

Born in the USA: The geographical, temporal and cultural displacement of the cigar box guitar

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

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Born in the USA

The Cigar Box Guitar as a necessity

The cigar box guitar—a very basic, homemade instrument—is undeniably American in origin. Made from whatever materials came to hand, cigar box guitars were a manifestation of a can-do mentality in the face of adversity; an authentic object that fulfilled a basic human social desire to create music. In the permanent display at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, and Interpretation board states:

“As British Settlers moved Westwards across the American Continent, they took with them a wealth of fiddle tunes and folk songs. They also created new music that would pass down through the generations at barn raisings, house parties, and local dances.”

With no access to repair or buy new instruments, and having a real social need to fulfil, resourceful settlers in the mid-late eighteenth century resorted to making homemade violins, guitars and banjos using whatever materials came to hand.

The exact date and route through which cigar boxes became recognised as a suitable base for musical instruments is lost in the mists of time, although the introduction of the cigar box as a form of packaging is fairly well documented. According to Tony Hyman of the National Cigar Museum, cigars in the early 1800s were commonly sold in barrels that held 5,000 cigars, although consumer-sized boxes of 100 cigars were advertised in New York newspapers as early as 1789. By the mid 1800s, shopkeepers' demands had led to smaller packages, and wholesalers commonly broke down barrels-sized lots into empty boxes. Cigar boxes in the form they take today first appeared around 1840, and the Federal Reserve Act of 1865, which required that cigars be packed in boxes before leaving the factory, meant that many cigar factories started to manufacture their own boxes. Standardised sizes of boxes appeared after it was made illegal in 1863 to sell boxes of 1,000 cigars and the Federal Revenue Act of 1865 restricted the sale of cigars to boxes of 25, 50, 100, 250, and 500. By the time demand increased dramatically for cigars in the 1880s, third-party manufacturers of cigar boxes proliferated. As cigar boxes could not be re-used after the tax seal was broken, they were commonly used as fuel, to hold other household items, or repurposed to make children's toys.¹ There are numerous documented occurrences of people making their own violins from tea-chests or other materials from the early nineteenth century, so it is likely that cigar boxes were first used to make cigar box violins, banjos and guitars from the time they appeared in the 1840s. The first image of such an instrument appeared in 1876 in Edwin Forbes' etching of Civil War soldiers playing a cigar box violin (although earlier sketch studies showing the same instrument are dated at 1865).

The author of *Trench art: materialities and memories of war*, Nicholas Saunders, notes that hand-made musical instruments seem to have achieved particular resonance in times of great hardship and adversity. During the Great War, musical instruments were apparently made on all sides by soldiers on active service and by prisoners of war: “Percussion instruments and xylophones were made from recycled metal, flutes from miscellaneous tubes, and guitars, banjos, violins and cellos from any available scrap wood.”² (Saunders 2003: 109). They were used to accompany traditional folk songs and patriotic songs sung to raise morale, and images of small orchestras of soldiers with such instruments were

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

In a similar vein, it is well-documented that many of the early American blues players, who came from very impoverished backgrounds yet went on to have such an important influence on the development of modern music, first learnt to play on simple, home-made instruments. The accounts are numerous, but examples include the blues guitarist Furry Lewis (b. circa 1893) who recounts being aged eight or nine years old and making a cigar box guitar using some two-by-four for the neck and screen wire for a string attached to a bent nail.³ At around the same time, Big Bill Broonzy (b. 1893), the son of an itinerant sharecropper, started his significant musical career by making a cigar box fiddle at the age of 12.⁴ The first instrument for Texan blues guitarist Lightnin' Hopkins (b. 1912) was a homemade cigar box guitar with chicken wire strings⁵ and later, Chicago bluesman Buddy Guy (b. 1936) recalls growing up in Louisiana as a poor sharecropper's son and making guitars out of old kerosene cans, nailing a stick in and using wire from the insect screen on the kitchen door as strings.⁶

The Cigar Box Guitar as a child's instrument

The displacement of the cigar box guitar as a serious musical instrument born out of necessity and hardship into a home-made child's toy took place over a long period. The first known plans to build a cigar box instrument were published in 1884 to accompany a story by the founder of the Boy Scouts of America, Daniel Carter Beard. The story, 'Christmas Eve with Uncle Enos' was printed in the December issue of *The Book Buyer*, and told the story of three boys (Tom, Dick and Harry) listening to the playing of 'Uncle Enos', a freed plantation slave, who had made a banjo from a cigar box and a broom stick. The plans were reprinted in 1890 in *The American Boy's Handy Book*. The book's subtitle: 'What to do and how to do it' points to the expectation that this was a simple project that a child could carry out—the instrument's inherent simplicity making it a prime candidate for DIY.

Throughout the early twentieth century, plans to make cigar box guitars, violins, banjos and ukuleles appeared fairly regularly in newspapers, magazines and DIY books, with accompanying text usually aimed at young boys. Firmly established as a child's toy in the mid twentieth century, [a bit 'Mickey Mouse' if you like!] cigar box instruments were perhaps not taken that seriously. The cigar box guitar was played by cartoon characters, including Mickey Mouse in the 1930s, Charlie Brown in the 1950s, and Ducky Lucky in the 1960s. Cigar box guitar-building projects continued to appear in DIY magazines, and throughout the DIY boom of the late 1940s and 1950s, I suspect thousands of such instruments were made, many as a bonding exercise between fathers rebuilding relationships with their children after returning from the war.

The Cigar Box Guitar Revolution

The Cigar box guitar might well have stayed a simple DIY project for fathers to make with their children if it wasn't for Shane Speal, 'The King of the Cigar Box Guitar'⁷. In 1993, a friend gave Speal some his father's old guitar magazines, and in one of them, an issue of *Guitar Player* from 1976, was an article by a rock music journalist called Michael Lydon. Lydon had been inspired by Carl Perkin's story of how as a child his father, a poor sharecropper, had made him a guitar from a cigar box, a broomstick and two strands of

baling wire. Lydon had made his own version, and the article included photographs and a detailed description of the process. Inspired, Speal built his own, three-string version, and found that as soon as he had built it, he could play it—and found it much easier than playing his regular six-string guitar. Wanting to show people how easy it was to make a cigar box guitar, he set up a single page website. That gathered so much interest that he had to set up a chatroom to answer everyone’s questions and before long it had 3,000 members.⁸ That website has now evolved into ‘*Cigar Box Nation: The home of the Cigar Box Revolution*’⁹—the first port of call for people wanting to find out about cigar box guitars and how to make them. The ‘revolution’ was based on the idea of breaking ‘rules’: that one didn’t have to be an excellent player, and most of all, didn’t have to sound like anyone else. Instead of playing hidden away in a bedroom, Speal encouraged people not to be afraid, to get out there and play, and not to listen to people who said they couldn’t do it.¹⁰

A significant difference between today’s cigar box guitars and the original cigar box guitar is the addition of pickups so that the instrument can be played through an amplifier. The search for a way of making acoustic guitars louder so that they could be heard in orchestras and ensembles was the main driving force behind the development of the modern electric guitar, and people experimented with different ways of achieving this. There are two different methods used—either a transducer pickup can be used to amplify the vibrations of the guitar’s soundboard, or an electromagnetic pickup can be used to amplify the vibrations of the strings. Before electromagnetic pickups became readily available, Popular Science magazines such as *The Electrical Experimenter* ran adverts in the 1920s for companies that could supply the microphone transducers used in telephone mouthpieces,¹¹ and reported on tinkerers using these, or transducer pickups from phonograph tonearms, attaching them to the body of a guitar and connecting it to a wireless to use as an amplifier. It isn’t known when such a pickup was first attached to a cigar box guitar, but it is almost certain numerous people dabbled with such a set up. In 1938 the magazine *Mechanix Illustrated* ran an article about an engineering student who had built an electric cigar box guitar,¹² and when electromagnetic pickups could be easily obtained in the 1950s, it would have been straightforward for people to create their own electric cigar box guitars, making them potentially a ‘serious’ instrument once more.

Fuelled by social media, the cigar box guitar scene in America is now significant. The Cigar Box Nation website has almost 19,000 members as of June 2018, the majority of whom are based in the USA, and cigar box festivals are held annually in numerous cities across the states.

The UK Cigar Box scene

The emergence of the cigar box scene in the UK can fairly reliably be tied down to a single event. On the 31st Dec 2006, BBC 2 television broadcast the 14th annual *Jools Holland’s Hootenanny* to welcome in the New Year. A large studio audience watched as a variety of glamorously dressed stars graced the multiple stages: among them Amy Winehouse, Paul Weller, the Zutons, Marc Almond and Lily Allen. Also appearing was a then unknown 66-year-old American Blues guitarist with a long grey beard, dressed in a shabby checked shirt, faded baseball cap and braces holding up worn denim jeans. A member of the invited audience that night recalls “He was the real deal. Not like the other polished performers around him. He had the air of someone with no fixed abode. He carried his battered guitar

with him wherever he went, even to the toilet! They were inseparable, like it was his best friend".¹³ When it was his turn to play, he sat alone, holding his old, dilapidated cheap six-string electric guitar fitted with only three strings and a home-made stomp box he called the 'Mississippi Drum Machine'. He played a 'three string trance boogie' that included a brief auto biopic of his time living rough, and finished spectacularly by rubbing his guitar strings vigorously on the edge of his amplifier before dropping his guitar to the side and walking off to huge cheers and wild applause. His performance reminded viewers that expensive, 'perfect' musical instruments were not a necessity for high-quality music, and that in fact, there might be something about such a rudimentary approach that brought the performer closer to the 'soul' of blues music.

Over the course of the next few years, Seasick Steve released major-label CDs, performed live at numerous festivals, and appeared widely on national television drawing music from a variety of home-made instruments including basic, one-string 'diddly bows', cigar box guitars and hub-cap banjos. His promotion of rough and ready home-made instruments has been a major driving force behind their increase in popularity over the last decade in the UK, where his influence has led many people to make and play cigar box guitars.

Shane Speal's equivalent in the UK is Chickenbone John, 'The Godfather of the Cigar Box Guitar'.¹⁴ Like many others, he cites awareness of the cigar box guitar down to Seasick Steve. He was looking to buy an expensive guitar in an attempt to sound more like his blues heroes of old when he realised that they never had expensive guitars, they had, at best, a Stella guitar, more than likely bought from the Sears Roebuck catalogue. He heard about cigar box guitars online (through Shane Speal's website) and decided to build one in 2005. As with other makers, he was then asked to build another for a friend, and before long was offering them for sale on Ebay. When a recession hit in 2014, he started to make more money through his cigar box guitars than through his architecture practice and so became a full-time maker. He organises an annual cigar box guitar festival called 'Boxstock' which has been running since 2009, tours the UK and Northern Europe each year performing, and runs workshops to teach others how to make and play a cigar box guitar in a day (at the time of writing he had taught over 2,000 people).

My research¹⁵ has shown that Chickenbone John's realisation that he didn't need an expensive guitar is a common characteristic of cigar box guitar makers and players in the UK. The UK movement, driven (as in the USA) by social media, has similar elements to the USA 'revolution' in that it is part of a larger growth of the Maker Movement, revelling in the sheer joy of making. It is also, as in the USA, concerned with a search for authenticity and originality, but the UK scene seems to be in many ways more characterised by a resistance to rampant consumerism, a reaction against the extortionate prices charged for original Gibson or Fender electric guitars and their derivatives, and mild contempt for the kind of guitar aficionados who believe that the only instruments worth playing are an original Fender Stratocaster or Gibson Les Paul. These aspects of the UK movement are the dominant themes of the forthcoming documentary film *'Three Chords and the Truth'*.¹⁶

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¹⁶ The documentary film *Three Chords and the Truth*, written by Paul Atkinson and Directed by Virginia Heath, is currently in the editing stages.