

Cigar box guitar forums: Fostering competency, creativity and connectedness in communities of practice and performance

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Melanie Jaeger-Erben

Nils F. Nissen (eds.)

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Cigar Box Guitar Forums: Fostering Competency, Creativity and Connectedness in Communities of Practice and Performance

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Keywords: DIY; Making; Performance; Musical Instruments; Social Media.

Abstract: This paper analyses research carried out into a particular group of makers whose DIY activities are centred on the creation, dissemination and performance of home-made musical instruments in the form of cigar box guitars. As objects that are based almost exclusively on notions of recycling, reuse and upcycling, cigar box guitars extend the life of component parts that would otherwise be discarded, but also, as hand-crafted labours of love, the resulting instruments are often used for extended periods, being added to, altered and reconfigured over time as new components become available and the makers' skills improve. This community of makers more often than not carry out their making practices in isolation, meeting in person only at festivals and concerts where performance with the home-made instruments takes place. For many, this activity is their first foray into creative production of any kind, and often, they need to find solutions to problems they encounter in the making of their instruments. Because of the solitary nature of the activity, these makers make extensive use of online forums and networks to become part of a community of practice, openly sharing their knowledge and experience to help each other, and to celebrate their achievements of productive labour. It is argued that the use of social media in this way is directly linked to the extension of product lifetimes of the objects made.

History, Context and Background

Cigar box guitars (and also cigar box fiddles, canjos, banjos and ukuleles – see Figure 1) are very simply constructed objects usually created through the upcycling of discarded objects and the recycling of reclaimed materials. Originally acoustic instruments appearing around the middle of the 19th Century in America, the building of cigar box instruments was initially driven by necessity and they were made by Civil War soldiers, frontier immigrants and plantation workers and sharecroppers that had no access to professionally made instruments. They were a means of entertainment and raised morale amongst poverty-stricken, isolated groups of people, speaking to the commonly held belief that making music is far from a distraction and more an essential part of the human condition. As standards of living gradually improved and the necessity for self-built instruments fell away, the cigar box guitar came to be regarded more as a child's plaything. The cigar box guitar was a staple project of the American DIY boom of the 1950s and 1960s, often made as a bonding exercise between fathers and their children. However, in the late 1990s the cigar box guitar reappeared in the USA as a 'serious', amplified

instrument – a reactionary object representing an alternative to mainstream consumption. The 'Cigar Box Guitar Revolution' encouraged people to make themselves an instrument and to get out and perform with them in public. The scene rapidly grew and now cigar box guitar festivals are held across the whole of the United States. When the American blues player 'Seasick Steve' appeared on UK television in 2006, the US cigar box guitar scene started to grow significantly in the UK.



Figure 1. Selection of 'cigar box guitars' made from cigar boxes, wine boxes, and various tins by Spatchcock and Wurzell. Photo by Author.

Through a series of in-depth interviews and observations, an earlier research study explored the creation of these instruments in the UK in an attempt to uncover the making processes involved and the motivations that drives makers to create them (Atkinson 2018). That study concluded there is, as in the USA, an element of resistance evident, which is the predominant force in the UK scene. There is a realisation that there is no real requirement to buy an instrument made in a Far East factory and unsustainably shipped to the West, or to pay huge sums of money for a factory-made guitar bearing a famous (usually American) maker's name. Perfectly good music can be produced on a far from perfect instrument. In fact, a key element for many of the UK makers was that wherever possible, the materials used should be recycled, reused, repurposed or upcycled rather than bought, despite a whole infrastructure of online suppliers of cheap parts for such instruments having appeared to support the scene in recent years (with many suppliers based in China).

Isolation, 'Flow', and the desire to connect

The original study found that one of the important issues encountered by makers was one of isolation. The vast majority of makers build guitars in workshops or sheds outside of the home, and so spend many hours alone. Many of these regularly experienced a 'flow' state, described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as the point at which people are fully engaged and completely occupied while concentrating on an activity and nothing else seems to matter (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Makers would enter their sheds or workshops early in the morning and then re-emerge to find that the whole day had slipped by. This may go some way towards explaining the makers' extensive use of social media to counteract the feelings of isolation. However, even those makers producing cigar box guitars as a cottage industry stated how important it was to them to meet people involved in the activity face to face. Whether this was through selling their instruments at festivals, or through attending or taking part in cigar box guitar performances, the fact is that the cigar box guitar more often than not becomes not only a means to an end, but an intrinsic part of the maker's lifestyle.

Netnography and the use of Social Media

An important aspect then, not fully explored in the original study, is the desire that cigar box guitar makers evidently have to feel that they belong to a community of like-minded people—being part of virtual communities connected through social media as well as physical communities of people for whom meeting and playing their home-made instruments in public is a primary concern. Netnography is 'a research methodology of ethnography adapted to the study of online communities' (Kozinets 2002). Analysing the content of internet-based activity allows insights into the drivers and motivations behind the behaviours of online communities.

The virtual communities studied here interface through well-established websites such as *Cigar Box Nation*, *Hand Made Music Clubhouse*, *The Musical Instrument Makers Forum* or *Homemade-Guitars*. Interviews revealed that the main go-to website for people joining the scene is *Cigar Box Nation*, the website set up in 1993 in the USA by Shane Speal, the founder of the 'Cigar Box Guitar Revolution' (Speal 2018: 9) that boasts almost 20,000 members. This site hosts instructional videos on making and playing, acts as a repository of downloadable plans, as an online store of parts and materials, and as a discussion forum for makers. Helpfully, the site counts the discussions that have accrued over the years under particular categories, with by far the most popular at the time of writing being 'Building Secrets, Tips, Advice, Discussion' (5,167 discussions) followed by 'Performances, How to Play, Lessons, Concerts' (2014 discussions). By comparison, all the other discussion categories, including 'For Sale: Cigar Box Guitars, other instruments, cds and related items', 'Fests and Concerts: Organizing and Promoting' and 'Other Stuff – off topic, fun stuff, whatever', number only in the hundreds.

As well as the use of websites specifically aimed at cigar box guitar makers discussed above, general websites such as *YouTube* also play a huge role in encouraging the movement through the hosting of instructional demonstration videos as well as hosting libraries of cigar box guitar performances. However, reflecting changing online practices, the majority of online activity for the movement now occurs through Social Media including

Twitter, Instagram and Facebook groups and pages including *Cigar Box Guitars*, *UK Cigar Box Guitars*, *Cigar Box Guitar Builders*, *Owners and Players*, *Cigar Box Guitar History*, and *DIY Cigar Box Guitars* among many others.

A simple 'netnographic' analysis of the different types of postings on Facebook provides an insight into the ways in which members connect with each other, promote participation and transfer knowledge on an open basis. An analysis of 50 randomly selected posts were coded and fell within five basic types. These are listed below with a few examples given of typical posts within each group.

Self-promotional posts - Making:

- Look at this cigar box guitar I've just made/ have for sale
- I've found these cigar boxes/ components I'm going to use
- Advertising cigar box guitars/ components for sale

Self-promotional posts - Playing:

- Video of me playing my latest cigar box guitar at home/ on stage
- Download my latest tracks here/ links to YouTube videos
- Advertising CD's for sale

Calls for help:

- I've got a problem making this cigar box guitar – can anyone suggest solutions?
- I want to use nails as frets – what problems am I likely to have?
- What's the best position for this particular pickup?

Instructional posts/videos:

- This is how to make a cigar box guitar/ solve a problem/ Downloadable plans
- Reviews of related equipment, tools, pedals or amplifiers
- How to play 'Spirit in the Sky' on a cigar box guitar

Promotional posts:

- Advertising Cigar box guitar-based performances / festivals/ trade shows
- Sharing 'found' posts/ videos of players, instruments etc.
- General promotion of the scene – cartoons, old photos etc.

To see if there was a pattern to the distribution of these different types of posts a sample of four Facebook groups was chosen, and the posts over a period of one month (May 2019) were analysed. The deliberately diverse groups chosen were *Cigar Box Guitars* (9,670 members); *Cigar Box Guitar Builders, Owners and Players* (3,264 members); *UK Cigar Box Guitars* (829 members) and a page (as opposed to a group) *Cigar Box Nation* [hosted by the people behind the Cigar Box Nation website] which at the time of writing had 54,365 followers.

The results (Table 1), particularly when graphed (Figure 2) show a remarkable similarity of distribution, despite the markedly different number of actual posts. When averaged out, by far the largest number of posts were self-promotional posts where people took the opportunity to display their making skills, followed by posts where people demonstrated their playing skills, which follows exactly the most popular discussions on the *Cigar Box Nation* website as mentioned above, showing a continuation of the dominance of these two topics. There is some crossover between these two types of posts, as very often, the people demonstrating their playing ability are simultaneously demonstrating the sound of an instrument that they have made. The next most common post types were more altruistic, promoting the cigar box guitar scene in general terms, advertising festivals or sharing historical photographs of cigar box guitars or related images. Next came calls for help, with less experienced members hoping for a solution from more experienced members, and finally came instructional posts, with members demonstrating how to perform certain making tasks, or providing lessons on how to play particular tunes. Some crossover between all these results occurs as the same posts were very often submitted to a number of different Facebook pages, so the entries are not unique to that page or group.

Facebook Cigar Box Guitar Pages	SP Making	SP Playing	Promotion	Call for Help	Instruction
Cigar Box Guitar	260	139	70	24	28
Cigar Box Guitar Builders Owners and Players	221	104	47	43	16
UK Cigar Box Guitars	65	26	15	8	13
Cigar Box Nation	17	13	6	0	15
Average	140.75	70.5	34.5	18.75	18

Table 1. Distribution of post types.

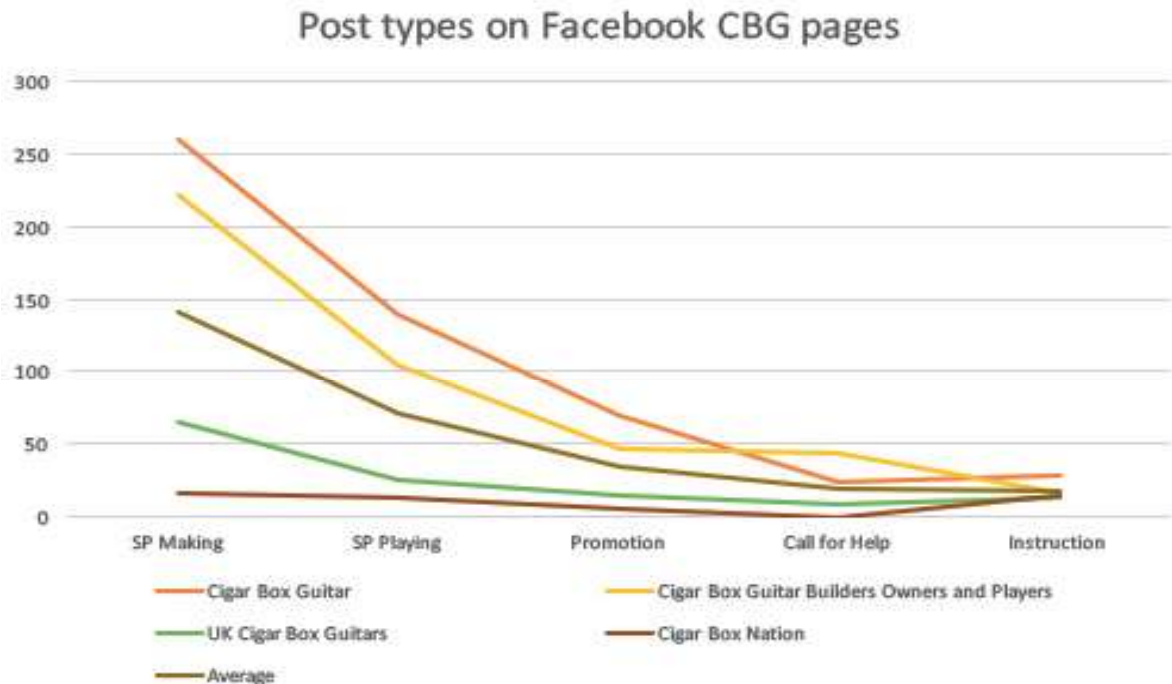


Figure 2. Distribution of post types.

Promoting Participation: Fanzines, Festival and Workshops

An element that was evident in the original study, and which has relevance to the subject of extending product lifetimes, is one of altruism among members. A number of the makers interviewed had struggled to learn how to make the instruments in the early days of the movement, and wanted to help others get involved in learning the making process. This resulted in the hosting of workshops where complete beginners could be taken through the process stage by stage, making an instrument from scratch and learning a basic tune to play in a single day. The most prolific of these has been 'Chickenbone John', one of the leading lights of the cigar box guitar scene in the UK, who has taught almost 2,000 people how to make and play an instrument.

Chickenbone John's other big contribution to promoting the cigar box guitar in the UK has been his hosting of an annual festival called 'Boxstock', usually held in Wolverhampton. This one-day event brings together makers and players from all over the country, with a number of the makers having stalls to sell finished cigar box guitars, cigar boxes and wooden neck blanks ready to use in making, specialised tools such as fret slot saws, guitar hardware such as tuners and strings, and related equipment such

as amplifiers. Various demonstrations are also given on specific aspects, such as hand winding guitar pickups, and open mic slots are available through the day for people to perform on stage. The evening sees a concert of invited artists from across the country and from Europe, all performing with home-made instruments constructed from recycled parts.

Further promoting the movement, individual makers have at times progressed from making and selling cigar box guitars to producing online fanzines, such as *CBG Review*. This high-quality fanzine, launched in 2017, is assembled and edited by Ross Hewitt, an Australian now based in Switzerland, and promotes the scene as a now global phenomenon, showcasing the craftwork of makers, publishing interviews with players and reviewing gigs and festivals.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the sense of connectedness achieved through active participation in online and real life communities of practice and of performance is a hugely important part of the world of the cigar box guitar maker. The main impact of these communities on the makers is to move their practice away from being purely a Do-It-Yourself activity into one of Do-It-Together or Do-It-With-Others, even if the participation is on the level of knowledge

exchange rather than hands-on construction. In doing so, increasing numbers of people are becoming involved in a creative activity (many for the first time) where they realise they have the ability to make choices and decisions about what materials to use (and reuse) and the freedom to use any found objects and upcycled parts resulting in unique products that they have an incredibly strong emotional bond with. Statements made by cigar box guitar makers during the filming of *Three Chords and the Truth*, a documentary film on the subject (Heath & Atkinson 2019), made it clear that makers saw their guitars as extensions of themselves:

“This is part of me. I mean, it’s come out of my head and out of my endeavours. It doesn’t exist anywhere else before I’ve got these little bits of scrap wood together and made it. The sound appears and you think ‘Wow! You know, that’s me. That really is me, because this doesn’t exist if I hadn’t have made it.”

Such emotional bonds are absolutely key to preventing the object being discarded at a later date. By developing such bonds, makers proactively extend the product lifetime of the component parts they select, and through

constant upkeep, repair, alteration and additions to their instruments as they gain experience, they extend the product lifetime of the instruments they create.

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