

In the zone

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

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CBQ Review

January 2019

AND NO...I DON'T PLAY REGGAE

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Editorial

Individuality and originality...

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

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

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

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

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

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

So, if you are looking for individuality and originality, then CBG Review is the place to find it! As always, read, enjoy and share with your friends...

Best regards

Huey Ross

On the zone...



Photo: Paul Hazell

by Paul Atkinson, Sheffield, United Kingdom

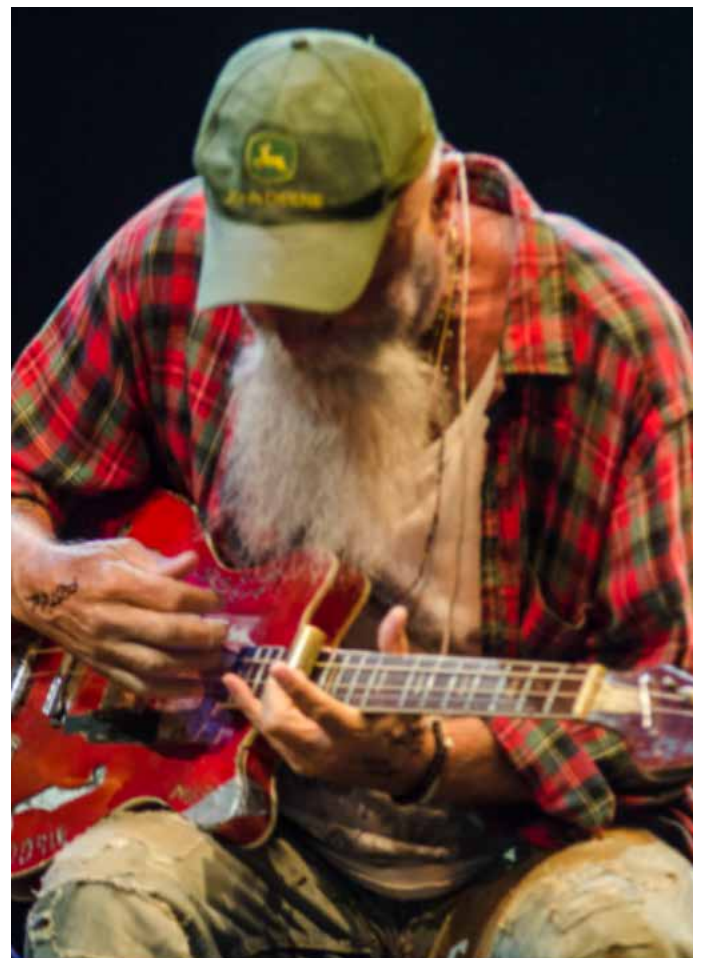
On December 31, 2006, BBC 2 television broadcast the fourteenth annual Jools Holland's Hootenanny to welcome in the New Year (BBC 2 2006). A large studio audience watched as a variety of well-known, glamorously dressed stars graced the multiple stages: among them Amy Winehouse, Paul Weller, the Zutons, Marc Almond, and Lily Allen. Also appearing was a then largely unknown sixty-six-year-old American blues guitarist with a long gray beard, dressed in a shabby checked shirt, faded baseball cap and braces holding up worn denim jeans...

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

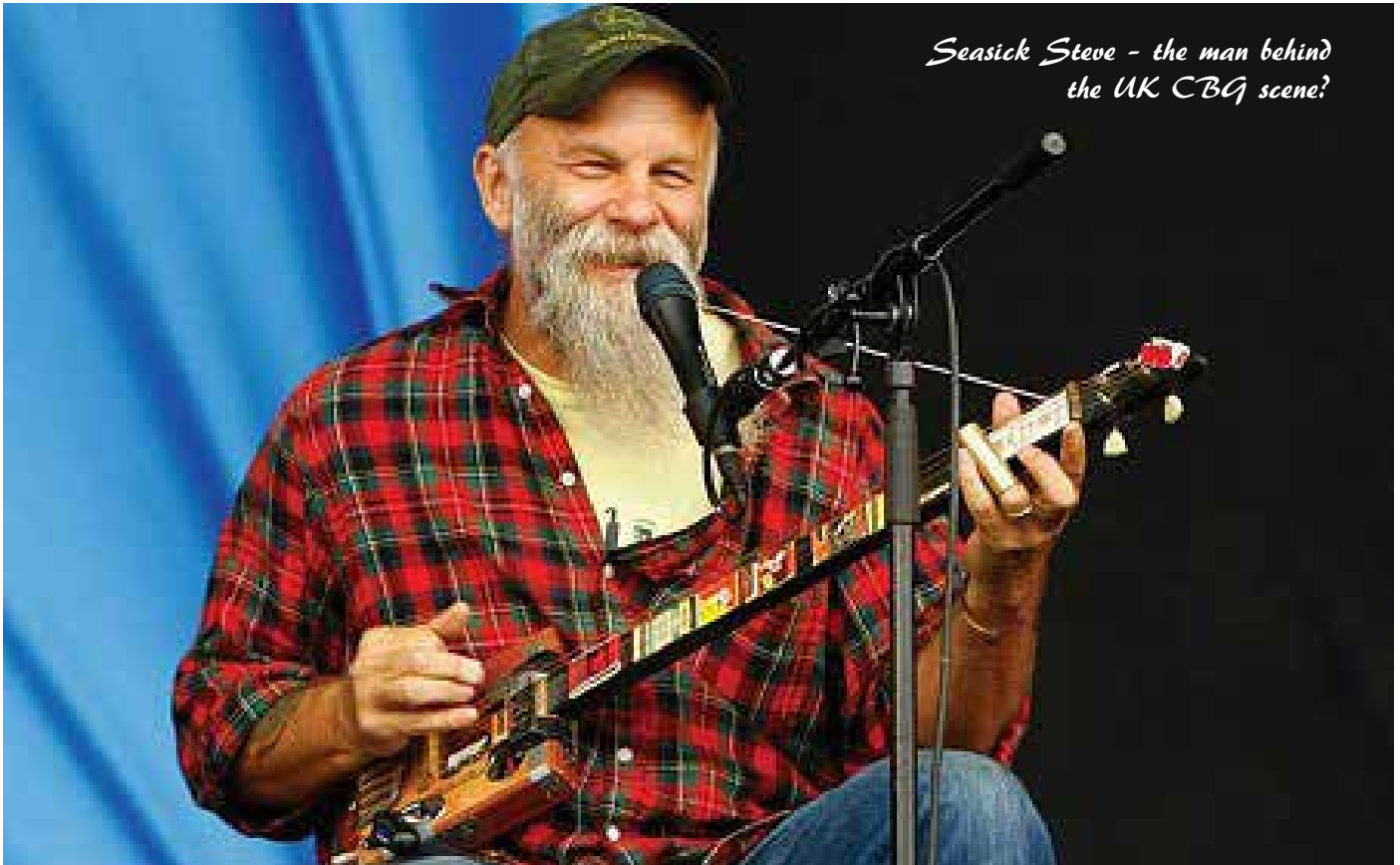
Over the course of the next few years, Seasick Steve released major-label CDs, performed live at numerous festivals, and appeared widely on national television drawing music out of a variety of homemade instruments including basic, one-string "diddly bows," cigar box guitars, and hub-cap banjos. His promotion of rough and ready homemade instruments has been a major driving force behind their increase in popularity over the last decade, particularly in the UK, where his influence has led many people to make and play cigar box guitars.¹

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

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



1. Extract from Paul Atkinson (2018) *Hairy Guys in Sheds: The Rough and Ready World of DIY Cigar Box Guitar Makers, Design and Culture*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17547075.2018.1467724>



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

*Chickenbone John in the workshop
Photo: Scott Dulson*



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



*Dusk Brothers at Boxstock
Photo: Paul Atkinson*

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

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*Chickenbone John
and Hollowbelly
Photo: Scott Dulson*

Builders mentioned in this article:

*Spatchcock and Wurzell
www.spatchcockandwurzell.com*

*Treadstone Guitars
www.treadstoneguitars.com*

*Barney Cigar Box Guitars
www.cigarboxguitar.me.uk*

*Chickenbone John
www.chickenbonejohn.com*

Contributors

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



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



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



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



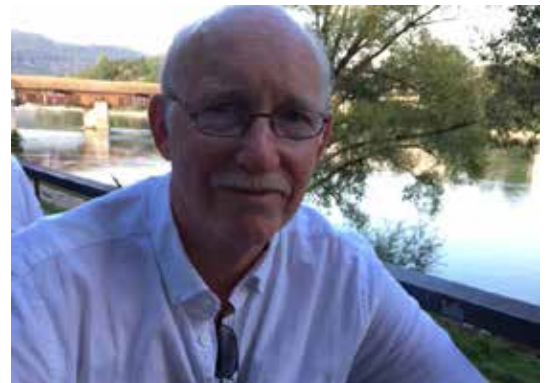
Christophe Deshayes is the patented inventor of “bricoswing” and an insatiable creator of musical instruments that include exotic and eccentric guitars and amplifiers, biscuit-tin mandolins, a harmonica he plays through a phone microphone attached to a trumpet and many more! A confirmed autodidact and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



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



Ross Hewitt a.k.a. Huey Ross was born in Australia in 1953 on BB King’s birthday. Over the years he has worked as a tennis teacher, journalist, translator and editor, and now lives in a village in Switzerland. He enjoys building and playing cigar box guitars, as well as editing and contributing to CBG Review.



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