

## MADE IN ARKANSAS

# NOTHING BUT THE GROOVE

NORTH LITTLE ROCK'S BILL JAGITSCH CAN MAKE A CIGAR BOX SING.

BY ERIC FRANCIS | PHOTO BY ARSHIA KHAN

IT'S A SIMPLE-SOUNDING RECIPE: Take a cigar box, add a stick, stretch some strings down it, and you've got a guitar.



"IT'S THE GROOVE, nothing but the groove," Bill Jagitsch says of the appeal. "After playing all kinds of music—rock and roll, experimental, Frank Zappa—I started getting into the blues because of the feel of it."

Jagitsch plays the blues at home and as frontman of Bluesboy Jag and the Juke Joint Zombies, and plays it well enough to have been twice named winner of the Arkansas Blues Challenge. Talk to him long enough about music—a few minutes will suffice, actually—and you'll come away with a clear idea of just how deeply this white boy from Michigan loves the sound that sprang from the slave fields of the Mississippi River Delta.

It won't take much prompting to get him to show you one of his cigar box guitars, either. Jagitsch has been building them by hand for almost a decade in his North Little Rock home and selling them to customers all over the United States and Europe.

Back when the cigar box guitar first appeared on the scene, it was an economic expediency for the folks who played the blues. Because of the instrument's grounding in the poor, black, working class of society, its practitioners were often dirt-poor and couldn't afford a real instrument. So anything hollow enough to resonate could be converted into a makeshift guitar. And the thing about a discarded cigar box is that it's free.

Mind you, cigar boxes aren't the only hollow things you might find lying around.

"I've made some out of cookie tins—cookie tin banjos," says Jagitsch. "I also made a 'ham-

dolin' out of a ham tin—it's really a ukelele, but I liked the play on words."

Jagitsch's first memory of playing the guitar involves the instrument his sister had received as a gift from a cousin back in the mid-1960s. She didn't know how to play it, so a young Bill (age 10, or maybe 11) laid his hands on it.

"I'd bang on it, literally," he says. "I'd lay it flat and drop coins on it and listen to the noises. There was something about it, like it was saying, 'You need to play me.'"

Now, move forward to 2004, and a grown-up Bill Jagitsch is an accomplished player with a knack for building things. He'd been working as an Apple computer technician and had a side business of restoring and selling vintage Macintoshes when one day he came across a magazine called *Make* with a picture of a cigar box guitar on the cover. He knew about the history of CBGs (as he calls them for short) and was intrigued by the idea of making one, so he bought a copy, read the article and gave it a try.

He's still got that first effort, even though it's not quite a working specimen.

"I didn't have any woodworking experience whatsoever and didn't know what tools I would need, so I kind of hacked at [the neck]," he says. "I made very crooked fret markers with a wood-burning tool. It took hours and hours."

He signs and numbers every guitar he makes and is up to about 2,000 now. The fabrication is detail-oriented but not terribly time-consuming, he says.

"The neck is the most labor-intensive part of

it," says Jagitsch. "I hand-sand them and shape them; I don't use any fancy tools. I cut the frets and hammer them in. Actually putting the guitar together takes another couple of hours. I'm using a hand-wound, single-coil pickup that I make myself; I'm also using humbucker pickups."

But guitars aren't the only things he can transform a cigar box into.

"I make small amps—I call them living room amps—out of cigar boxes, with a five-watt solid state amplifier and a direct out so you can plug them into a bigger speaker and get a nice, loud sound out of it," he says.

He has also made drums out of old hard-side suitcases—he calls them "gutbuckets"—which can also be traced back to the early do-it-yourself days of blues. In fact, he holds, just about everything you hear on the radio, one way or another, can be traced back to the blues. Which itself can be traced back to the traditional songs played on homemade instruments, often crafted from hollow gourds, that African slaves brought to these shores upon their indenture.

"Everything in American music derives from the blues: Pop, R&B, soul, jazz, you name it," says Jagitsch. "It's as close as you can get to an indigenous American music. I can play it all night, all day, non-stop."

*Jagitsch's cigar-box guitars start at \$79 for an entry-level fretless acoustic model and go up to \$400 for "the fancy six-string," and can be ordered online at [jagshouse.com](http://jagshouse.com). **AL***