

# CBG REVIEW

April 2022

## HOLLOWBELLY THE MAGIC AND THE ALCHEMY

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# Editorial

## Magic and alchemy

Welcome to the April 2022 edition of CBG Review. First up, join Paul Atkinson in the U.K. as he interviews John (Hollowbelly) Farr after Hollowbelly's last-ever concert at Boxstock last year. In this especially memorable article, John talks with Paul about about his life and music (the best job in the world!), and the "magic and alchemy" of cigar box guitars.

Our next interview is with Bill Jagitsch from Bluesboy Jag Box Guitars in the U.S.A. Bill has been a professional musician for 42 years and has built and sold thousands of CBGs internationally for 18 years. Read how Bill makes them for every type of music and musician, and the particular way he designs and customizes his instruments both inside and out.

Australia's Brett Littlefair is another talented singer/songwriter who embraces the "magic and alchemy" of CBGs. He tells us how each of his cigar box guitars has its own personality and how CBGs have changed the direction of his music. His 2020 "Foot Stompin'" album has drawn Brett a large online following of people from all over the world.

Next, Cathy Mullaert reaches out to Elías Chandía Schröder of Elías Box Guitar in Chile, asking about life in Chile, CBGs, inspirations and aspirations. Elias tells us there's nothing quite like a cigar box guitar for creating simple but powerful music, with a distinct sound different to regular guitars. For Elias, it's all possible when you make your own music!

Fred Cachou in the south of France "tinkers" with homemade string instruments and decorative items for fun, aiming to breathe life and purpose into unused and discarded objects. Fascinated by guitars, their history and how to build them, his minimalist flair for art is reflected in instruments of all shapes, sizes and materials that are unmistakably "made by Fred!"

As always – read, enjoy and be inspired!

Best regards  
Huey Ross

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# Hollowbelly United Kingdom

# The magic and the alchemy

## John Farr a.k.a. Hollowbelly, Exmouth, U.K.

Interview by Paul Atkinson

Hollowbelly, the Cigar Box Guitar player formally known as John Farr, is one of the most established performers in the field in the UK and has traveled extensively across Europe purveying his own unique brand of “punk blues.” I caught up with John at the Boxstock Festival in Wolverhampton, UK last October, following his final ever performance as a one man band and persuaded him to join me for a chat.

*Paul Atkinson: You’ve made quite a reputation as a performer on cigar box guitars playing as you name it, “punk blues.” Can you give us a quick overview of how and when this all started for you?*

John Farr: It was the usual thing of watching “Top of the Pops” and thinking “Err... damn, that looks good fun, I wanna do that,” so I wanted a guitar. But my grandad went to America and he came back with a ukulele, so I had to hide my disappointment and learn to play that. So that was the first thing I actually played and I ended up getting together with some friends and we were in a cabaret band, and then the next thing we knew we were making 50 quid a night when 50 quid was quite a lot in the 70s. On the cabaret circuit we had to have a special license because we were so young, you know, you play these crazy places.

But luckily when we went on, as soon as the curtain went back, there was always a reaction: “ahhhh” because there were these huge bloody guitars or whatever and we

were only yey high, but we could also play to be fair. Because “ahhhh” would only get you so far, but then you had to deliver.

*So you were self-taught on the ukulele?*

No, there was a guy, he was a milkman for a living and he showed me how to play. But he used to say he dreaded me coming round because I used to learn really fast and he hadn’t learnt what to teach me the next week! He ended up giving up being a milkman and turning the whole thing into a guitar school. So when my mate went round, he was 15, he said, “You’re not paying, you’re a friend of John Farr’s.” Because, he said, if it wasn’t for this specky little kid that came round to learn how to play the ukulele, he would never have gone on to do what he did. That’s nice...

*So where did it go after the cabaret band?*

Well, punk came along and er, as everybody knows, that changed everything, you know. And I started playing in this punk band because I went to university and met this lad and he was in this punk band. So we used to hitch it down to London and I watched him play and eventually I started playing bass in that and then, you know.... It wasn’t a named punk band that anyone would particularly sort of know, but they were good and they were cutting their own 7” singles and albums like you did back in the day. So that was the other foray into music until, you know, it became the 80’s and it all petered out.

So how did you get into cigar box guitars?

Well, I played regular six string guitars in regular tuning and didn't even know anything about open tuning, and it would have been Shane Speal. You can't really talk about cigar box guitars without talking about Shane Speal because he was doing it and advertising it before anybody else. So, at some point, I must have come across that and I thought, oh, I'll get one of them and that's when I went on to eBay or whatever and there was this cigar box guitar by a guy called "Chickenbone John," so I thought I'll give that a go, you know. And he was selling it for about £30 or something, and I thought "If I don't like it, it's not a massive amount of money to lose."



*“...that’s when the magic and the alchemy happened”*

But as soon as I played that, I thought, 'Oh my God!', the sound, you know, it was what I'd been looking for and that's when the magic and the alchemy happened – where you've taken three strings away, you've got no frets, you can hardly play any chords on it and press your finger down on it and that's, that's the real limitation. How that makes it, makes you, be more creative, I've no idea. It's kind of magical, but it did and that's when the songs came because, well I can't say why, it was just, that's when I could write because I'd tried to write on a six string and it was just pants. Well, so yeah,



it was a real gift for me. It's just mad. I suppose it's like a pallet if you're a painter – “Oh, you can only use red, yellow and green” or something and then finding out, “Wow, this is so much better than having a limitless amount of colors,” you know, if I could explain it I would but all I can tell you it, it's that whole thing of less is more. It really is. It certainly was for me.

*“It's that whole thing of less is more”*

*You had a break when someone asked you to play at the 100 Club*

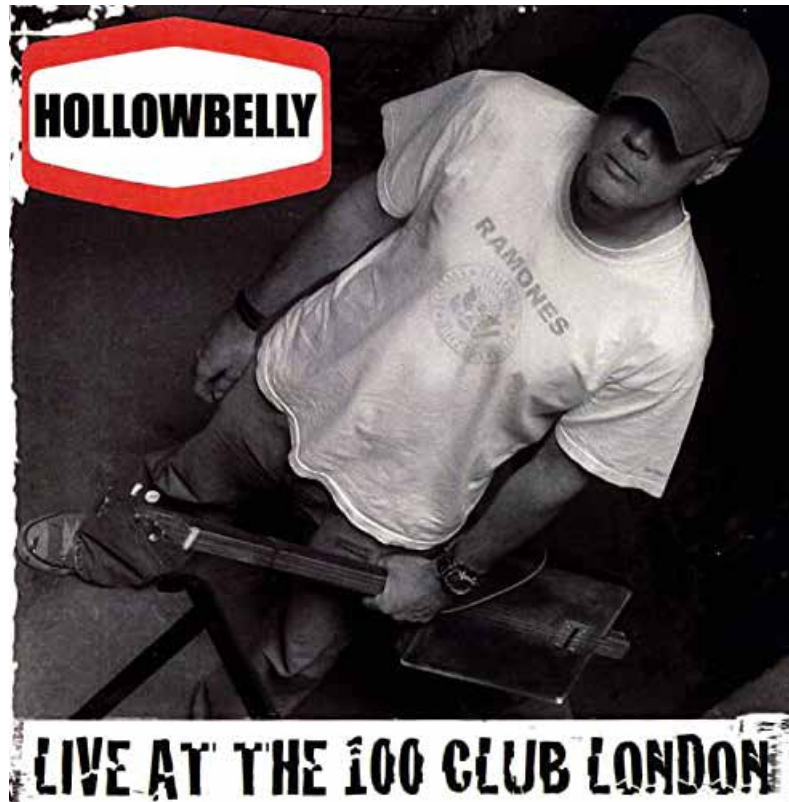
Yeah, it was just crazy. Well, I put a thing up on YouTube and then I thought, I'm half embarrassed, people are going to think “what's this silly git doing with a piece of stick and a box,” but no, people liked it, you know, and then straight away, “why don't you come and play Chicago Blues?” So I'm sat in my bedroom with one video and one song. But the lovely thing about YouTube, which I really love, is that it's so democratic and there's no reason for anyone to say anything nice if they don't like it, but you've got like, so much encouragement and you know, lots of people said, “hey, you seen this guy doing this thing?” So I thought, I'd better write another one, and then eventually this guy just err, plucked me out. Dave Hill is like a punk, trash blues DJ guy and he was connected and put me forward to others. One got in contact and said “do you want to play?” I said “no, because I haven't practiced enough!” So he said, “well, I'll ring you back in three months.”



And sure enough, he did. It's crazy because he could have had anyone! I mean, how many musicians are dying to play? He rang me back and I said "yeah, I'm ready" and I nearly died when he said it was the 100 Club. I thought "oh my god, the 100 Club!" You know, that's just a legendary thing, supporting a guy called Bob Lock. I did that and another night... it was crazy because it was like being plucked out of my couch in suburbia and dropped into this rock and roll lifestyle in days and then just plucked back in and I just landed back in my couch, thinking "what the hell was that?" I don't know what it was, but I liked it, liked it, yes I did! I thought "that's great!"

*"...this is the best job in the world!"*

And of course one thing leads to another. You play a gig and someone in the audience thinks "oh, I'm going to book this guy" and the next thing you know, you play that gig and then there's somebody in Belgium hears about you or sees you on the internet: "oh, could you come over?" "Well I can't come over for one show." "Oh, I can get you four shows" and then there's somebody in Germany saying, "Have you ever played in Germany?" "No!" "Well, would you like to?" "Well, yeah, can you get me three shows?" And then there's somebody bringing out all these specialized amps, all the lighting is being done, and I think "come on, somebody must be playing here." Then I think "oh yeah, it's me!" I couldn't quite believe all of this was happening because I was going to make a racket for 45



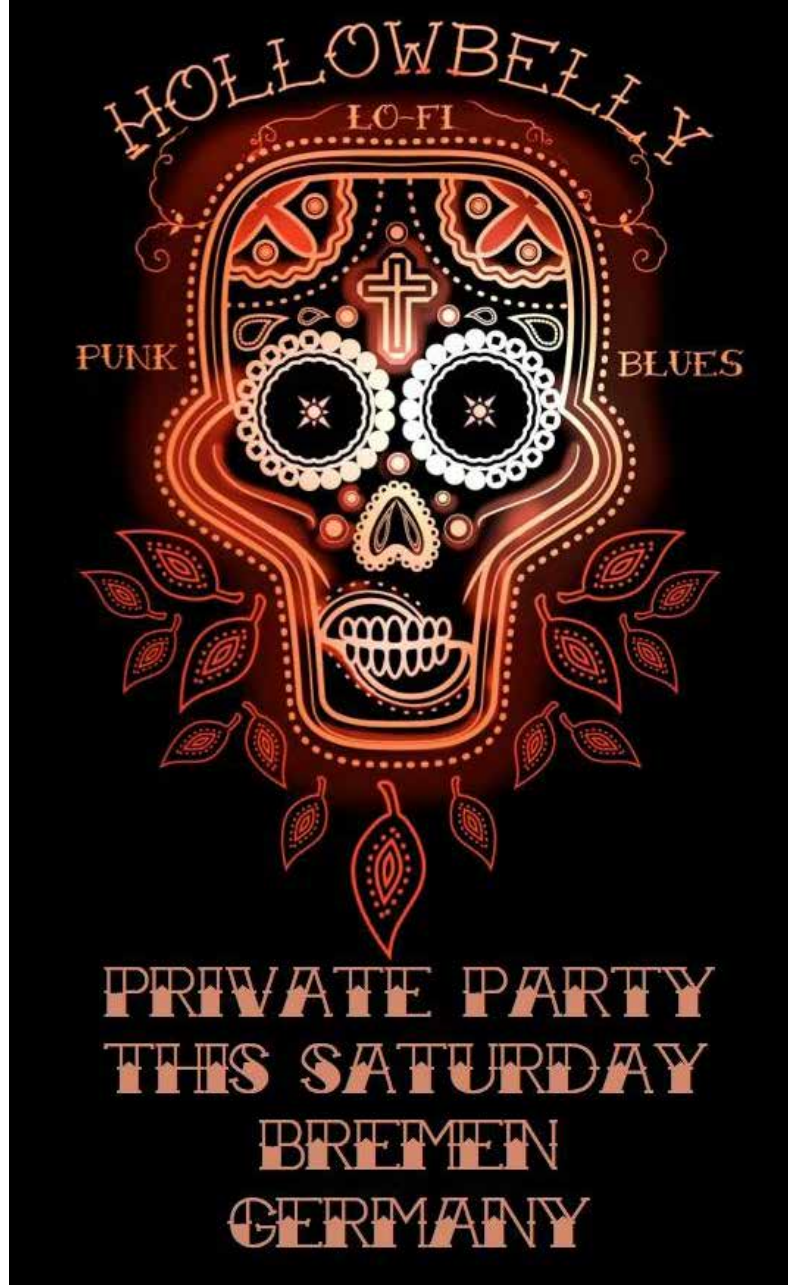
minutes and I went on and, it was just one of them audiences that, you know, I could have just done anything. It was crazy, I was playing and thinking “this is the best job in the world!”

You know, it was just fantastic! I came off stage and then there was this DJ on and getting drunk and dancing about. I thought “this is the boss.” I’d one more show to do the night after, I went out to Ponti Nia, which is some place out on the coast, in this tiny, tiny bar – one man and his dog and they left after two minutes! So, it was like right up there, “oh man, I’m a pop star!” Then down to “oh shit!” But usually the gigs are like last night, they are like a middling fab, nice good time. But it was just so interesting, I like to tell that story, because it’s just too extreme.

*Last time I met you we were filming a BBC documentary<sup>1</sup>, which was before the lockdown. How did the lockdown affect you in terms of your playing and recording?*

Well yeah, there was no playing really. I didn’t do an awful lot to be honest. Musically, you probably think “oh well, I’d hunker down and start writing stuff,” but then that’s that old thing of, the very thing that gave you wings becomes this sort of gilded cage. That’s one of the reasons I’m ending it, that last night was the last show, because I found, several years ago actually, you know, you can’t get out of the kitchen, from behind the one-man band format. If you take your baseball cap off, people get upset, you know, do you know what I mean? You become known for this thing, and it’s great, but in terms of being artistic, I’ve spent 13 years doing it and I’ve honed it and honed it, and swapped the high hat for low, swapped this kick drum for that kick drum and everything’s been tweaked to the Nth degree.

1. “Cigar Box Blues: The Makers of a Revolution”





But about four years ago, I realized I couldn't really take it any further. For me, this is it. So, what do I do? Do I keep going "oh I'll bring another album out?" And I started writing stuff and it was ok, but I've never wanted to write an ok album, who wants to do that? So, it came to a sort of natural ending. It's not the only reason, you know, there's health and age and other things that play a part, but that was the major reason. I just can't keep doing it forever, you know. And also, all of those sort of intersong stories and jokes I've probably told five thousand times and there's just some nights, where I think, if I just say that again, I'm just going to hit myself in the face, but you have to keep remembering that you are in a new town and everybody thinks it's really funny because they've never seen a thing before. So, there's a lot of that. It's been great, I'm so super grateful for the time I've had, you know. I know on my death bed I can look back and think "you know, no one can take that away from me."

*There are people who make cigar box guitars, but don't play them at all, and then maybe the majority of people who make and play them, and then there's a group of people that play, but don't make them. Where do you place yourself on that spectrum?*

Definitely the play and not the make. I made three. One of them I played at the 100 Club, so if you listen to the live at the 100 Club album, that's more of an EP really, as I didn't have that many songs, but that's on a banister rail from B&Q and a face painting tin my kids had left in the garden. But it was terrible, even by cigar box guitar standards and after about my third one that I'd made, the other two were pretty terrible as well. But by that stage I'd got to the point where people had started to see me on the internet and wanted to send me them. If you come to my little bungalow, I don't have wallpaper, I just have all of these things people have sent me from Virginia, Texas, California, New Orleans, Miami!





And of course, there's so many of them and I think "but what can you do?" You can't sell something that somebody has put their love into, you know, I don't say "I'm stuck with them" – that would be terrible and I don't mean that, but there's quite a few of them. But then again, it just shows you what I said before, the world's full of beautiful people, you know. Including that one I use the most from Christian Beshore in Pennsylvania, I mean we're never going to meet in real life I don't think, but just for him to send it, to say "hey thanks, I'm really interested in music again" is touching.

*"...it just shows you what I said before, the world's full of beautiful people"*

*So, what for you personally makes a good cigar box guitar?*

Right, ok, you can't design it in, I'll tell you that. I don't care how hippyish it sounds, some of them do have songs in them and some of them don't. I have no control over that and guess what, as a builder, neither do you. You might think you do, but you don't. It's just an alchemic thing that's gonna happen or it's not.

*It was a bit of a surprise to hear the announcement last night that it was your last performance. So, what happens now?*

I don't know if you've seen it but I've put a song on YouTube by "Hollowbelly and the Six Yard Skip." I couldn't play it live as a one-man band; I'd have to have a band, because it gets to that gilded cage thing again, where I said I can't get out of the

# HOLLOWBELLY & THE SIX YARD SKIP



SAVE ME JESUS



kitchen. But with this song I felt, right, I can do what the hell I want, it was still blues-based, but it was very much, I'd need a drummer, I'd need a band basically. Now, am I deliberately finishing Hollowbelly so I can do that? No I'm not. I've finished Hollowbelly for all the reasons I just told you. Now whether I'm definitely going to do this, I must admit, I've no burning ambition to right now. I'm gonna form a band, but certainly no burning ambition to take it on the road. It's great, but it's a lot of hard work. So, will there be some recordings and stuff? Probably, but I can't see me physically forming the band and taking it out on the road unless of course, you know, it blew up, then I would. I'd do it that way round.

There's two ways of doing it isn't there? You either do it the old-fashioned way that works, which is going out on the road, just keep playing and playing and playing, eventually you build up a following, which I'm just too old to do all that now. Or, there's the way you can do it where you go

on the internet and it gets shared like crazy and then you go out, knowing you've got a ready-made audience. That's the only way I'd go out now, I just haven't got the energy to go round Holland and Germany and Belgium anymore, especially with a band because there's no money in it. There's money in it if there's one man in a band, but if there's five of you.... But I don't know to be honest what I'm gonna be doing, you know, like I said, probably wearing slippers and growing tomatoes! ☺ ■

John Hollowbelly Farr:

<https://www.facebook.com/hollowbelly.lofipunkblues>

<https://hollowbelly.bigcartel.com>

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAEfGju3zcqI51onXL-3fnA>

Builders mentioned:

Chickenbone John: <https://www.facebook.com/chickenbonejohn>

Christian Beshore: <https://www.facebook.com/chrisybeshore>

Steve Chilvers: <https://www.facebook.com/steve.chilvers.77>

# Bluesboy Jag, U.S.A.



# Music is what I am...

## Bill Jagitsch, Bluesboy Jag Box Guitars, Little Rock, Arkansas, U.S.A.

I've been playing professionally for 42 years, so I have the experience and knowledge to make a sturdy, balanced, in-tune CBG for every type of music. I weight them for optimum balance and that increases the sustain. My customers ask me all the time if they are stage worthy, which of course they are; I wouldn't sell them if they weren't 😊.

*CBGR:* Bill, you started building CBGs about 18 years ago?

Bill Jagitsch: Yes I started in 2004 after seeing them on the cover of "Make" hobby magazine. I had already been playing blues and had heard about CBGs many years before, but I had never seen or played one. I figured they would fit perfectly into my blues solo act.

*And how many have you built and sold since then?*

Over 4,500.

*Eighteen years is a long time – what's changed since the CBG revolution?*

There are manufactured parts specifically for CBGs available now – bridges, pickups, nuts, special size boxes, whammy bars, fretboards, necks, resonator cones, and there are a lot of places to get CBG parts now; many are even being mass produced out of China, which is great. There are also a lot of people experimenting with different designs and "new" tunings that have come along – of course they're not new – they've





always been around on six-string guitars, but now they're moving into the CBG world, which is cool.

*How have your own builds evolved over the years?*

I've modified my original specs many times, such as adding more weight, which really helps to balance the CBG and increase the sustain. And I'm making a lot of lap dulcimers, steel-string ukes and natural-tuned four-strings, which allows you to play traditional guitar chords and classic rock riffs on a four-string CBG.

A few years ago I started adding an L-bracket under the neck to raise or lower the neck a bit, which in turn raises or lowers the strings. This allows you to adjust between higher slide string height and regular string height. I'm currently

fine tuning (literally!) a tremolo bar CBG design. I also started relicing CBGs many years ago to make them look old and beat up. They are extremely popular.

*Have you added any special tools to your workshop?*

Not really, I keep it simple: if it works, I stick with it.

*Rather than using piezos, one of your trademarks is making your own hand-wound pickups that you conceal under the lid of the box to preserve the artwork?*

Yes I stopped using transducers about a year after I started making CBGs because the tone is just not good. I use single coil and humbucker pups. I use screws as pole pieces, which touch the pole piece on the pup and embed the pup in the box without

cutting a hole in the box, this transmits the sound to the pup and preserves the art on the front of the box – all you see is three or four small screws. I sell a lot of CBGs with custom art. It started with customers sending me their photos of their favorite rock stars, business logos, etc.

*What techniques do you use when you redesign boxes?*

I add artwork to the top of the box to differentiate my brand from my competitors, I sometimes re-paint the boxes, sand off the logo, relic them. I make a relic'd "Crossroads" CBG, which is quite popular and I often get requests for custom paint jobs, business logos or customer supplied art for CBGs.

***"I keep it simple: if it works, I stick with it"***

*Where do you get all your ideas?*

The customers will give me their ideas and I'll go from there or search for royalty free art and come up with my own design. It's a lot of fun! I also peruse the Facebook CBG groups for ideas and suggestions.

*Which ones are your favorites?*

I made one with the Air Force logo of my fathers' World War Two bomber group. I've sold many hundreds of that model. I also like the pinup girl CBG, the old timey cigar box art and I even made a wood-burned CBG. One customer even wanted me to put a photo of her living room rug on the sides of her CBG!



Despite their makeshift nature, many musicians use them professionally – why are they good stage instruments?

I've been playing professionally for 42 years, so I have the experience and knowledge to make a sturdy, balanced, in-tune CBG for every type of music. I weight them for optimum balance and that increases the sustain. My customers ask me all the time if they are stage worthy, which of course they are; I wouldn't sell them if they weren't. ☺ For example, if you want to play country music on a CBG, it needs to have the correct pickups and tone. Conversely the same is true for metal, rock, blues, punk, slide, etc. Even a \$100 guitar can be used to play almost any type of music; you just have to take a few days to experiment with different styles of music until you determine what the best music is for each guitar (of course this applies to name brand mass manufactured guitars as well).

***“Experienced players and beginners are finally realizing that you can play any music on a CBG”***

And they're good for playing any kind of music?

Experienced players and beginners are finally realizing that you can play any music on a CBG, just like you can play any kind of music on any instrument – be it kazoo, organ, penny whistle or bagpipes, which is a very GOOD thing. Also there are more people playing jazz, country and metal and punk on CBGs; for years they were relegated pretty much to blues.





No doubt they turn heads when people busk with them?

I hope so. ☺

Especially with a cigar box amplifier as well?

My cigar box amps are really for low-volume living room playing. You can buy fantastic quality amps these days for \$100.

How long have you been performing yourself?

My first gig was in 1980. I was in a classic rock band (but it wasn't classic rock then ☺) playing Zep, Skynyrd, AC/DC, *Aerosmith*, and I've been in many dozens of bands since – rock, punk, blues, country, metal, psychedelic, improv.

Tell us about “Homicidal Briefcase” and “The Glands”...

*Homicidal Briefcase* had an electric bassoonist, keyboards played by a non keyboard player (who also made squonking noises on a trumpet mouthpiece), bass, live electric drums (a real novelty back then!) and me on metal/experimental guitar. We were a “subgenius” band (look it up ☺).

*The Glands* was sort of a more laid-back (usually ☺) improv/original band without drums. The leader often gave us instructions such as “at this point in the song any member of the band can randomly go up in pitch at their own individual tempo for as long or short as they wish – or not.”

We literally made up songs as we went and we played Hendrix, punk rock, *Ramones*, *Wire* and originals. We used to play totally freeform gigs (including



extemporaneous vocals) with “real” jazz musicians and they really had a blast playing with us. I was in a Frank Zappa type original band in Austin Texas called the *Rudy Schwartz Project*, which was so weird even the Austinites were clueless as to what we were doing 😊.

### How did you get into the blues?

I got into blues in 1998 and dove in head first learning open-tuned slide, which I always wanted to learn since I first heard *Foghat* when I was a teen. I tried to learn many times, but had no one to teach me until instructional DVDs became available.

When CBGs came along, I had already been playing open-tuned slide guitar for several years, so it was a no-brainer to make a CBG for myself. I immediately started selling them online because I had taken a big pay cut to move back to Little Rock from Austin and it took off immediately.

### And the Juke Joint Zombies?

That band was a straight-up old school swinging blues band. We were lucky enough to play the King Biscuit Blues Festival in Helena, Arkansas, one of the oldest and most well-known blues fests. I played a six-string cigar box guitar, which I still play today.

After that I was in a blues/rock trio called *VooDoo Sauce*. The bassist played with the *Cate Brothers* who were members of *the Band* in the eighties and toured Europe with Michael Burks in the early 2000s. The drummer was David McKnight (RIP) who played a suitcase bass drum that I made for him – one snare, no cymbals, no hi-hat! He also sang and played harmonica while he played drums with one hand!

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Which guitars do you take with you on gigs?

Lawdy! I rotate them all pretty much all the time to keep it fun and interesting. I have the usual arsenal of Fenders, Gibson knockoffs, cheap 60's electrics, baritone, six-string ukes, a Simon and Patrick open-tuned slide guitar that I put a \$6 Chinese pickup in (sacrilege!), various cheap knock-off electrics that I enjoy, a Taylor acoustic for solo and duo gigs, several three, four and six-string CBGs tuned various ways. I even have a double-neck CBG with one fretless three-string neck and one fretted four-string neck.

A look at "Jag's Music Page" reads like a book with a list of gigs and songs as long as your arm – how many CDs have you produced and did you write all the music yourself?

Well I started recording at home in the early eighties on a four-track then an eight-track. So if you include those, over 150. I've been way too busy to record much these last few years, with my solo and duo acts, and bands playing a lot of gigs plus making CBGs.

And how many videos have you posted on YouTube?

Hundreds, mostly of each new CBG I make. During the Covid lockdown, I posted about 50 acoustic solo music videos and a few of my 50 or so Facebook live shows.

Is it safe to say you'll never grow tired of guitars and music?

I hope so! Music is what I am! I play every day either by myself learning songs or with friends, and I play several blues jams a month. During Covid, I played my Facebook live shows from my home for a

year – it was a lot of fun – I learned two or three new songs every week. I also teach guitar part-time and I go see live music every week.

And the future of blues?

Very bright! Samantha Fish, Christone (Kingfish) Ingram – both of whom I opened for in Little Rock – Larkin Poe, Joanne Shaw Taylor. Joe Bonamassa, Danielle Nicole, JP Soars, Shemekia Copeland, Jontavious Willis, Gary Clark Jr., Tyler Bryant are just a few of my favorite "new generation" artists keeping the music alive. ■

<https://www.jagshouse.com>  
<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063743550397>  
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNsUZRfYzSGYS05Qi6pIx0A/videos>





**Brett Littlefair**  
**Australia**

# Foot stompin' down under

## Brett Littlefair, Adelaide, Australia

Photos: Debra Welk Littlefair

It started with North Mississippi style open tuning and then CBGs were another fork in my musical road. I love the challenge of coming up with different riffs and progressions from less strings. I love that the guitars create the tone. Usually a guitarist will use one guitar to record with. You know... their favorite... and then use different amps or settings to get a variety of sounds. CBGs have their own personality and tone built in.

CBGR: Brett, was it family or friends who got you started in music?

Brett Littlefair: My Ma played music a lot when I was growing up. She played it LOUD! I think my connection with the pure joy of music started with her. As far as becoming a musician goes...well it's kinda embarrassing really. As a 15-year-

old kid listening to *Guns' N Roses* and *Motley Crue*, I saw the girls they got and I wanted some of that. Haha. I fired up some mates to start a band. One of them was Dale Speedy Williams on bass. Incredibly we are still playing together. And as far as getting all the girls went... well, I met my wife after my first "real" gig 30 plus years ago and we are still together today. So I wasn't much of a rock star... ☺ But working on being a serious musician became everything to me.

You originally began playing in cover bands?

I tried writing a few songs with my first band and they were so terrible that we quickly gave up and started playing covers by the Rolling Stones, AC/DC, CCR, etc.



When did you become a songwriter?

When I was about eight or nine. Ha, I was only reminiscing with my sister about this a few days ago. Together we wrote songs with titles like “The Alley Monster,” “Dragster” and “The Cowboy Rides North.” ☺ We recorded them on a cassette tape on one of those portable tape decks that you plugged a mic into. No instruments. Just singing with catchy melodies. Then we did an interview at the end – like we were famous or something. Haha, after a while we started arguing about who wrote what and didn’t think to erase it. We found the tape years later and had tears streaming down our cheeks laughing at it. ☺ I started writing “properly” in 2001. Me and a long time collaborator wrote songs for an album titled “Alamo - Behind Your Walls.” It was an alternative country sounding album and we even got a review written up in a local country music magazine here in Australia.

*“Blues has always been my first love”*

The songs on your first album “Black Hole Town” in 2016 are more folklike or how would you describe them?

I would call it folky singer-songwriter alternative country blues. Doesn’t sound as cool as “Toetappin’, Footstompin’ Boogie” does it? I do like the style of “Black Hole Town,” but to be honest I was trying to find somewhere to fit in and I thought the folk scene would suit me best. Blues has always been (and will always be) my



first love. But I thought blues was tired and full of Stevie Ray Vaughan clones playing the same old lengthy blistering solos. At that time I didn't see how I could fit in the blues picture.

*Who influenced your original fingerpicking style in songs like "When I Die"?*

Townes Van Zandt. He's my favorite singer/songwriter. I was listening to him a lot! Plus Steve Earle, Bob Dylan, Guy Clarke. Heavy depressing lyrics are attractive to me. Haha.

***"Honestly it just felt 'right' to me"***

*Tell us again about your CBG epiphany ☺*

A lot of things came together at once. I had discovered R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough after seeing a documentary they were in. That North Mississippi style got to me big time. I started playing open tuning. Then I started seeing a lot of videos like Seasick Steve and Justin Johnson popping up. I said to my wife casually...I'd love to get a guitar made out of a cigar box. She surprised me with one for Christmas. It was made by a guy named Steve Plater in Victoria, Australia. The brand on them says "Salty Dog Cigar Box Guitars." I fell in love with it BIG TIME! Played it all day...all the next day until my fingers were sore. Honestly it just felt "right" to me. The feel and the tone of a three string guitar with a cigarbox body...it was like a flashback to seeing and playing an electric guitar for the first time.



*Did you ever imagine you'd be playing a song called "2 String Blues" six years ago?*

No way! That was a gift from my guitar maker Craig Koen at CK Instruments. I opened up the box expecting to find a number plate guitar (which there was), but then there was another guitar in the box with it – it was "The Duece," which is my name for her. I saw two strings and a vertically aligned pick up on this tiny body. I was thinking...what am I gonna do with this? I pulled it out during the next livestream and started writing 2-string blues live in front of the audience. I was just making up stuff for a bit of fun, but it actually turned into a song that made it onto the "Footstompin'" album.



***"CBGs have their own personality and tone built in"***

*So cigar box guitars changed the direction of your music?*

Absolutely. It started with North Mississippi style open tuning and then CBGs were another fork in my musical road. I love the challenge of coming up with different riffs and progressions from less strings. I love that the *guitars* create the tone. Usually a guitarist will use one guitar to record with. You know...their favorite... and then use different amps or settings to get a variety of sounds. CBGs have their own personality and tone built in. "Shelby" (the Shell motor oil guitar) is deep, dark and menacing. While "Pearl" (The Mississippi license plate) is softer





with more “jangle.” Yes, I have names for my guitars. ☺ My good mate and *Stompbox Records* partner Dave “CC” Mallette started naming them during livestreams and now it’s stuck.

*With different influences from old blues masters?*

My music influences switched from hair bands<sup>1</sup> to blues within a 12-month period. I heard blues in AC/DC songs like “The Jack.” Then I walked into a record store and heard my first John Lee Hooker song. I could hear the connection. I bought the album immediately and that started me down the blues road – much to the chagrin of my mates! They listened to Metallica, but my path had me listening to Buddy Guy, Muddy Waters, Albert King, Albert Collins, SRV, Johnny Winter. Johnny Winter was a big one for me.

*Can we still hear tones of CCR and the Stones in “Where’ve You Been”?*

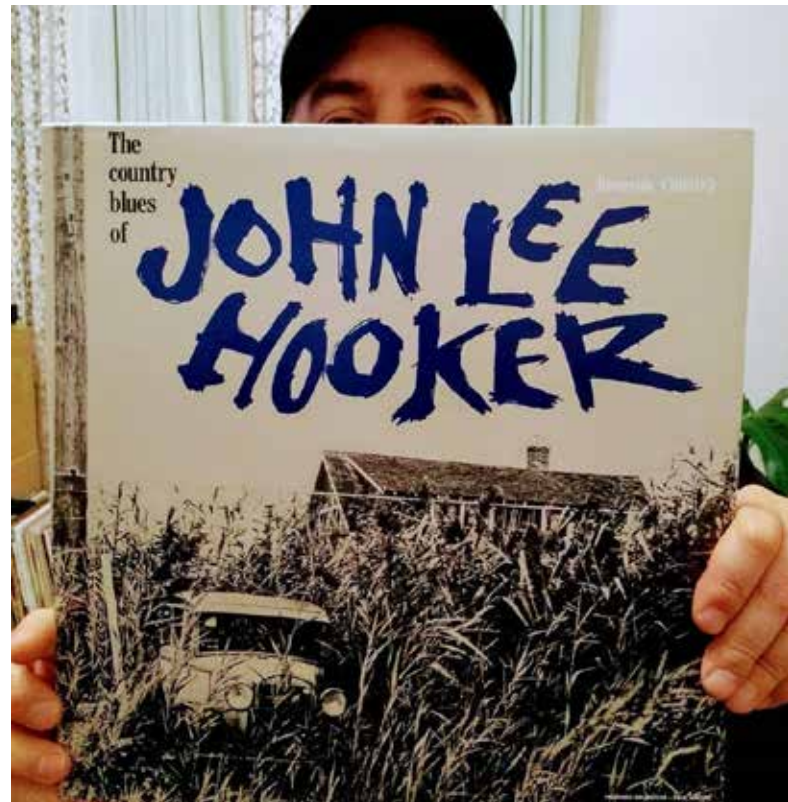
If you don’t hear those bands in *any* of my music I’d be surprised. They were a massive influence on me and I have played many covers by them. However, I attribute “Where’ve You Been” completely to Aisie Payton. He was on the same documentary I watched about R.L. and Junior.

*The 2020 “Red Devil Lye” album was the first from Brett Littlefair & Devil’s Bend right about when the pandemic broke out?*

I was invited to play a support gig with a friend after he saw me put a post up on Facebook playing on my first CBG. I was really good mates with his drummer, Jimmy James, who muscled his way into playing along with me. Haha, I was supposed to be solo.

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1. Rock bands where the members have long hair, mostly from the late 80’s



## BRETT LITTLEFAIR

### RED DEVIL LYE



EPIPHANY

Then we added “Speedy” a.k.a. Dale Williams on bass. A follow-up gig at a blues festival was so well received we decided to record a demo and start getting gigs. We ended up turning the ten best songs into an album. I don’t think the boys were that keen on that idea. Haha.

But I liked the lo-fi, garage sound of it and thought it suited the whole CGB vibe. We drank about ten beers, wine, whiskey and enjoyed the hell out of ourselves while we recorded. All the gigs got canceled because, yes, we were at the start of the pandemic. It was great that we could put something out and I sold them during livestreams, which was my only way to play live to people.

*“So, after being gig-less with no fan base at the start of 2020, I now have an online following of folks from all over the world...”*

*Tell us a bit more about the livestreams...*

I went from feeling pumped about the incredible reception at a blues festival to deflated at the thought of losing momentum with no live shows. So I started making more of those live, one-take style of video and posting them on Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. I dreaded the thought of livestreaming.

It seemed impersonal to me from what I’d seen in the past. But my old music buddy, Ken Cooke, from the Alamo days did a couple of livestreams and I thought he did a great job. It gave me confidence to give it a shot.

So, after being gig-less with no fan base at the start of 2020, I now have an online following of folks from all over the world and am selling CDs, t-shirts, etc. I never dreamed that would happen and I owe a huge amount to the “Where’ve You Been” video filmed on a farm in The Adelaide Hills. It’s had over two million views on Facebook and brought a lot of very cool people into my world.

*How do you keep up with all your followers?*

I tried to come up with a regular schedule of daily posts and then weekly livestreams. I don’t engage much on my personal profiles on social media, but I try to engage a lot with folks on my artist pages. I try to answer everybody who commented on videos and livestreams if I could because I really appreciate the support, although I must admit it’s getting harder to do these days.

Obviously nothing beats a live gig out in the real world, but the folks who listen to me (called “The Clangang”) really get involved and interacting with them feels great. They always comment about how my regular weekly streams bring them joy and create friendships in a time of uncertainty and division. The feeling is mutual and I am very grateful for their support. They even have their own t-shirts that we had made up, which is very cool.



*And the 2021 “Foot Stompin’” album was another response to the pandemic?*

I had songs floating around that hadn't made it onto “Red Devil Lye.” It was getting harder to pass those songs by the drummer, Nick Randles, who is a very creative guy on drums and I think he was a bit stifled in Devil's Bend. But those songs needed something rock solid and reliable. Jimmy James came on board and it gave us a slightly “tougher” sound. I like old school recordings. Lo-fi in a garage stuff like the early Black Keys albums. But everyone around me was convinced we needed something a little more punchy to suit the new line-up. We tried to go for a

ZZ Top, Rio Grande Mud kinda style with the sound and I think it worked out pretty much like that.

*How is 2022 shaping up for you and the band?*

2022 is gonna be the year 2020 should have been I think. But with a big difference – instead of slogging it out in the pubs to start building an audience, me and the boys will be adding to the following we already have online. In January, the song “Makin' My Name” made it to number 8 on the AMRAP (Australian Radio Airplay Project) Metro charts and I was kinda shocked. Now I'm getting played on blues

radio stations all over the world and made it into the number 23 on the Blues and Roots radio airplay charts alongside some heroes of mine.

*“...but, hey,  
ya never know...”*

I am consistently getting surprised at how well Footstompin' is being received. I will be recording a solo album and, as things have slowly started opening up with less restrictions, I have begun playing solo shows at festivals and bars. The plan this year is to get over to the Eastern states of Australia both solo and with the band. There is a lot of positive response over there. I don't think I will get overseas this year; but, hey, ya never know... ■

Brett Littlefair:

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

<https://www.brettlittlefair.com>

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCfdd\\_OnhJPhfsGVvhAy9UA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCfdd_OnhJPhfsGVvhAy9UA)

Builders mentioned:

Steve Plater: [SaltydogCigarBoxguitars](https://www.facebook.com/SaltydogCigarBoxguitars);

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

Craig Koen, C K Instruments" [Guitar Steampunk Slide Cigarbox](https://www.facebook.com/STRINGLUTHER); <https://www.facebook.com/STRINGLUTHER>



A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a blue and white floral shirt, stands in a rustic, wood-paneled room. He is holding a guitar where the body is a repurposed black motor oil can. The can has 'TOYOTA Motor Oil for Gasoline and Diesel SAE 5W-30' printed on it. The guitar neck and headstock are visible, and the man is looking towards the camera.

# Elías Box Guitar, Chile

# It's all possible!

## Elías Chandía Schröder, Elías Box Guitar, Santiago, Chile

Interview by Cathy Mullaert

Ever since I was first introduced to these instruments, I understood that it was possible to create music in a simple way – that's how blues is – simple...I play CBGs because there's nothing quite like it in the world – the sound is very different from a regular guitar. Also words can't describe the feeling I get when I create and play my own instruments. I discover a sound that I have always longed to hear!

*Cathy Mullaert: Elías, why do you play cigar box guitars?*

Elías Chandía Schröder: I play them because I love music and I am passionate about blues as a musical genre. I think that cigar box guitars are very much linked to blues. Ever since I was first introduced to these instruments, I understood that it was possible to create music in a simple way – that's how blues is – simple. I also play them because they are simple to play, even with just a single string (a diddley bow), or with three or four strings. It's all possible! I play CBGs because there's nothing quite like it in the world – the sound is very different from a regular guitar. Also words can't describe the feeling I get when I create and play my own instruments. I discover a sound that I have always longed to hear!

*Who or what inspired you to build CBGs?*

There was a moment in my life when I saw cigar box guitars on the internet. Immediately after that I started looking to see if I could get one here in Chile, but wasn't



able to find any. However, during my musical journey, I met a musician who played blues here in the city of Santiago. He had a diddley bow and some cigar box guitars that he had built himself. His name was Bernie Weiss. His parents were French and he grew up in Louisiana. Later he moved to Chile. He was a true blues musician.

*“One of Bernie’s sayings that greatly inspired me was: less is more!”*

I used to visit him frequently and it was during those visits that I learned some of the techniques for the slide guitar and the Mississippi blues style, which is my favorite style. Some time after he passed away, I started building cigar box guitars and haven’t stopped building them. That was five years ago.

One of Bernie’s sayings that greatly inspired me was: “less is more!” I’ve found that principle to be true in the simplicity of the CBGs. Over time, I have become familiar with more musicians from around the world who are an inspiration for their unique styles, like Seasick Steve, Deak Harp, Justin Johnson, and Juzzie Smith, among others.

*What do you like most about building CBGs?*

I enjoy the whole process of building. From the moment I get my hands on a cigar box along with all the components until to the moment when I finish the product. Each stage of the building process is equally important to me. I am very passionate about every detail.



*What part do you find most challenging?*

In reality, the whole process can be quite challenging. But I would say that the hardest part is the building of the neck and being able to center it in the right position in relation to the strings. I like to keep my creations simple, using mostly just a capsule (microphone and pickup) and a volume control. I am currently building a resonator CBG, which requires a lot of precision in the details.

*Are you seeing more do-it-yourself builders in Chile?*

Yes, I have noticed that there are more and more people building their own CBGs. Several have even seen my creations and have been inspired to make their own. I especially enjoy it when they send me photos of what they have built!

*“People are really surprised when they see me playing an oil can guitar and I usually receive more tips too!”*

*Are there any youth CBG building programs in your area?*

Currently, there are no such programs here for young people. If there were, I would be very interested to be a part of it. I think one possibility is to do workshops teaching the basic building methods using recycled instruments. I would love to teach children how to build musical

instruments from common recyclable objects you find around the house like cans and stuff.

*Which guitars have you built “outside of the box”?*

My out-of-the-box guitars include a six-string oil can guitar and a three-string one made using motor oil cans found here in Chile. The oil can is my favorite. It’s the one I enjoy playing the most and I’ve never wanted to sell it since it has more sentimental value for me. Also it’s the guitar that has been my constant companion in all my musical performances. I really like this type of build because it’s also connected to cars and the environment. People are really surprised when they see me playing an oil can guitar and I usually receive more tips too!





Are there many CBG players in Chile?

Yes, I do know others who play them like Jando Guzmán who's a member of the band *Los peores de Chile*, Bryan Blue, and *Cigarbox Man* Felipe Ubeda just to name a couple.

And you perform solo as well as in a band?

My favorite venue is a local restaurant where I work here in Santiago called "Uncle Fletch." I also enjoy playing in the streets and even on public transport like the subway. I believe my preferred location has to be the street because it gives me the greatest flexibility to choose the times that work best for me.

***"I also enjoy playing in the streets and even on public transport like the subway"***

And what about the band?

Our band is called *The Original Blues* and has four members – Pablo Peña sings and plays guitar and harmonica, Diego Aguilar Fuentes on bass, Kenhiro Vásquez on drums and me playing cigar box guitar, diddley bow and my oil can guitar. We've been together now for almost two years.

Who are your favorite blues artists and which ones inspire you?

Barnie Weiss was someone very special to me as he taught me how to play with a slide guitar. Other blues artists that I enjoy listening to are Johnny Winter, Deak Harp,



Seasick Steve, Freddie King, Albert King and R.L. Burnside. I'd also like to mention Gustavo Hasse from Paraguay who is a one-man band, and Carlos Elliot among others.

*Do you play your own original music?*

Yes, I have composed some of my own music, but not professionally. Most of my recordings have been simple home recordings, but I would definitely like to record something professionally one day using better audio equipment.

*Have you ever played outside of Chile?*

No, we've never played outside of Chile. It's not very common here in South America to play in other countries due to the high costs, not to mention the more recent health restrictions due to Covid.

*Do you have any other passions besides blues and CBGs?*

I enjoy playing with my son or going out for a bike ride. I used to go out riding my motorcycle. In fact, I once crossed the Andes mountains on my motorbike between Chile and Argentina. It was an amazing experience for me. Lately, I've enjoyed restoring an old 1960 Ford F-100 pickup truck.

*Why do you think you have nearly 3000 followers on Facebook?*

Most of my followers are in the US, Europe and South America, and seem to enjoy my work or the music that I share on my Facebook page, Instagram and CBG groups. I receive many positive comments about the quality of the sound of my creations, including many messages from people



Left to right: Elías Chandía Schröder, Kenhiro Vásquez, Diego Aguilar Fuentes, Pablo Peña

around the world asking me about how much these guitars cost and if it's possible to ship to them. Others write to me asking for advice on some of the musical techniques or for a tutorial video, or simply to congratulate me. Others send me friend requests to get to know me better. I guess that's why.

*And your plans for the rest of the year?*

My plans for this year are to continue building CBGs and keep improving the quality of my designs. At the beginning of this year I started to make plans to record my own music, work on new CBG designs and maybe even write down my experiences in book form. So many plans! Another goal I have is to perhaps travel to the US and play in one of the cigar box guitar festivals. And keep creating videos to present and share my music with others.

Finally, I would like to branch out and establish my work also in the city of Cordoba, where I have family and will soon be moving to. I hope to make CBGs known there as well, whether it be by sharing my CBG creations or simply playing the instruments I love so much. ■

Elias Box Guitar: <https://www.facebook.com/EI%C3%ADas-Box-Guitar-2057080557685065>



**Fred Cachou  
France**



# Made by Fred...

## Fred Cachou, La Croix Valmer, France

Among all the bluesmen, I prefer those who don't just show you how well they play the blues, but those who play more with their hearts than with their fingers. Why put in a lot of notes when just a few are enough to create the feeling? The CBG, and especially the diddley bow, were originally put together by people who didn't have anything to their names and go in this direction.

*CBGR: Fred, how long have you been building handmade guitars?*

Fred Cachou: I've been tinkering with string instruments for six years now. One day a friend gave me an old dilapidated electric guitar from the trash to see what I could do with it. After totally dismantling it, I realized that a solid body was not so complicated after all! I made one and, beginner's luck, it worked just fine.

I am a technology teacher for students aged 11 to 15. The idea was to do a project that they would like. The cigar box guitar was an interesting instrument that they could make at school. I prepared ten "kits" (boxes, necks, etc.) to assemble. And that's how I caught the bug – 90 instruments followed...but I'm not looking for a cure!

*You have a very artistic flair – how did you channel your creative urge before CBGs came along?*

I have been making do-it-yourself hifi speakers, turntables and tonearms for 20 years, as well as toys and wooden decorative objects for 15 years. I put



loudspeakers in everything that could contain them and I realized that it works if you respect the basic rules.

I like the diversion that various objects provide, especially those found in the trash. Bringing something that's been thrown away back to life is fun. I share this interest with my friend Christian Fournier, a great handyman who recycles all manner of things and who makes the elements for which I am not equipped, particularly microphones and laser cutting/engraving.

*“Blues music is another bug that can't be cured!”*

With string instruments, it's the same. A biscuit tin, a can, a shovel, an iron soleplate, a vinyl record, a skateboard, a tennis racket... After spending countless hours on the internet to understand how to build guitars, I discovered some amazing projects that I wanted to try out. Seasick Steve, Justin Johnson, Mike Snowden and Dismal Ax have been a great inspiration.

*You like blues music, but you don't play guitar?*

Blues music is another bug that can't be cured! ☺ It surprises everyone who has seen my instruments, but no, I don't play guitar: too many strings, too many fingers, I don't know.



### Not even diddley bows?

I'd need time to try to master them. I have to say making instruments interests me more than playing. I'm fascinated by the guitars themselves, their history and how to build them. If I run into any problems, my brother, an amateur guitarist, helps me a lot. But it's a great source of satisfaction when someone plays my instruments. Here I should mention my old friend and musician, Sylvestre Etienne, who makes these instruments sound incredible!

*“Why put in a lot of notes when just a few are enough to create the feeling?”*



### Do the diddley bows and three-string guitars suggest that you are minimalist in nature?

Among all the bluesmen, I prefer those who don't just show you how well they can play the blues, but those who play more with their hearts than with their fingers. Why put in a lot of notes when just a few are enough to create the feeling? The cigar box guitar and especially the diddley bow were originally put together by people who didn't have anything to their names and tend to go in this direction.

### And bass sticks to accompany a CBG?

A bass with a single string is in line with keeping only the essentials. It's pretty impressive what you can do with just one string.



*Not to mention all the quirky amplifiers you've made...*

Here too, the goal is to put an amp (a little one-watt amp that you can buy for under \$20) and a loudspeaker in a reused object. I made a diddley bow with an amp and a built-in speaker (which I didn't find on the internet) and I think the whole thing sounds amazing!

***“When I discovered the Wandré, it was the first time I'd seen aluminum used for the neck”***

*Would you say some of your guitars are similar to Wandré guitars from the sixties?<sup>1</sup>*

When I discovered the Wandré, it was the first time I'd seen aluminum used for the neck. It opened up a new perspective for me in how to use different materials, particularly aluminum, which is easy to work with.

*Are there any other styles of guitar we've left out that have influenced you?*

I like steampunk when it's not too crowded.

*You've made some interesting bodyless instruments out of aluminum?*

The style of the Yamaha SLG200 silent guitar went in the direction of keeping only the essentials. So I've been trying out some instruments along similar lines.

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1. Wandré guitars were built in Italy and designed by Antonio Vandrè (aka Wandré) Pioli with odd aesthetic shapes and aluminum necks.





*You make them seem so simple...*

I tried using only curtain rods, but found them difficult to grip. So I adapted other objects like a table leg, a computer screen leg, etc., to create the most understated body possible. And then the idea of an all-aluminum diddley bow came to me. The result is simple, but quirky, which is often what I'm looking for.

*And, as a technology teacher, you haven't thought about making your own custom pickups?*

Christian and I have been trying to develop some pickups, but the level of gain of the ones we have made so far is fairly low and they need a preamp.

***“The result is simple, but quirky, which is often what I'm looking for”***

*And the students you taught how to build CBGs – did any of them keep it up?*

For various reasons, the project didn't succeed with the students. Maybe they were too young for this kind of project. I finally assembled them myself. My wife and my 10-year old son are learning the guitar (the brave ones!). My son likes to play my guitars and asks a lot of questions about them, so maybe he'll build instruments too one day.



*You said it only takes a few notes to create the feeling – but that doesn't apply only to blues music...*

There are lots of examples of various kinds of music with only a couple of notes like folk and traditional, and even classical. The notes tell a story. Sometimes it doesn't take much to get the message across and sometimes you get a different story from an avalanche of notes. It takes feeling and I don't think there is any one technique to achieve it. I think this principle can be applied to many areas of life.

*So what's next on the drawing board?*

I'd like to try out some resonators. I'm also trying to get an old Leslie speaker I found in the trash to work properly. I'm always accumulating all kinds of things that I find all over the place. Many of them will become stringed instruments! ■



Builders mentioned:

Seasick Steve: <https://seasicksteve.com>

Justin Johnson: <https://www.justinjohnsonlive.com/roots-instruments.html>

Mike Snowden: <https://snowdenguitars.com/>

Dismal Ax: <https://dismalax.com>

# Contributors

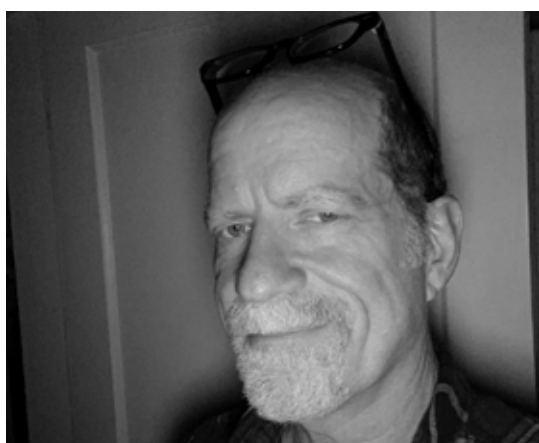
**John Farr** a.k.a. Hollowbelly stumbled across cigar box guitars on the internet. It turned out they were just what he'd been looking for and "that's when the magic and the alchemy happened..." He can't say how playing the CBG made him more creative, "but it did and that's when the songs came." He is one of the most established performers in the field in the UK and has traveled extensively across Europe purveying his own unique brand of "punk blues."



**Paul Atkinson** is the Professor of Design and Design History at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. He has written a number of books, including one called "Amplified: A Design History of the Electric Guitar." He has also written a documentary film on the CBG scene in the UK called "Three Chords and the Truth," which screened at film festivals around the world and which formed the basis of the BBC documentary "Cigar Box Blues: The Makers of a Revolution."



**Bill Jagitsch** a.k.a. Bluesboy Jag is an accomplished blues guitarist from North Little Rock, Arkansas, and has been building cigar box guitars for around 20 years and selling them to customers throughout the U.S.A. and Europe. He also teaches guitar and repairs computers. He is the frontman of *Bluesboy Jag & Learning to Crawl* and has been twice named winner of the Arkansas Blues Challenge.



**Brett Littlefair** has been playing guitar and writing songs since an early age and has always been in love with the blues. After a period of experimenting with open tuning, he fell in love with the feel and tone of cigar box guitars. He says each of his guitars has its own personality. Today, Brett plays both solo as well as shows with Devil's Bend. He has a very dedicated and globally dispersed online group of fans known as "The Clangang" and his "Where've You Been" video has been viewed by over 2 million people.



**E**lías Chandía Schröder lives in Santiago, Chile, and started building cigar box guitars around five years ago, fascinated by their simplicity and sound. For Elias, “less is more!” As a musician, he plays slide and Mississippi blues style on his handmade oil can and cigar box guitars, with followers on social media in the USA, Europe and South America. In his own words, “there’s nothing quite like it in the world!”



**C**athy Mullaert is from Herminie, Pennsylvania. She is a self-taught singer/songwriter playing piano, mandolin, tenor banjo, guitar and CBGs. She loves playing slide guitar, Delta blues, rock, country and folk in her own style, and performs at local shows in her area. In 2018/19, while in Germany, she combined with *Ruhr Pott Rock* to produce two EPs called “Authentic Blues” and “Swampin Blues.” She wants others to enjoy playing and creating music with CBGs the way she does.



**F**red Cachou lives in La Croix Valmer, France, and teaches highschool students basic technology skills. Besides blues music, he has always been interested in recycling and reusing items that at first sight appear have little value, but that can be brought to life as works of art with just a little imagination. After a school project with homemade guitars, he became fascinated with simple but aesthetic stringed instruments, their origins and the music they make.



**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, editor and graphic designer, and now lives in a village in Switzerland. He enjoys building and playing cigar box guitars, as well as editing and contributing to CBG Review.



**N**ext issue: July 2022

⇒ **B**ack to CBG Review [www.cbgreview.com](http://www.cbgreview.com)

# Back issues of CBG Review

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