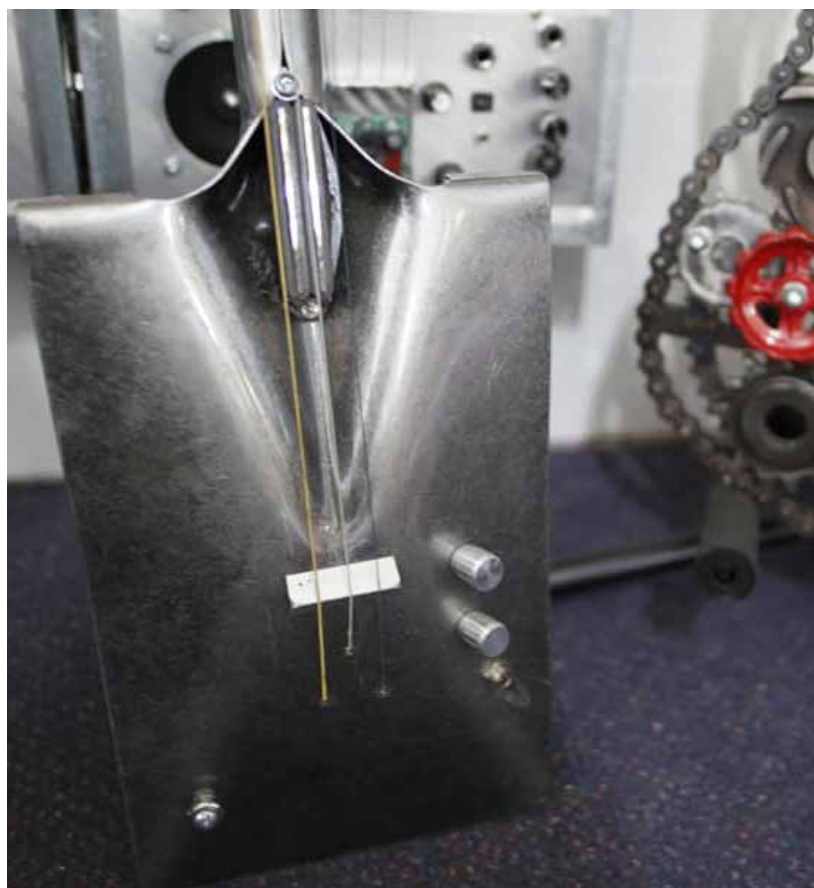


and have value to me. I make instruments out of anything that resembles one – big, small, round, bent or square – from conventional box guitars to steampunk – whatever I can lay my hands on!

*“Everything’s a guitar part, it just doesn’t know it yet!”*

I can play guitar, but I don’t perform. And I really admire people that can get up and play in front of a crowd. But there’s the art of playing and the art of designing, forging and creating. For me, like many fellow builders, the reward is seeing other people enjoy my instruments. I’ve sold them to people that can’t play a note, but buy them because they like the look of them. I’ve sold them to complete beginners and pros alike who appreciate them for the unique sound they make as well as their looks. And I’m a perfectionist – I won’t stop until they sound good!

I’m self-taught and have accumulated all kinds of tools to make a day in the shed pass by in the blink of an eye. I’ve lost count of how many instruments I’ve made over the years. Some builds go relatively quickly and others take months to complete. Time’s not really an issue. For example, it took me around five years to eventually build an industrial punk guitar, made from cogs, chains, gauges and industrial scrap parts. I pictured it in my head, but couldn’t quite work it out, had other stuff going on. Then one day someone gave me a motor bike drive chain and a few cogs and it all came together.







I have made quite a few now and they are all a challenge, which is just how I like it! Steampunk is a lot more visual and spontaneous, more intense – telling a story that’s half nostalgic and half futuristic – preserving things that tickle the imagination and that might otherwise get lost in time?

I have people asking me how an industrial punk guitar without wooden parts can sound any different from other solid-body guitars, but I tell them to listen for the different sounds bouncing off the metal parts. I admit the solid-body industrial steampunk guitars are pretty heavy compared to other instruments, but still only about as heavy as a full-metal resonator guitar. And of course some people like heavier guitars. I personally have a preference for four strings, strung GDGD, but that’s also a matter of experimenting to find the right sound to suit the owner.

*“Preserving things that tickle the imagination and that might otherwise get lost in time?”*

I had built a few steampunk box guitars with small steampunk type amps to go with them before the idea came to me to put an amp inside the guitar. Since my “amp guitars” have proven to be very popular because you can busk with them or run them through an external amp or both. You can also plug in a mate’s guitar and jam together.



I keep thinking of new builds – for example, I’m still thinking about how to build a guitar out of rabbit traps (without any risk to the player of course :-)). And I’ll make instruments according to customers’ specifications. The sky’s the limit when it comes to imagination and guitars. There are no rules! “Transformative art” keeps me motivated and I like to think it’s contagious too, so that my work may rub off on other artists. Art can have a huge impact on peoples’ moods and emotions, and can have a uniting effect.

*“Transformative art keeps me motivated and I like to think it’s contagious too”*

I sell locally and have also sent several guitars to overseas buyers, and also sold them to tourists getting off cruise ships at Port Lincoln. We set up stalls on the foreshore and people can’t help taking in interest in them. I string up small-scale guitars like ukuleles and it’s surprising how many people buy them because they already know how to play a ukulele. Naturally there are customers who have still never seen or played a CBG who are amazed how easy they are to play and decide to take one home. I build dulcitaras that are a little more limited in what you can play, but are very easy to play. You almost can’t go wrong with them as a fun and enjoyable instrument. Ultimately it’s a nice feeling to have pieces of your art in people’s homes around the world. You can imagine the buzz I get when touring professionals pick them up and play them. It’s been a great pleasure to make various





instruments to add to Fijian-born multi-instrumentalist Jay Hoad's collection. Over the years I have made him a dulcitar, all manner of cigar box guitars (from twin necks to steampunk to a standup wine box bass), an industrial shovel, a cricket bat, a skateboard and an industrial punk guitar to play at his shows all over the world. I really enjoy hearing them in a lot of his songs. His music runs the gamut from rock to jazz, reggae, tribal and celtic music.

So, at this point, I guess I can safely call myself a "multi-instrumentalist" too. I like to stay flexible in my approach so that no two instruments are the same – I figure if you want an everyday electric or acoustic guitar, there are shops full of them. I have no plans to make a "conventional" guitar, in fact a lot of my creations have no plans at all – they just happen! ■

C K Instruments' Guitar Steampunk Slide Cigarbox  
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*Who would have thought?*



Photo: Giulia Valente

# *Interview with Gabriele Dodero*

## *Padua, Italy*

*“Remember ‘Inside Llewyn Davis’? The award-winning film by the Coen brothers inspired by the life and times of the American songwriter Dave Van Ronk? The Greenwich Village, the Sixties, the streets of New York, the wanderings, the adventures, the loves, the small and great daily tragedies ... All of these images and scenes come back when listening to ‘Stories For A Friend,’ the debut album of guitarist and singer Gabriele Dodero...” – Umberto Poli, Guitar Club Magazine*

*CBGR: Gabriele, besides playing the acoustic guitar when you were young, you studied trumpet and piano at the Giuseppe Tartini Conservatory of Music in Trieste?*

Gabriele Dodero: I studied trumpet for ten years at the Conservatory, at first in Padova, my home town, then in Rovigo, Trieste and finally in Vicenza. With trumpet I have performed in big bands and in the Conservatory orchestra, and I have played in small jazz combos too.



Photo: Adriano Siberna



Unfortunately almost ten years ago I had to stop playing for health reasons: the trumpet's mouthpiece was damaging my teeth, causing me pain after I finished playing. It was a very hard decision because I love the trumpet, but it was necessary, and now I feel good playing guitar.

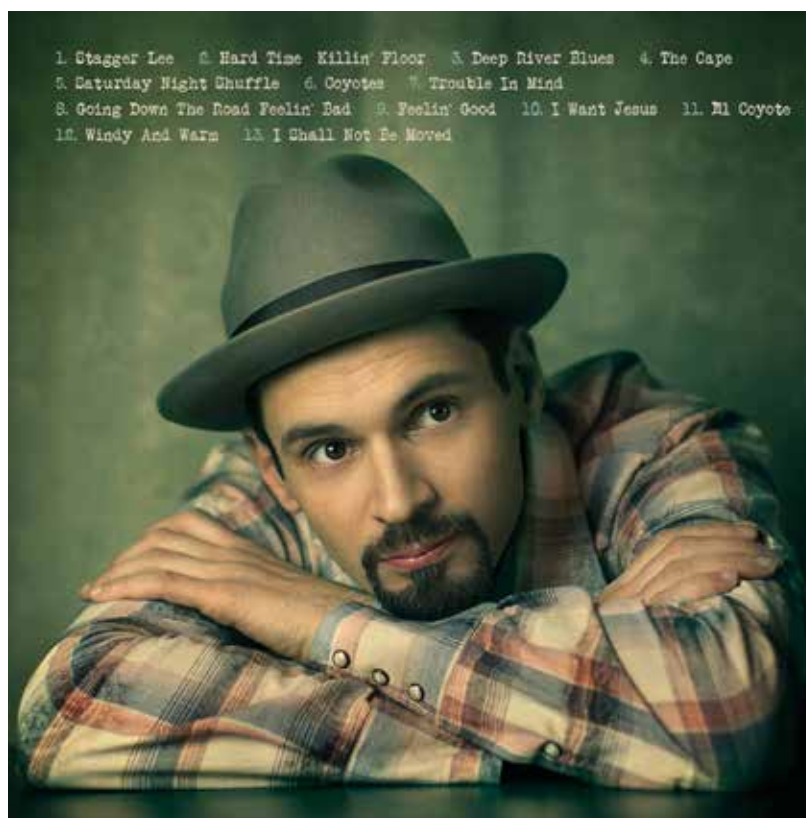
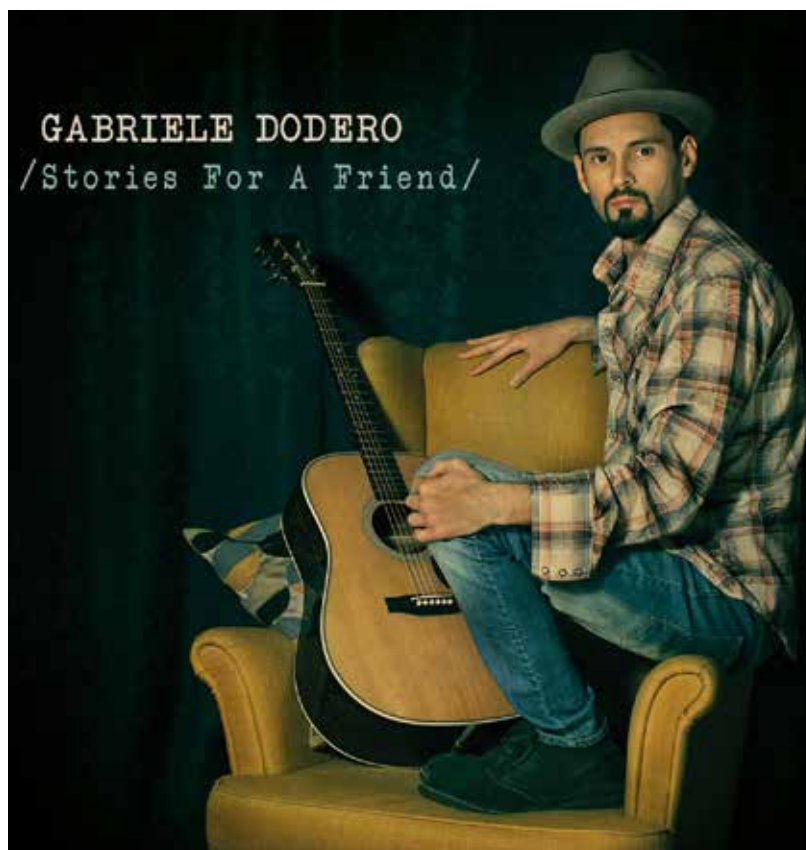
*Over the years you've made the transition from classical music to jazz, rock and blues?*

After giving up trumpet I have been playing electric blues for years, playing Stevie Ray Vaughan, Freddie King, Jimi Hendrix with my trio. However, some years ago I decided to change direction, looking for another way to express myself and my music. So I picked up the acoustic guitar again, the first instrument I learned to play when I was a kid, and went back in time with roots, folk blues and traditional music.

*“...back in time with roots, folk blues and traditional music”*

*Your “Stories For A Friend” album includes traditional blues, gospel, country and a touch of jazz?*

“Stories For A Friend” came at a very delicate moment for me. The idea of recording an album was given to me by a close friend who always supported and encouraged me, and who introduced me to a lot of new music. He passed away some time after I had started the recordings and we were unable to listen to the album together: so I dedicated the whole work to him, hoping that the stories will reach him wherever he is.



Would you describe it as relaxed and easy listening?

When I first approached the recording, I decided to choose music that made me feel good: the songs included in this first album represent the artists and musicians that inspire me – Guy Clark, Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James, Doc Watson, they are the masters of folk, roots and traditional music.

When did you first introduce a cigar box guitar into your music selection?

I introduced the cigar box guitar in my act two years ago after being the lucky winner of a CBG at an Italian Blues festival called Blues Made In Italy, one of the most important events dedicated to blues music in our country. At the end of the day they held a lottery and, of all the participants, they picked out my name. Who would have thought? This completely random event made me collide and immediately fall in love with this beautiful instrument. I had never played a CBG before, now it comes with me to every concert.

*“Who would have thought?  
... now it comes with me to  
every concert”*

This guitar was built by Gigi Ravasio, one of the most well-known cigar box guitar makers in Italy: his instruments are played by several musicians in the country and, even if he is sadly not with us anymore, we still have his creations that testify to his love of CBGs and his passion for blues and music.



with Gigi Ravasio 2018†  
Photo: Giulia Valente



*Last year you were a finalist in the International Blues Challenge selections at the Italian Delta Blues Festival in Rovigo?*

Last year I was selected together with three other musicians to compete at the Italian selections for the International Blues Challenge, and of course the CBG came with me! I used it to perform “Hard Time Killin’ Floor” by Skip James. While the jury didn’t pick me, it was nevertheless a beautiful and intense experience, and I still remember the emotion and how fast my heart beat before I went on stage.

*What else is on the agenda this year?*

At the end of this year I’m going to record a new album, but this time the songs will be written and composed by me. I spent almost all last year songwriting, which is a completely new experience for me – once again face to face with my feelings and fears – but in a deeper way this time. Well, honestly, it hasn’t always been a positive journey, but I felt that the moment was right to tell something more about myself and to speak with my own words. And the new album will of course feature my trusty cigar box guitar. ■

[gabrieledodero.com](http://gabrieledodero.com)  
[facebook.com/gabriele.dodero](https://facebook.com/gabriele.dodero)



Photo: Adriano Siberna

*People and places*





# Interview with Todd Cecil

## Asheville, NC, USA

*“A friend recently asked me if I purposely write music that no-one quite knows what to call. This was puzzling to me, but I get what he was talking about. I listen to a lot of different styles of music and whatever comes out is probably a little taste of each...”*

– Todd Cecil

CBGR: Todd, You originally hail from Nashville, Tennessee??

Todd Cecil: I’m originally from Greensboro North Carolina, but lived in Nashville for ten years, so I kind of consider it my home. But as with any home it is always good to leave once in a while. I live in Asheville North Carolina now in the smoky mountains.

Have you always played the style of music you play now?

No, today is very different. Music and creating for me has to go where it goes and you have to be willing and open enough to follow it... follow your heart I guess. Nothing is worse for an artist than being stuck or repetitive, so I think change has to happen to stay original, and without originality what’s the point of doing art?

So how would you describe your brand of music today?

Right now the songs I am writing have a comedic thing to them. I value light-heartedness and humor as a very valuable walking stick through this world and I have





never really put humor in songwriting, so it has been time to explore this. The music itself is kind of party danceable stuff, something that moves and is fun to play live.

*Tell us about your “woodshedding” days...*

I guess woodshedding is a continuous part of writing and creating for me. In Nashville it was a bit strange because everyone wanted to co-write songs and for me it is a bit of a private affair. So that's one side of Nashville I didn't relate to. One time I pretty much hid out in the mountains for six months to just learn how to play the Lowebow guitar.

*“I value light-heartedness and humor as a very valuable walking stick through this world”*

*So the Lowebow is more or less your trademark?*

Well the Lowebow just seemed to fulfill the big sound I had been searching for a long time. A fat big bass sound along with a guitar sound – way too cool! I have a gold CBG with a special pickup made in France by a good friend of mine, Joel Poupeau, and I have a guy in Germany, Willy Burgos, a very high-end guitar maker that I talked into making me a fretable CBG with a drum installed in it – so it's a bass, a guitar and a drum plugging into three amps now – super cool! Although John Lowe has made me two other Lowebows, I play the red one all the time and nothing sounds like it. The red one is the magic one that seems to be my main go-to.





*You're quite the world traveler – which countries have you performed in since you started your musical journey?*

France, Spain, Germany and Scotland, although Scotland was a long time ago and I'm itching to go back!

*You originally played solo and then joined forces with Mike Fore and Scott Harte to make up the band Back South?*

Yes, those guys are great and fun to play with. I used to go down to Columbia while in Nashville to play shows and Mike Fore showed up a couple of times and I was blown away, so I eventually talked him into moving closer to me.

*“People’s personalities always show up in the music”*

*And the Todd Cecil Band with Benny Safferling?*

Benny I met in Germany last year and once again felt a bit of magic and ease when we played together. He is a great musician and a super nice guy (people's personalities always show up in the music). He had a pretty successful band here in the States a long time ago, opening for Nirvana and the Chili Peppers among others.

*How do you explain your popularity in France and Spain?*

Not quite sure about that one. I think if you open yourself up to all possibilities, where you go and where your music will fly will call you.





*This year you'll be in Germany from August to October?*

I will be over there for the month of August this year, with plans for a longer tour in 2020.

*What do you like most about touring overseas?*

I like the people and places and situations that you find yourself in. Music tends to always bring unexpected things such as crazy places you get to visit and amazing people. The folks overseas are so incredibly caring when it comes to helping travelers.

*What do you like least ☺?*

The airplane ride – long, long, long...

*You talked about a “personal change” in your life over the last few years – can you elaborate on that?*

It was a big shift in my life when the Nashville flood happened and I lost everything – my guitars all drowned and all my family heirlooms, plays, children's books, a half-finished novel and poems that I had written were all gone. This created a big hole in my heart and made me pack my bags and move from Nashville. I didn't live anywhere for about a year, staying in hotel rooms. I went to France for a couple of months and then the beach for a while, and then ended up here in Asheville.





Last year's album with Back South "The Dirt Yard Choir" started out as an EP and now features 15 songs – where does all the inspiration come from?

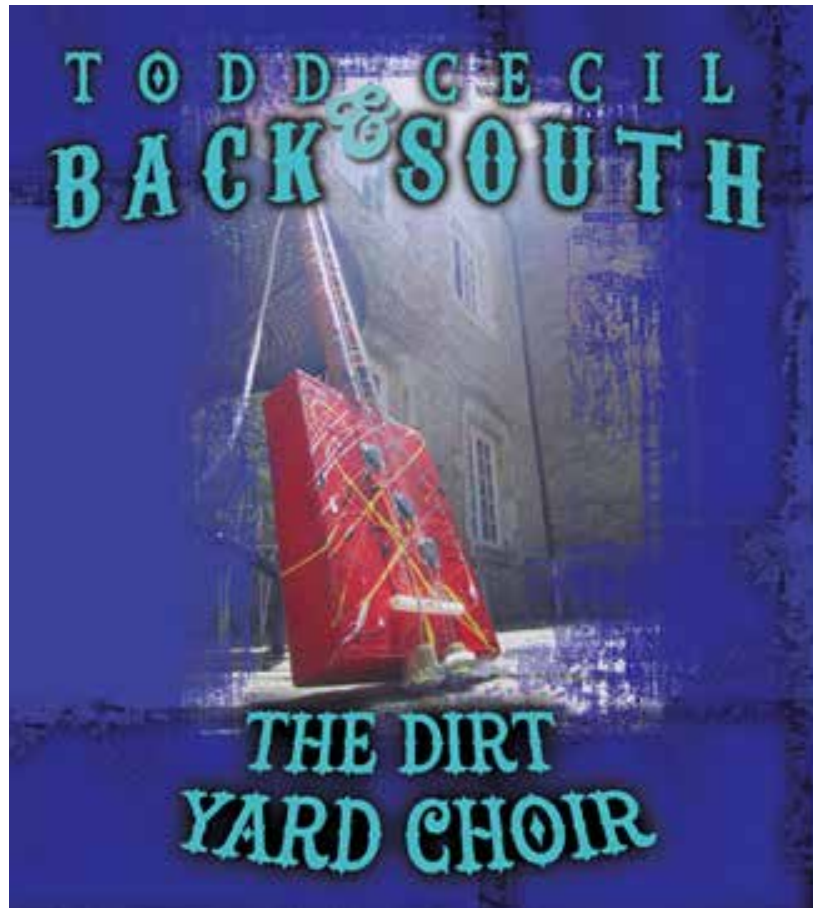
I think it is always out there for you, but you have to seek it. I think most artists are always looking for something that will make them make the art. The dry times suck, but when it's on, life is magic.

*"I like the people and places and situations that you find yourself in"*

Bill Kopp's music magazine calls it "a wholly original creation from the just-twisted-enough minds of Todd Cecil and his band mates in Back South" – how would you respond to that?

Love it, love it! I think he is referring to self-expression and the courage to write wherever it leads you. A friend recently asked me if I purposely write music that no-one quite knows what to call. This was puzzling to me, but I get what he was talking about. I listen to a lot of different styles of music and whatever comes out is probably a little taste of each, but definitely not purposely done. I think this would be writing from the mind and not the heart. ■

toddcecil.com  
facebook.com/toddcecilmusic



Builders mentioned in this article:

Johnny Lowebow  
facebook.com/JohnnyLowebow

Joel Poupeau (Joel Blues Guitars)  
www.blues-guitares.com

Willy B Guitars  
facebook.com/people/Willy-B-Guitars/100012929046435

# Press release...David (Dr. Easy) Reed

*"I look forward to continuing on the journey"*  
– *cbgreview.com July 2018*

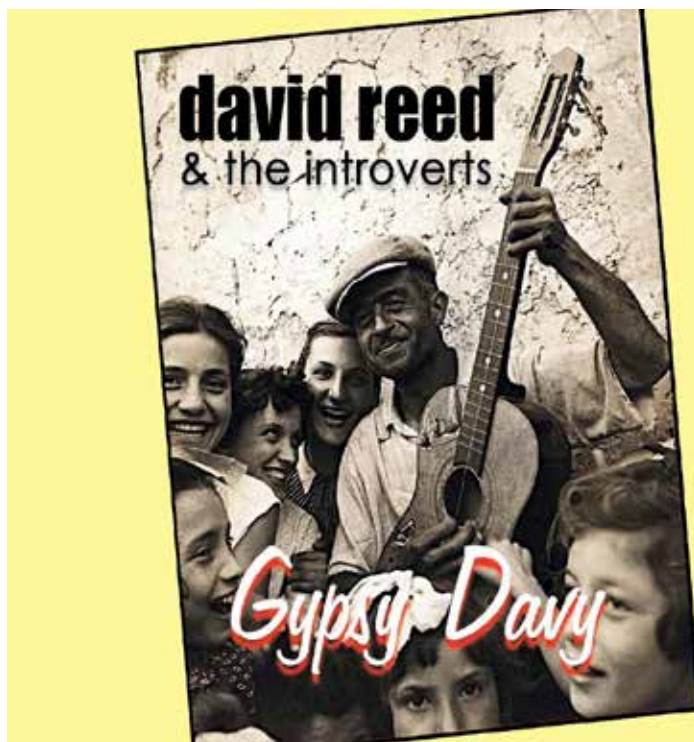
*David Reed has been bringing a smile to the faces and a beat to the feet of audiences young and old for most of his life. In 2019, his fourth solo recording, "Gypsy Davy," spotlights some new songs, old songs, borrowed songs and blues songs – featuring The Introverts, "Doctor Ea\$y's Sonic Boxes" and an exciting assemblage of Berkshire County musicians.*

David's inspired voice powers and growls its way through the blues, caresses the ballads, and his lively-up, West Indian patois in the reggae/calypso selections is always a delightful surprise. David's vocals and cigar box playing on the title cut of "Gypsy Davy" are an exotic and energetic musical journey that fires the imagination.

Spotlighting his own Band of Introverts (Sam Earnshaw, drums and Scott McKenney, bass), a number of distinguished guest artists join David, including Scott Murawski (lead guitar), Mark Mercier (keyboards), Eric Martin (violin/viola), Dave Vittone (accordion), Brendan Reed (djembe), Mark Tuomenoksa (saxophones), Claudia d'Alessandro and Lee Everett (backup vocals).

Gypsy Davy is available at CDBaby, Amazon, Spotify and other online outlets. ■

tambouraproductions.com  
store.cdbaby.com/cd/davidreedtheintroverts





# Contributors

*Matt Isbell* is a Memphis native and frontman for *Ghost Town Blues Band*, singing and playing six-string and homemade three-string cigar-box guitars, as well as harmonica. He is also founder of Memphis Cigar Box. *Ghost Town Blues Band* was International Blues Challenge Runner-up in 2014 and Independent Blues Award winner for “Best Contemporary Blues Song” in 2016. The band plays throughout the USA and Canada, and is increasingly setting its sights on Europe. Its new album “Shine” will be officially released in October 2019.



*Rich Kennedy* is the designer and luthier behind Deepseed Guitars. He received his B.S. from Binghamton University and went on to become a painter, decorative artist and project manager prior to discovering his passion for creating unique instruments. His work has been featured in Guitar World Magazine, and displayed in the exhibit “The Art of the Cigar Box Guitar” at NAMM. Rich designs and builds Deepseed Guitars at his home in New York City, with loving support from his wife and son.



*Craig Koen* was born in Adelaide, South Australia. After leaving the “Big Smoke” for the country in his teens, and taking on a variety of jobs, he finally settled in Port Lincoln, where he now uses recycled materials to create cigar-box-inspired guitars with a difference – among other things using a MIG welder and grinder to build four-string steampunk guitars. CK Instruments sells “custom playable art” to customers and musicians worldwide with the motto “everything’s a guitar part, it just doesn’t know it yet!”



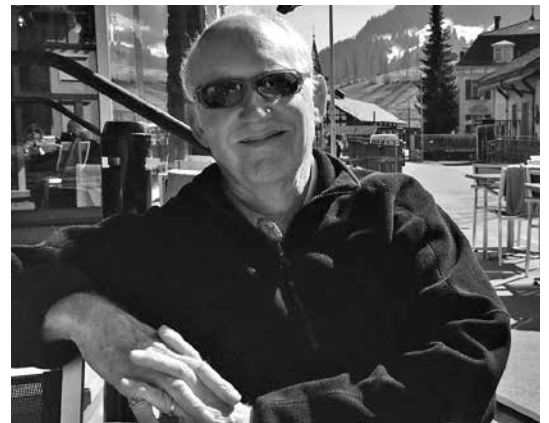
*Gabriele Dodero* was born in Padova in northern Italy. During his musical journey, he has explored various musical genres, including classical, jazz, rock and blues. He studied trumpet and piano with internationally known masters, playing in big bands, classical orchestras and small jazz combos. In 2016, he turned back to acoustic guitar – immersing himself in fingerstyle and roots music, including cigar box guitar. His first recording “Stories For A Friend” is a selection of blues, gospel and traditional music.



**T**odd Cecil is a Blues artist and songwriter from Nashville & the Smoky Mountain areas of America. He has performed and traveled all over the world, with three solo studio records and one studio record with the band *Back South*. He predominately plays a Lowebow cigar box guitar (a bass and guitar in one instrument) and sings and plays harmonica to create his full band sound. Besides performing and touring with *Back South*, Todd plays in Europe every year with Benny Sapphire in the *Todd Cecil Band*.



**R**oss 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 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.



*Next issue: October 2019*

⇒ *Back to CBG Review home page*



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