

Cigar box guitars are really smokin'



Brendan Polak picks out a tune on the cigar box guitar he bought from the US and which inspired him to start making his own versions of the instrument.

Words and photos by Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]B[/dropcap>rendan Polak is no musician, in fact he admits he couldn't play a note until he began to make instruments that are both simple and fascinating – cigar box guitars.

Cigar box and biscuit box guitars belong to a genre of instruments borne of poverty and portability – right up there with spoons and the harmonica – and are rooted in the blues music of America's deep south. Some recordings of the cigar box guitar date back to the 1840s.

It was through this music that Brendan, of Warrnambool, became

captivated by the unique guitars.

"I listen to a bit of blues and have always wanted to learn to play something, so I ended up buying a cigar box guitar online from the US," he explains.

That was about three years ago and, in the time since, Brendan has not only got a fair handle on how to play a cigar box, but how to make one.

The guitar begins, of course, with an old cigar box and Brendan has found himself a ready supplier via Gumtree: a Melbourne cigar stockist who is happy to offload the empty boxes to somebody who can use them.



A selection of Brendan's cigar box and biscuit box guitars, excluding the far right instrument which was made in the US. In front is a version of a diddley bow, single string guitar.

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The boxes are beautiful objects in themselves, with sweet-smelling wood or thick cardboard, tiny gold clasps and usually an intriguing decoration on the top and sides to make the recipient feel like they are enjoying a small luxury (if an ultimately unhealthy one!)

Brendan then adds his own touches – the acoustic guitar strings, the tuner pegs, and the neck, made from bits of recycled wood that could be anything from a broom handle to an off-cut from old wooden pallet. Some even have volume buttons.

“I really love the simplicity of them, yet each one is different,” Brendan says.

“The fact it has only one, two or three strings also makes it appealing to people who think they can’t play an instrument...like me,” he laughs.

Another intriguing element is the “pick up” – a small piece of electronic work that sits inside the guitar for use with an amplifier. Brendan shows me a pick-up hidden inside a vintage ‘*Log Cabin*’ tobacco tin and I am beginning to think that these instruments are the ultimate in up-cycling.

There is one more surprise yet to come.



Simple but effective. This cigar box guitar made by Brendan includes volume and tone controls and can be used with an amp.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]B[/dropcap]rendan offers to play a few bars on his cigars – (that was a line just waiting to be written) – and slips something like a metal socket over one finger.

His hand slides up and down the neck of the guitar as he picks out a tune and suddenly his man cave, and it is a sensational man cave, is alive with the sound of the blues.

“That sounds okay, but then you can do this,” Brendan says, as he plugs an amp into the side of the cigar box and boom – the sound is phenomenal: loud and phenomenal.

Who would have thought that an old box, or biscuit tin, with some guitar strings, recycled wood and a ‘pick up’ could make such music? But it does.



Brendan, a self-confessed non-musician, says he is proof positive that just about anyone can play a cigar box guitar or, in this case, a diddley bow.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]A[/dropcap] it turns out, the multi-stringed cigar box guitars are actually the more complex members of the family.

"This one," Brendan explains as he points to a single-string stretched on a piece of timber, "is called a diddley bow. They come from the days when people would stretch string along a verandah post, or down a broom handle, and use it to make music".

Now that's simplicity.

(Click on video below to see a cigar box guitar in blues action.)

Brendan's custom made guitars are available directly through him (darky99.bp@gmail.com or 0423 696 440) and now [Dale Cleves Music](#), Warrnambool.

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