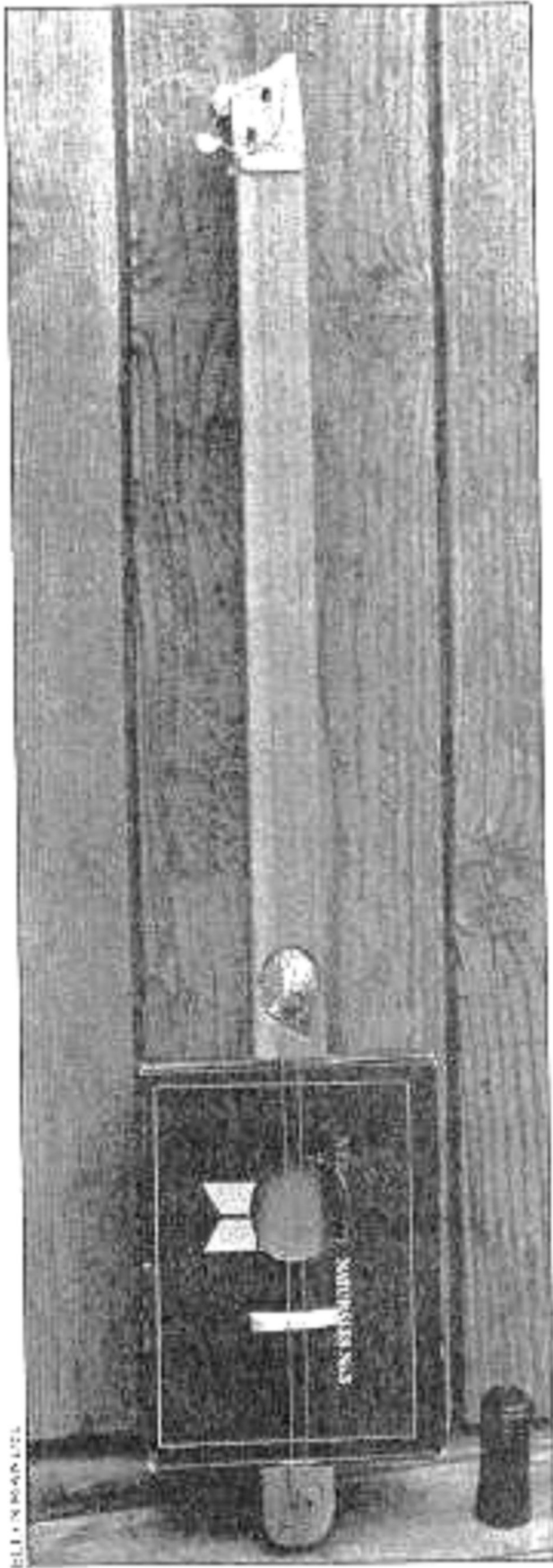


The Great American Tradition:
The Cigar Box Guitar

By Michael Lydon

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A Great American Tradition

The Cigar Box Guitar

By Michael Lydon

[Ed. Note: Rock writer Michael Lydon's books include Boogie Lightning; his guitars include a Gibson and a "Medalist Naturales No. 3"]

Before I went to school, I started fooling around on a guitar. My daddy made me one with a cigar box, a broomstick, and two strands of baling wire and I'd sit and beat on that thing.

—Carl Perkins

Like Carl Perkins' daddy, I've made a 2-string cigar box guitar, and like Carl Perkins, I've been beating on it. It sounds good, particularly played bottleneck and tuned to an open chord. It gives strong volume with a clear ring to it, and it can deliver smooth Hawaiian swoops and bluesy clangs. The cost: less than a dollar; the tools: a saw, coping saw, hand drill,

pocket knife and chisel, white glue, and sandpaper. It took thought but no hard work, and I think I've learned something about the guitar I didn't know before. Plus I have a brand new axe I'm proud of.

I made it because I wanted to study from scratch what happens when a taut string vibrates. Nailing one end of a guitar string to a board, tugging the other, and twanging the middle wasn't good enough. My arm got tired, and the string made a sound, but not a loud one. The solution was to fasten both ends of the string, and to get the string's vibration to in turn vibrate something else larger and more resonant. So for 84¢ I bought 3' of wood 1½" square (a 2x2 in lumberyard parlance) and got a cigar box free from a liquor store.

My first bright idea: run the 2x2 through the cigar box so that the

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strings, attached at both ends to the same piece of wood, would span out but put no pressure on the cardboard box. I cut holes in either end of the cigar box about $\frac{1}{2}$ " from the top, then whittled off about $\frac{1}{4}$ " off the top of the 2x2 along enough length for the whittled part to go through both holes and make a 2" tailpiece. When I put the piece of wood through the box, the "fingerboard" section was level with the top of the cigar box, and what was inside was recessed enough so the box top, soon to be the soundboard, didn't touch it. At the tailpiece piece end I replaced what I had pared away so it too was at the fingerboard level.

Bridge to nut on my Gibson acoustic guitar is about two feet; that seemed fine for this one. I cut the 2x2 accordingly, angling the cut to make a slanted plate for the tuning pegs, again imitating the Gibson. Whittling the insert cutaway for the gears took some figuring, and I did a trial run on the extra part of the 2x2 I had cut off. To hold the strings at the tailpiece I drilled two holes to run the strings through from the back, adding two buttons in back to keep the string ends from being tugged into the wood—my first fancy touch.

Nut and bridge on the Gibson are bone, so I sawed little pieces from a beef soup bone and sanded them to shape.

For the all important soundboard I first used some corrugated paper sent to me around a record. The first time I tightened the strings, it began to cave in. I added a plywood strip crosswise as bracing, notching the 2x2 so it would clear. After a few days of playing, it began to warp again. Only then did I think: why not use the nice stiff original top of the cigar box? This I braced crosswise and also diagonally on either side of the sound-

Continued on page 82

continued...

CIGAR BOX GUITAR

Continued from page 81

hole. It's both sturdy and tensile and works fine.

Finishing touches: a piece of aba-

coats. It feels satiny and has a nice golden glow. I string it with the third and fourth strings from my Gibson when I change strings on that.

When I was making the cigar box guitar I pretty nearly crushed it twice



ELLEN MANDEL

No truss rod adjustment needed with a neck like this.

lone shell cut into the neck and an L monogram in silver paint that curls around the tuning pegs. I oiled the wood with five coats of a mixture of linseed oil and turpentine, sanding the wood and rubbing it down between

out of plain carelessness, and a few times, when I couldn't figure out my next step, I felt like smashing it in frustration. I'm glad I got it done in one piece. It tickles me to own a unique guitar—the one and only Lydon—and the thrill I get playing it is priceless. ■