

Music

Where there is smoke

Visiting a handmade cigar box guitar workshop

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When he was eight James Marshall Hendrix was so passionate to have a guitar that he used the broomstick to play rhythms he heard in his head, he rigged a guitar at home starting from an empty cigar box. So is the Cigar Box Guitar community, from a decade ago, it is reviving the ancient tradition of building guitars with wooden boxes and is slowly fanning sparks of blues music in its truest essence.

It is a sunny autumn Sunday in New Jersey (United States). In an urban craft market, a seller offers curious guitars rudimentary, cigar boxes made of different types and sizes. The instruments are very interesting, so I wondered if he could show me how one of them sound. The man, John Bernyk takes one of which is plugged into an amplifier and with only a couple of chords makes the style sound more Mississippi Delta vivid ... The luthier smiles to the faces of admiration and clarifies: "This is the same type of instrument that was used when the blues was born. "Folks then did not have the money to buy a guitar, so they built their own instruments. "

A few days later we visited the Artisan (Bernyk) at home to discover the secret of Cigar box guitars. John Bernyk (New Jersey, 1959) works in administration for a school district in a coastal New Jersey town. When time allows, you may find him in the workshop is located in his garage, for the design and constructing cigar box guitars, more known as CBG (Cigar Box Guitars). "This goes far beyond being a business. Actually I do not make a lot of money from this, but it is something that I do in my free time and share with others, what I have discovered in these instruments. My musical life has changed, "he explains Bernyk while strolling through the small, workshop tidy and cold, crowded with cigar boxes, guitars, a keyboard and several amplifiers.

"I always liked the guitar and started to play at 12 years old, but only would get so good at it". He would play for a little while then drop for a while" he says the craftsman, who has already produced more than 500 guitars... "It was difficult to play the regular guitar like I wanted to and I did not have enough motivation. When I tried a Cigar Box Guitar ...it was a springboard. Its simplicity basic raw sounds allowed me to start writing my own music and even form a band, the Cigar Box Stompers. "The CBG is overwhelming simplicity: an empty cigar box, wooden neck, a small opening for better sound and at least three strings. This is the most common way to build a CBG!

After you tune them in an open chord: the two outer strings tuned in same note, and the middle set a third above. "You can customize your guitar as you like. This, for example this one, it is very special to me and also sounds great," he says, while holding a guitar that is adorned with a license plate from an old pick-up truck from his family's ranch, in the state of Arizona. Bernyk explains that the CBG has opened the door to a new world in which is alive and includes an integrated growing community of musicians and luthiers that recycles wooden boxes. This movement has spread and gone viral throughout the United States. The echoes of this current trend also have reached Europe. In the UK there is a number of fans who listen assiduously to Bernyk's radio program dedicated to music played on these instruments (titled Cigar Box Theater on Lazy B Radio.com).

Cigar Box Guitar Nation is a website where finally all stakeholders in these types of instruments, which are mainly guitars, but also banjos, violins and other stringed instruments are built. Shane Speal, the 'father' of the web Based in York (Pennsylvania), gets excited with every detail of these instruments. The self-proclaimed King of CBGs began playing this type of instrument about two decades ago, when there was nothing being said about them.... Yet ... "I posted instructions to build and set up a CBG chat for users on the internet. He went from three thousand people when it started to now ... "Today Cigar Box Nation has more 12,000 users and growing. Speal says that for him this is much more about rescuing an old sound. "We want to take forward the blues and create something new," he says from his studio and with an eye to promoting Holler, the new album by his band: Shane Speal's Snake Oil Band.

When not playing, or designing a new guitar, Speal runs it's the CBG Museum located in Speal's Tavern in Alexandria (Pennsylvania). This is the only permanent collection in the world, a kind of Hard Rock Cafe and home for CBGs, which opened in 2004 and it presents more than 80 pieces. This includes an instrument manufactured in 1910 and donated by John 'Reddog' McNair, a luthier and historian New Orleans now living in Puerto Rico. According to McNair, the Congo Square New Orleans, now called Louis Armstrong Park, was the meeting place for enslaved Africans, commonly allowed on Sundays, "There they played music, mixed tribal rhythms creating spiritual and blues a new sound. In the heart New Orleans He created jazz. "Guitars and other instruments made from cigar boxes are intimately linked the birth of both genres. He and Emile "Stale bread Charlie" Lacoum considered as one of the fathers of jazz. He appears with his banjo in an image of the late nineteenth century (left). The tobacco industry had started to package cigars in boxes around 1840. In 1876 is documented the first picture It retains a violin made from one of them. The co-founder of the Boy Scouts of America, Daniel Carter Beard, was the first to publish instructions to build a five-string banjo from a cigar box. The search for authentic sound in these primitive instruments, the creators of the blues on poor rural communities, has become an irresistible call for musicians all areas. From amateur to celebrities like Jack White, PJ Harvey, Tom Waits, Johnny Depp, Billy Gibbons (ZZ Top) or bluesman popular in UK, Seasick Steve, using all types of CGBs. Even in the New York studio Danny Clinch, a regular photographer for Rolling Stone, found one of these banjos unmistakable. "It is a gift it has made me a fan recently," he reveals: "I play the harmonica best, but I love the sound of this thing." Who knows if Clinch is one of the new faces which you can see in a forthcoming annual festivals with these instruments? From spring to summer, there are plenty of festivals in Pennsylvania, Chicago or Huntsville (Alabama), which the twelve edition of the Cigar Box Guitar Festival will happen in June.

Cigar boxes, oil cans, one or two strings, frets or fretless, with or without amplifier ... The possibilities are infinite in a world in which the builder plays their own instrument. Perhaps the key to these boxes music is that although they sound earthly and humble, they also sound good plugged in. Guitarist Pat MacDonald (Timbuk3, Purgatory Hill) explained so a few years ago the Los Angeles Times: "One key aspect of it is that it's very earthy, very down to earth, but it's also electric. You can play a brand new flashy Martin guitar that sounds bright and beautiful, and that is acoustic. A lot of people think of that as folk music: something based on acoustic guitars and banjos and something that's really beautiful sounding acoustically." "A lot of the cigar-box instruments, they don't sound like much necessarily acoustic. Most people who play them plug them in, it's very electric. It's like folk music turned inside out, way more electric, yet way more primitive. The instrument itself, it's hyper-primitive. When you electrify an acoustic guitar, you usually make it sound like a louder acoustic guitar. But these things, even the folk [extremists] who are opposed to electricity, have to agree that these instruments are pretty [genuinely] folky."