It’s Been A Long, Hard Road

How the diddley bow got here…and stayed!

Written by Philip Thomas
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Dedication

To my partner, Eirwen, with all my love
Foreword

By Justin Johnson

We’ve all heard the phrase, ‘getting back to your roots.’ It can mean many different things, but the message that always holds true is that there is a strong magic in the simplest and purest form of something. When I first fell in love with Blues music, I was inspired by the classic sound of an electric guitar, bending, moaning, and cutting through the air with a fire and soul that captivated me from the start. Striving to learn from the greats, I traced the music back to where it came from in order to find the truest form of Blues guitar. Only once I found that source could I rightfully take this music somewhere new, on my own path as a musician.

On my path to discover the source of Blues guitar, I discovered the one-string diddley bow, the simplest of all stringed instruments. Once I began to play the diddley bow I began to see a dramatic change in the way I approached and conceptualized not only guitar, but stringed instruments in general. The challenge of making music on a single-string forces a player to develop better voice, pitch, rhythm, style, and inflection. The diddley bow had become my personal trainer for Blues guitar. It was the missing link I had been looking for. From that simple string, I could now summon the sounds I had been searching for, with a voice that I never knew I had at my fingertips. Eventually, I could get this voice out of any stringed instrument I picked up, whether it had one string, 6 strings, 8 strings…you name it!

All over the world, on almost every continent, in almost every style of music, you find a one-stringed instrument at the heart of regional musical traditions. Whether it’s the American diddley bow, the Brazilian Berimbau, the African musical bow, or any other variation…the simple music from a single-string is the original wellspring of all modern stringed instruments in their endless varieties.

I applaud Philip Thomas in the work he’s done with this book, to bring attention back to that humblest of stringed instruments, the one-string diddley bow. I hope you enjoy the journey ‘back to your roots!’

Justin Johnson

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Introduction

Let me introduce myself. My name is Philip Thomas and I live in Cardiff, Wales. I am an amateur ethnomusicologist. By that I mean that I am retired from the world of work and have no current academic affiliation. My good friend Professor Hamish Fyfe from the University of South Wales in Cardiff refers to me as an ‘Independent Scholar’. I rather like that. I trained in ethnomusicology, taking a Master’s Degree in World Music Studies at Sheffield University in the UK under Professor Jonathan Stock and Dr. Andrew Killick where I developed and expanded a long-standing interest in primitive musical instruments from a variety of cultures. I worked on a number of community arts projects including taking the role of artistic director of an arts festival for older people for over six years. In 2012 I was fortunate to be awarded a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Travel Fellowship that enabled me to travel in the USA for six weeks researching the senior arts scene in the USA. While in New Orleans I had my first encounter with the world of Cigar Box Guitars and, in particular, the one string slide guitar known as the diddley bow. On my return to the UK I began to make and play these amazing instruments and went on to develop a small voluntary arts project (The Home-made Blues Project) running workshops to show people of all ages how to make and play their own instruments.

The process of making, playing and teaching on these instruments prompted me, over time, to revisit my reading of the work of earlier anthropologists, musicologists and ethnomusicologists and, as a guitarist of fifty years or so, consider some interesting questions:

Why do we make music anyway? What use is it?

Is there any significance to the myths and stories about the creation of music and musical instruments?

Archaeology and anthropology seem to indicate that most cultures had a single-string instrument in their musical history. What do we know about them?

Why did those instruments persist in some cultures and not in others?

Most guitarists know something of the development of the electric guitar. Many know of its origins as what we now call the Spanish guitar. Some even know of earlier progenitors like the oud, the lute and the cittern. But where do these instruments really come from? In this piece of work I hope to tell the story of the primitive single-string instruments that seem to be the progenitor of many of the stringed instruments, such as the guitar, that we recognise today.

Most musicians (particularly pop musicians) will recognise the phenomenon that occurs every few years when the music scene re-boots to its basic state and a new generation revels in the joy of being loud and primitive. Remember, maybe, your father telling you to ‘Turn that racket
down! Why don't you listen to proper music?’ Maybe you find yourself saying the same thing to your own children - or grandchildren. Do you remember the arrival of Punk in the seventies? Rap music? Grunge? Emo? How did they make you feel? Perhaps, like me, you derive pleasure from building simple instruments like the diddley bow, cigar box guitar, washtub or tea chest bass? Why might that be? I intend to explore the possibility that this regular re-boot to the primitive may have its root cause in the primitive origins of the stringed instrument that we have come to know and love as the guitar. Is there something in the DNA of the instrument itself that pulls us back to the basics from time to time, regardless of our ability as a player or the technical advances in the design or manufacturing of the instrument? I intend to write for the guitarist and those with a general interest in the roots of music - not the academic. Plain English.

My interest stems from my involvement in the Cigar Box Guitar [CBG] movement and, specifically, my interest in the single-string instrument called a diddley bow. I have built diddley bows; I have taught others to build them; I have played the instrument for audiences. I am an ethnomusicologist. In some circles that can be like standing up and declaring that you are an alcoholic, but simply put it means that I am interested in music and music-making and how those two things sit within society. It should come as no surprise that, when I began to make and play the diddley bow, I became curious about its history and evolution. I live in Wales, in the UK, and whenever I play my diddley bows for people there are some comments that are almost always made:

‘I never saw one of those before’

‘Why has it only got one string?’

‘Is it easy to play?’

‘Can I have a go?’

The more I considered it the more I began to realize that these questions need a bit of unpacking and that the answers provoke still more questions.

‘I never saw one of those before’ – Well, this question really got me thinking. A little ‘googling’ of the term ‘one-stringed musical instruments’ showed thirteen MILLION results. I found that most cultures have a single-stringed instrument embedded in their musical DNA somewhere and that in many of those cultures the instruments are still current and still relevant…still being played and still having a ceremonial or other cultural function. Why is it that most British people seem to know nothing of a single-string instrument? It can’t be explained away simply by saying that British culture is different or, in some way, more advanced than other world cultures. The British Isles has pre-Roman cultures such as the Druids that have a tradition of stringed musical instruments but nowhere can I find a single-stringed instrument – and I have looked! Perhaps the English Channel is a possible answer. In earliest times maybe musical ideas were freer to travel on mainland Europe. In any event my curiosity was piqued.

‘Why has it only got one string?’ That is a loaded question and there may be a number of answers for us to explore. The Baul musicians‘ sect in Bangladesh play an instrument called a Gopichand. They believe the single-string represents one God or the oneness of the universe…that’s an interesting idea from a particular perspective. However, I feel that maybe this question masks another more interesting question: ‘Why has it still only got one string?’ All over the world musical instruments evolved from one string into two-, three-, four- and many-stringed instruments of all kinds. Why have these single-stringed instruments retained their importance
and survived to the present day. What does that say about music and musicians?

‘Is it easy to play?’ Any musician will probably give you the same answer when asked this question about his or her favourite instrument. ‘Easy when you know how’ or ‘Easy to play but hard to play well’.

‘Can I have a go?’ The easiest one of all to answer. There have been many occasions when I have answered this question with ‘of course you can’ and watched the fire ignite behind the eyes as an eight (or eighty) year old begins to think about how they can make one for themselves.

What I hope to do here is to offer some comment on why these instruments survive today and why musicians and non-musicians alike are drawn to them. This book is intended to help you think about your music and your playing and take both in new directions as a result of your experiments.

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A Diddley Bow? What's that?

What exactly is a diddley bow anyway? Well, when it comes to describing the instrument in its most primitive current form the best I can come up with is this:

The diddley bow is a single-stringed instrument which influenced the development of the blues sound. It consists of a single-string tensioned between two nails on a board over a glass bottle or can, which is used both as a bridge and as a means to magnify the instrument's sound.

This picture shows an instrument built by ‘Trashmun Johnson’ (aka Kevin Lassiter from Portland, Tennessee, USA).
He makes wonderful instruments of the most authentic kind and has created a special demonstration video which will be really helpful to those who are new to the Diddley bow and the music made with it. Click here to view the video. I can also recommend that you subscribe to the ‘Trashmun Johnson’ YouTube channel to keep up to date with Kevin’s work.

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Meet my friend and fellow researcher Professor Beau Dudley. This gentleman is a creation of illustrator Dafydd Owen who has provided most of the illustrations in this book. The professor is what I call my 'ologist. That is to say he is a bit of a mash-up of every kind of scientist or academic you have ever met. He is something between The Nutty Professor and Indiana Jones. You will see him popping up in all the illustrations in this book - up a tree - behind a rock - peering through the bushes. He is my way of travelling through space and time to investigate the various topics we are going to explore. But he serves another useful purpose. He is there to remind me that this journey into the world of archaeology, anthropology, musicology and ethnomusicology is supposed to be fun! He is there to stop me taking myself too seriously. I need to make something clear. I am not the fount of all wisdom on the history of musical instruments. If you do some basic research you will find that many people have done detailed research into this subject and there are a number of theories out there about how musical instruments evolved. My research for this book took a very winding and erratic path and I have come to believe that is OK. While I have tried to put things in some kind of sensible order to help the reader, it is not the
way research usually happens. If there were no diversions and surprises then research wouldn't be much fun, would it? If you were prepared to take time and trouble there is little in this book that you couldn't find out for yourself. I hope this book - this story of my research journey - will provide you with a fun way to cut some corners and, maybe, set you off on your own journey to find out more about the bits you find interesting. The Professor's job is to keep you smiling and keep you reading until the end. Let's get started, shall we?

**Where do we start?**

Problems arise when we try to investigate the history of music or musical instruments. The further back we go the worse the problems get. The difficulty is that our perspective on the subject changes as we move on and learn more about the subject we are investigating. Up until fairly late in the twentieth century it was still possible for an ethnomusicologist or anthropologist (or any kind of 'ologist for that matter) to make a new discovery in their field of study by finding, visiting and study a real-life example of the subject s/he wished to investigate. In this book you will find that I make reference to many of the pioneers of the relatively new discipline of ethnomusicology whose work has impressed and inspired me. You will hear mention of John Blacking, Curt Sachs, Bruno Nettl and others, men and women (I call them my 'ologists - I hope you will want to read their work for yourself) who have all written extensively on their experiences with what we would call unsophisticated tribes and cultures and moved our understanding of music and its place in society on to new levels. Unfortunately for 'ologists these examples of unsophisticated culture are becoming fewer and further between. There are few parts of the world that remain truly unknown to us and few cultures that remain uninfluenced by contact with our modern world (initially by the 'ologists themselves and progressively by encroachment by settlement and the influence of technology). We have had plenty of time to read and think about the work of our 'ologists and, in some ways, to take our knowledge further by adding layers of knowledge that we have today that they did not have in the past. The danger in this is that we impose our modern perspective, ideas and values on situations first studied in times when they did not apply.

For example, we can fall into the trap of believing that progress (in our case the development of music and musical instruments) always happens in a linear fashion that progresses from the past into the future in a universally forward direction. In this book I hope to show you that is not always the case: that very simple musical instruments, and the music made with them still survive in many cultures today and that the instincts that drive us toward so-called ‘primitive’ music are there in us for a reason and persist to the present day. I want to attempt a journey as far back as we can go to investigate why, in the early twenty-first century, some of us are still drawn to making music on a one-stringed instrument such as the dan-bau, berimbau or diddley bow.
Back to the beginning – What do our stories and legends tell us?

If you are reading this it is probably because you are interested in the diddley bow, cigar box guitar or other stringed instruments so it is unlikely that you will be interested in tales of cavemen banging rocks together or blowing flutes made of bones (interesting though those things may be). Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that humans had their stories about how music came into the world long before our ‘ologists began to approach the subject scientifically. It is often said that myths, legends and stories contain a grain of truth. That is easy to understand. Traditional stories in all cultures only survive because they had something within them which was considered worthy of being told and retold through the generations. But it is also said: ‘Never let the truth get in the way of a good story!’ Stories are told and retold for many reasons, not least for entertainment by the fireside on a long winter’s night. We need to be careful about the importance we attach to stories. There is a difference between ‘lore’ and ‘history’ and failure to understand the difference between the two can lead to misconceptions. Let me give you some examples to illustrate what I mean.

Morgan Schatz-Blackrose, a professional storyteller and musician from Brisbane, Australia, pointed me to a collection of myths retold by Geraldine McCaughrean (‘The Bronze Cauldron’) that contains an Aztec legend that tells how the god of the earth was resentful of the sun god because he had all the music and musicians in his kingdom and the earth was silent. He tasked a spirit god to go to heaven and bring back the musicians despite the fact that the sun god had warned them all against leaving his domain. The spirit god used fear, deception and the creation of storms to convince the sun god’s musicians that they were under attack and entice them to come with him to the earth which then ‘awakened’ and became full of music. It is easy to believe that this story (and there are many like it) might be used to reinforce the belief that music is a gift from the gods – something with an intrinsic power, and that the people who make music are ‘special’. In earliest times music was probably a part of ritual and it is likely that the first ‘professional’ musicians might well have been masters of ritual. In our modern, largely secular, times we might question that, yet most major religions and belief systems rely pretty heavily on music. It seems that those early stories are still having an impact today.

My good friend Michael Harvey, another professional storyteller from Cardiff, Wales, told me of a tale of the Bantu people of Africa. He said:

‘They tell of the day when the Creator got very bored with infinity and eternity and, scratching his head one day, he woke up ‘Imagination’ who told him to invent a musical instrument. The result was the Kalimba (a thumb piano much loved of the Bantu people). The first note represented the sun, the second the moon etc. – you get the idea – then he played a bum note and made the first human being. The rest, as they say, is history.’

This is a lovely story of special relevance to the Bantu people for whom the Kalimba is an important part of their culture and ritual. However, if you look at the story more closely you could interpret it in several ways:

It is a story about how music came into the world.

It is a story that shows that even the Creator can make mistakes.

It is a story that shows that mankind was flawed from the beginning.

The same story can be told in three different ways depending upon the message that the storyteller wishes his audience to take away.
In 1830 Sir Thomas Stanley Raffles, a Fellow of the Royal Society and the former governor of Java published a monumental work, entitled ‘The History of Java’ [Note 1], in which he relates that Javan folklore says that the origin of music is due to accident. Javan tales say that the wind blew through a suspended tube (they don’t say what kind) and produced a tone, thus bringing music into the world. Folklore is often rooted in fact and this story doesn’t seem unlikely to me. As we are here to talk about stringed instruments, here is another example.

There is a commonly held belief (I held this belief myself for a number of years) that the origin of stringed instruments lay in the old story of a hunter who was resting the end of his bow on a hollow log to be re-strung. The hollow log acted as a resonator which enabled the hunter to hear, and be entranced by, the ‘twanging’ sound made by the bow string… making music with strings was born. Sounds plausible, doesn’t it? Yet, in his excellent book ‘The History of Musical Instruments’ musicologist Curt Sachs [Note 2] recounts this story and says that ‘…this is plausible but wrong, like many plausible explanations.’ He goes on to say that the oldest known examples of instruments with a plucked string are about three meters long, made from cane and with a ‘string’ that comprised a sliver of the same cane raised up from the body by objects used as a bridge. It is difficult to see how such an object could be used to shoot an arrow. It is nice to cling to the romantic idea that a hunter could turn from killing to music because of a hollow log. It is a nice story, but it seems likely that is all it is. There are many other reasons given by Sachs and others as to why this is so…we don’t need to delve too deeply here. Hopefully you see what I mean.

One of Sachs’ contemporary musicologists in the early twentieth century was Professor Erich von Hornbostel. He did a lot of research in African cultures and was responsible for much of the work done to arrive at the classification of musical instruments as we now know them. In his article ‘The Ethnology of African Sound-Instruments’ [Note 3] he arrived at the conclusion that:

‘…it would be hard to find a sound-instrument which had not originally a ritual or magical significance, and which had not served for an indefinite period as a secular amusement for adults before being finally passed on to the children.’

So, three distinct stages in the development of a music…or an instrument:

Ritual
Entertainment
Children’s play

Von Hornbostel also believed that ritual use was a key indicator of the antiquity of a music and that the more widely music can be found around the world the more likely it is to be ancient in origin. Our old friend Curt Sachs uses a great analogy to illustrate this. He describes throwing a pebble into a pond, creating a series of circular ripples in the water. These move outwards until they reach the poolside. The largest ripple was the one created first and is therefore the oldest. In our modern society we tend to think that things develop in a linear fashion. From small to large…young to old…or large to small…simple to complex. I tend to believe that this a rather simplistic view of things. We are going to look at this idea next. Before we move on, let me leave you with a riddle often used by storytellers:

‘It walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon and three legs in the evening. What is it?’

Answer: Man (or woman). A baby crawls on all fours, then walks on two legs as an adult and
uses two legs and a cane when they’re old.

So…the development of music (of anything) does not take as obvious a path as you might think. In this book I suppose I am asking: ‘Why is the Diddley bow still alive and kicking?’

To answer that question we will need to take rather a winding path…follow me!

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Note 1 - T. S. Raffles (1830).’The History of Java’ John Murray, London p.472

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Why do humans make music in the first place?

This is a huge question and it must be pretty obvious that we can only theorize about this as we don’t have any real idea how early man felt about the idea of music. Early man probably didn’t think about it much, if at all, and anyway, he had no way of communicating his thoughts to us.

To consider this question we are really entering the realm of philosophy, I suppose. However, while we can only speculate about how early man might have related to the concept of music, we can think about how we view music and musicians today and how things may have changed over time.

An ethnomusicologist who did a lot of thinking about this subject was John Blacking. In the late 1960s he gave a series of lectures on this subject (The John Danz lectures) at the University of Washington and then, in 1973, published a marvellous small book based on the lectures entitled ‘How Musical Is Man?’ [Note 1] which remains ‘ground zero’ for most academics who consider this subject. For our purpose I intend to make a brief summary of some of his conclusions…enough to set your intellectual juices flowing if you have not considered this subject before. Others are developing ideas all the time about why mankind makes music, but many of John Blacking’s observations still hold true.

It seems that before mankind became what we call ‘civilized’, music was probably not an activity that was considered in isolation. When the early ‘ologists did their fieldwork with communities in Africa and elsewhere that had not yet been contaminated by contact with modern civilization, they found that music was often inseparable from dance or other ceremonial activity. As recently as 2004 psychologist Stephen Pinker, in his book ‘How The Mind Works’ [Note 2] wrote:

‘I suspect music is auditory cheesecake, an exquisite confection crafted to tickle the sensitive spots of at least six of our mental faculties.’

Such an idea would have seemed very strange to an African tribesman (even if he could have grasped the idea of ‘cheesecake’). Some of the languages used in these communities do not contain a word that means just ‘music’. We get an example of this from Blacking (p. 105) when he describes attending a ceremony with a chief of the Venda tribe in southern Africa where the chief told him:

‘You shall hear the finest imaginable performance of our national dance.’

The idea that, for men and women from these cultures, music was inextricably linked to other
activities leads us on to another thought: the listener is as important as the musician! Without someone to listen to the music or song and participate in the required ceremony or other activity the performance of the music has or had no real purpose. Blacking refers to music as ‘humanly organised sound’ but there might be a downside to that. When talking of his own musical upbringing he says:

‘I had been brought up to understand music as a system of ordering sound, in which a cumulative set of rules and an increasing range of permissible sound patterns had been invented and developed by Europeans who were considered to have had exceptional musical ability.’

Maybe to an early man or woman the idea of listening to music while doing nothing just would not have occurred at all? What would s/he have made of the concept of learning to be a musician who made his living creating and performing music for no reason other than making a pleasant sound or making money? Perhaps s/he would have thought that this trivialized the listening experience in some way. Maybe the concept of music as relaxation would have been a step too far. We have no way to know.

We can say that the technical developments in music and music-making (more sophisticated instruments, musical notation, etc.) have made our present day musicians seem more special and have elevated them to the status of an elite category in our society. This means that those of us who do not feel able to aspire to this elite status of ‘musician’ (mainly due to the lack of opportunity or resource to learn to be a musician) can easily feel deprived of the chance to fully participate in the musical experience, however much we may be inclined to do so.

Before we move on let me share two further observations from John Blacking.

‘Music is…a reflection and response to social forces, and particularly to the consequences of the division of labor in society.’

‘Is it surprising…that many people abandon music because they cannot play what they feel, or cannot feel what they play?’

I am beginning to come to the view that these two observations get right to the heart of the question of why some of us are drawn to the music of the diddley bow, cigar box guitar and other so-called ‘rustic’ instruments.

We like to be a part of the creation of the instrument as well as the creation of the music.

We are drawn to a simple music with fewer rules and restrictions – a less clear view of right and wrong – a music where feeling is more important than technique.

We like to engage with musicality rather than musical knowledge or expertise. There is nothing for us to prove.

We like to share our experiences with others in the community of music makers who feel the way we do. We do this through participation in networks like the Cigar Box Nation and others on the internet. It makes us feel part of a family or a brother-sisterhood. It makes us feel more like…well…musicians, I suppose. It’s complicated, isn’t it? Enough of the intellectual stuff. It’s time to take a more detailed look at how these single-stringed instruments evolved and survived to the present day

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Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

Let's Go Back...Way Back

So, in the beginning (as far as we can tell) was probably the Ground Harp. In the early twentieth century examples of this instrument could still be found among tribes of Central Africa. Our ‘ologist Curt Sachs describes the Ground Harp as being reminiscent of the snares of some African hunters:

‘A pit is covered with bark. Beside the pit a tall, flexible rod is stuck into the earth and pulled way over by a string fastened from its end to the bark lid of the pit. The instrument is either struck or plucked, sometimes by several persons simultaneously.’ (Sachs 2006 p.54)

Below is my view of what this must have looked like. The flexible rod can be bent with one had to vary the pitch while the string is plucked or struck with the player’s other hand.

Let’s take this as our starting point. That’s a big step, I know, but we have to start somewhere. Similar instruments were used by the Annamese people of central Vietnam where it evolved to become the Ground Zither. I cannot find a drawing or photo of this instrument so far but my own attempt at a visualization is shown here.
This huge instrument (over four meters long sometimes) has a second line that stretches to the bark or skin ‘lid’ or top (the soundboard). It is easy to see that if the tension string, effectively the bridge, is moved along to make the two halves of unequal length then two notes can be produced…the beginning of melody in addition to rhythm. In a further evolution there is an instrument played on the Javanese island of Madura which uses two pits and multiple bridges. Again, no pictures available but from Sachs’ description (Sachs 2006 p.55) I think it must have looked something like this:

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

This instrument must have made it possible to play melodies of three notes, and the music of Madura does indeed feature repetitive melodies of three note patterns, though it seems likely that there must be at least two musicians to be able to play across the two pits. Maybe something like this would have been the first instance of ensemble or band playing?

If that is the case then we can see very easily that there is a problem for our budding string musician on the road to Rock ‘n’ Roll and that is the issue of portability. Pretty soon our music maker is going to run out of space – and enthusiasm – for digging holes. He needs to take the next step on his journey by taking his instrument out of the ground and making it portable.

In the next few pages we will look at some of the various ways in which our single-string achieved portability in different parts of the world.

However, before we go on to look at these instruments we need to take a little detour into the world of anthropology.
So, how do you move a hole in the ground?

Let's get this show on the road!

Let’s go back to our ground harp or ground zither player in central Africa. It’s pretty difficult to accept an invitation from a local dignitary to play at a ceremony in the village - maybe a wedding or an initiation ceremony - when the first thing you have to do is dig up the man’s yard! Our musician wants to take advantage of his new skill - he wants to make his hole in the ground portable.

Having said that the hunter’s bow was probably not the origin of stringed instruments, it seems that our musician ended up with something that looks remarkably similar, largely because of the limited number of ways available to make a hole in the ground portable.

In terms of the design and construction of a stringed instrument a hole in the ground is a resonating chamber – a pre-requisite for making your stringed instrument audible to an audience. It is possible to play a bow-like instrument without a resonator, but it would be very quiet. Some ‘ologists believe that instruments like this were the first to encourage introspection or meditation. But if you want your audience to party they need to be able to hear you. You need a resonator. Over time our early musician discovered that there were three types.

A separate resonator – a pot or trough-like vessel laying around that he could utilize by placing the end of his bow on the container to make use of its resonating properties. In some cases he might use the wall of the building itself. If you are familiar with the diddley bow you may recall seeing videos on YouTube of players using wire from the screen door stretched across the door frame of a tin shack in the southern USA as late as the 1950s.

A Gourd – a small pot or similar container that could be attached to the bow to provide a portable resonator.

The Mouth – the simplest and most readily available resonator of all that could be put to use by ‘biting’ the end of the bow and plucking or bowing to make a sound.

Almost all of the single-string instruments in the next phase of development took one or the other of these forms. Some eminent academics have done huge amounts of fieldwork and study to arrive at long lists of these instruments used by various peoples around the world. Next we
will look at a couple that have survived to the present day…some of them you may recognise.

It seems that in a number of cultures the ground harp was lifted out of the ground and the hole became a portable hole, using any kind of a box that could be used as a resonator, and became what some of us may recognize as being very like the Tea Chest or Washtub Bass.

The instrument is made from a pole, traditionally a broomstick, placed into or alongside the chest. A string (usually made from a clothes line or similar chord) is stretched along the pole and plucked. The result is an instrument that serves as a passable stand-in for an upright bass. It has been used in Skiffle, Jug band and Kwela music among many others.

Other bass instruments around the world follow the same basic design using a variety of containers as the resonator:
Gas-tank bass (USA)
Barrel bass (USA)
Box bass (Trinidad)
Bush bass (Australia)
Babatoni (South Africa)
Dumdum (Zimbabwe)
Sanduku (Zanzibar)
Tingotalango (Cuba)
Tulòn (Italy)

It is difficult to determine whether this instrument was a natural evolution from the ground harp in all the respective cultures or whether the design travelled the world during the mid-twentieth century as a result of recordings of the jug and skiffle bands heard on American and British Forces radio. In any event it seems possible that there is a common ancestor for all these instruments.

The rise of the Gourd Bow

We have already alluded to the fact that many early cultures (and even some cultures today) use a word or words for ‘music’ that encompass other concepts such as dance and other ritual events. I don’t think it is unreasonable to assume that this idea of an overlapping concept might also include singing, which is often an important part of ritual in all cultures.

It is my belief that the mouth bow evolved still further because it was pretty well impossible for our early human musician to sing or chant with a mouth full of stick! The acquisition of musical skills are likely to have given a musician social standing within his community and maybe even placed him or her in a position of leadership during ritual occasions. It is likely that this would require the use of the voice.

Maybe I am biased but I think that musicians, by and large, are a pretty inventive bunch. It doesn’t take much for one small innovation to pull together the skills acquired over time that have become ‘custom and practice’ and take things in a radical direction. Let me tell you how I think it might have happened.

Our early human musician would have encountered the ground zither and realized that if a string had a different length it made a different sound. Using a mouth bow would have planted the idea that changing the size and shape of the mouth (resonating chamber) affected the tonal quality of the sound being made (what the ‘ologists…remember them?…refer to as pitch and timbre). Sooner or later it seems likely that one of our mouth bow players would have hit upon the idea of attaching an artificial ‘mouth’ to his mouth bow in the form of a gourd or other container. What resulted was a form of instrument that occurs in many parts of central and southern Africa with exotic names like umduri and ugbhu but also in South America as the berimbau and under different names in various parts of the world. Though each of these individual instruments has its idiosyncrasies in the way it is played and what it is used for each follows a similar principle. The string is made from plant fibre, animal gut (or maybe metal wire nowadays). A gourd is attached to the bow to act as a ‘mouth’ or resonator. A wooden stick is used to tap the strings to make the notes. A loop divides the string into two unequal lengths. This creates two different notes (usually a fourth or fifth in musical terms though this may be pure coincidence) as fundamental notes.

To play the instrument the bow is held in the left hand vertically in front of the body and the gourd is pressed against the body. Additional harmonic tones can be created by moving the gourd away from the player’s body as mood dictates. In addition to the two fundamental notes the upper or longer part of the string can be shortened using the finger giving three notes:
fourth and fifth.

The umduri is usually played solo and the performer sings at the same time, often accompanied by the audience clapping their hands. It is unusual for the umduri to be played with other instruments. In Brazil the berimbau is very similar. When playing a berimbau a small disc called a *dobrau* is used to affect the tone and pitch of the string and to give it a distinctive buzzing sound. It is used to accompany performances of the martial art Capoeira.

Hopefully you get the idea - differences in use and playing technique but all the instruments have similar component parts. Our friendly ‘ologists continue to debate loud and long as to whether these different versions developed in far flung parts of the world by some kind of ‘spontaneous combustion’ or whether the idea developed much earlier and travelled the world as early humans spread out from Africa millions of years ago. Speaking as an amateur ‘ologist, I think we are a little like lawyers…if you put four ‘ologists in a room you end up with at least five opinions!

For myself, I like the idea that early human ‘musicians’ spread out from Africa taking their instruments with them and other humans recognized a good idea when they saw it. How many times have you seen an electric guitar that looks like it has been influenced by the design of the Fender Stratocaster - not too hard to believe, is it?

Those of you who have come to this book through an interest in the diddley bow may, by now, be beginning to think that the simple instrument would be a step backwards in terms of the evolution of musical instruments. After all, it is a single-string between two fixed points and our early human musician with his gourd bow has surely moved beyond this…hasn’t he? Well, I don’t think so. I think that the diddley bow and its musical ancestors represents an evolution in the way humans listened to and experienced music as opposed to an evolution in the construction of the instrument. That is what we will consider next.

Earlier I talked about the perils of looking at the past through eyes that have been influenced by the present, and I want to return to this for a while before moving on to the Diddley bow.

The ‘ologists of the nineteenth century used terminology that we now find somewhat disturbing, but, nevertheless, some were aware of the problem of assuming simple answers to complex questions based on the assumption that what we now know must be right.

In 1893 a musicologist by the name of Richard Wallascher published a monumental work entitled: *Primitive Music – An inquiry into the origin and development of music, songs, dances and pantomimes of savage races*. Nowadays we would not use a term like ‘savage races’ (or many other terms used in the work) but they were different times and the language need not obscure some useful observations made by Wallascher in criticism of some of the other ‘ologists working in the field at that time and in previous years.

Wallascher’s contemporaries such as J F Rowbotham believed that early humans first developed drums, followed by flutes and whistles and finally stringed instruments. He based this on the theory that there was an order of simplicity of construction of musical instruments that went from drum to flute to stringed instrument that should be regarded as a measure of progress in the civilization of mankind.

In the delightfully genteel language of the nineteenth century academic gentleman Wallascher refutes Rowbotham’s theory with the following words:
‘Compare existing illustrations of primitive instruments and you will see that the primitive bow…is the simplest, the flute and tube coming next while the drum…is the most complicated. A simple bow…any one of us could construct; every shepherd boy cuts his flute in a few moments – but a drum…made of a hollowed-out tree trunk, would take days to make with the aid of several practised hands and appropriate implements. (Wallascher p. 85)

That’s how an ‘ologist says ‘Absolute tosh, mate!’ It would seem that Wallascher thought the exact opposite of some of his contemporaries, though there were others like the German anthropologist Rudolf Wagener who agreed with Wallascher completely.

Wallascher then goes on in measured tones to provide a long list of countries where tribes (Wallascher’s term) performed their music without any instruments including: The Philippines, Caroline Islands (Part of Kiribati – now uninhabited), Lugunor (Micronesia), Kusai (Egypt) and the Melanesian Islands and Tierra Del Fuego. (Wallascher p.87)

On Captain Cook’s first voyage to Australia he reported that the locals were: frightened by the bagpipes, though they eventually became accustomed to them; disappointed by the drums, which they regarded as inferior; and held the French horns beneath contempt (I know some drummers who feel that way today). Music means (and always has meant) different things to different people...nothing changes…why should it be otherwise? To illustrate this maybe I could give you an example from the writing of George Schwab, who led the Peabody museum expedition to study the tribes of the Liberian Hinterland in the early 1940s:

‘The Dibo, seen in Mano, is a one-stringed noise maker. A hole is made in the center [sic] of a square of bark of the Sepe tree. A piece of semia yidi beh vine … with a knot at the end, is passed through the hole. The corners of the square of bark are pegged firmly to the ground over a hole about a foot in depth and from 6 to 8 inches in diameter. To play this contrivance, the vine is wet and held by one hand while the fingers of the other are drawn upward on it. Different sounds are produced by varying the tension of the vine. This crude instrument is used mostly in the rice farm to frighten off animals, especially antelope, as ‘it got mouf like tigah [sic].’

When I used to listen to the Rollin’ Stones as a kid my dad used to say much the same. As I said…music is all things to all people and we would do well not to get too ‘high-falutin’ about it.

In a nutshell - we need to keep in mind that the development of music and musical instruments did not progress from the time of early humans to the present day in an organised, linear fashion that is easy for us to follow. We now accept that science, for example, often experiences sudden leaps forward and explores ‘blind alleys’ from time to time. Similarly, I suspect, music has evolved by one step forward, two steps back and the odd shuffle sideways now and again. We can never really know how the process unfolded - we can only guess - and I expect our ‘ologists would probably sniff a bit and say ‘I don’t guess – I theorize!’

Maybe so, but let’s keep this haphazard ebb and flow in mind when we consider what happened when the music of Africa made its way into Europe, Australia and across the sea to America to initiate the ‘labour pains’ that eventually gave birth to the diddley bow.
Why don’t we find one-string instruments in Australia?

How did music spread?

If you remember, one of my original motivations for this book was to answer the question: ‘Why is it that some cultures don’t seem to have a single-string musical instrument?’ - Particularly when these instruments have survived robustly in some cultures.

Let’s go back to our ground harp and other early instruments which seem to have their origins in Africa and think about how they might have spread to other countries.

The current scientific version of events is that Neanderthal man evolved from the late Homo erectus in West Eurasia and the Middle-East about 230,000–150,000 years ago. They were the first humans to express aesthetic qualities and religious beliefs in the form of burials. About 80,000 years ago modern man (Homo sapiens) came along, originating in central Africa. Homo erectus became extinct approximately 28,000 years ago as more numerous and versatile populations of Homo sapiens colonized their territories.

Some 55,000 – 60,000 years ago Homo sapiens began to spread out from Central Africa. The earliest people to colonize the Eurasian landmass probably travelled across the Bab-al-Mandab Strait separating present-day Yemen from Djibouti. They moved along the coast to India, and reached South-east Asia and Australia by 50,000 years ago…there is evidence that they could cross open water! That’s what current science tells us. Now this gives me a problem and that problem is Australia! Let me explain.

Let us take our ground harp in central Africa and make the assumption that it becomes the ‘latest big thing’ in music for Homo sapiens….the idea catches on and, as early man forays out of Africa and spreads into what we now call Eurasia and then on to India and elsewhere. The ground harp becomes as popular as the electric guitar is nowadays. As the idea travels the ground harp evolves into other kinds of instruments (we’ll look at them soon) that are more portable – louder - more versatile. Musicians are the same the world over and probably always have been - sooner or later one note or one string would not have been enough. It’s possible to envisage that the instrument might have arrived in some parts of the world with more than one string…maybe many strings…by-passing the one string version. It seems like a natural process of ‘musical evolution’…doesn’t it? Plausible, definitely, but possibly complete nonsense and let me tell you
Here’s the thing. The earliest musical instruments so far discovered have been bone flutes that were found in Germany and dated to between 43,000 and 45,000 years old. We cannot reasonably expect to find evidence of stringed instruments from these times because it is likely that the organic components of any such instruments would have decayed but it seems that we can believe that musical instruments arrived on the scene a little more than 40,000 years ago…and that is where the continent of Australia poses a problem for our theory.

Let us accept for the moment that Homo sapiens arrived in Australia 50,000 years ago - at least 5,000 years before stringed musical instruments are likely to have made their first appearance elsewhere - it is interesting that there is no evidence of stringed instruments of any kind in the early aboriginal culture of Australia - at least none that I can find as yet?

The aboriginal people of Australia have the world’s longest continuous oral history, going back some 300 or more unbroken generations, but they seem to have only three basic forms of musical instrument prior to the arrival of the colonial explorers - four if you count the use of handclapping and slapping of body parts (Morgan Schatz-Blackrose, my guide on things aboriginal, is not sure that I am right about this - still looking into that - the journey goes on). These are:

- The Bullroarer (a sacred object used in Aboriginal religious ceremonies, consisting of a piece of wood attached to a string whirled round to produce a roaring noise.)
- The Digeridoo (a natural wooden trumpet or ‘drone pipe’. Musicologists classify it as a brass aerophone for reasons that I cannot fathom)
- The Gum Leaf Flute (a gum leaf held between the fingers of both hands and vibrated by blowing through pursed lips - I expect, like me, you did much the same as a kid)

If the Australian aboriginals had string of a sort to make the Bullroarer how come no stringed instruments appear to have evolved in their culture? It would seem that the evolution of music and musical instruments must have happened differently in Australia – Homo sapiens arrived in Australia some 5,000 – 10,000 years before the first musical instruments so far discovered. Does that call into question my half-baked theory above to explain how some other parts of the world also have no history of an instrument similar to the ground harp? Why might that be? Is there something about the nature of their nomadic lifestyle that made strings impractical? If so, how come we have the Bullroarer? [Author’s note: I believe that instruments like the Bullroarer exist in other cultures but my point remains essentially the same – if they had a string to make a Bullroarer why didn’t stringed instruments evolve?]

What about Europe...and the Americas?

The journey of early humans from Africa into Europe and beyond was not easy. The early adventurous humans did not have a destination to put in the satnav, nor did they just keep moving forward in a steady, easy-paced manner. In a sense they had to ‘follow their noses’ and deal, like most intrepid explorers, with whatever circumstances they encountered. There was no clear, direct line from A to B. Modern science is now able to tell us a bit more the ebb and flow of their journey. In some ways the best analogy is to think of the coming and going of tides on the seashore. I believe this may offer one possible explanation of why our musical instruments did not evolve in a consistent fashion in all parts of the world. Let me try to explain.
When early humans came north out of Africa they spread along the gulf coast. If some had wanted to travel north to what we now refer to as Asia Minor at that time, they would have had to skirt the Libyan and Arabian deserts and cross the fertile region between the Tigris and Euphrates. This would have been a difficult enough task in itself. However, between 65,000 and 55,000 years ago, the world descended into an ice age, making that corridor impossible to cross. Northward travel paused and culture began to develop in situ. Then, starting 51,000 years ago, a warm and wet period lasting nearly 5,000 years provided a suitable climate for population growth in South Asia and gradual expansion. It seems there was a migration to the north and West. There is no evidence of tools from these early travellers (known as the Aurignacians) prior to 47,000 years ago but by 38,000 years ago they had migrated as far West as the coast of Portugal. Belgian archaeologist Marcel Otte [Note 1] has identified the Zagros Mountains in Iran and Iraq as the likely origin of this culture.

About 33,000 years ago an offshoot of this group (called the Gravettians) came out of what we now call Ukraine and crossed the Steppes using huge tents supported on animal bones in the absence of a ready source of wood. Around 30,000 years ago the world again retreated into ice age conditions preventing further northward migration - these people spread into central Europe over the next 5,000 years. The Gravettians seem to have provided the genetic origins of most modern Europeans, and their culture became fairly well established.

Some 18,000 years ago saw yet another return of ice age conditions. For the next 5,000 years northern Europe was uninhabitable, being under an ice sheet some 5km thick. Early humans retreated to enclaves in Southern France, Spain and the Balkans. These groups became isolated from each other for a long time and, in terms of their DNA, evolved into three separate groups. From this point on, despite a couple of glacial ‘hiccups’ the climate became more like what we now experience and the human migration northwards became less restricted.

I hope by now you can see the reason for my analogy with the ebb and flow of tidal waters over a long period of time. By the time early humans arrived in Northern Europe several cultures had had time to come and go. Discoveries of the earliest bone flutes come from sites that seem to have been to the south of the southern-most reach of the ice sheets and it seems reasonable (to me at least) to assume that early music (and musical instruments) might have already had time to evolve to some extent and be influenced by the development of several cultures. Their bit of the race to develop music started from a different place…in a way they had an unfair advantage.

‘What about the Americas?’ I hear you ask. A good question.

All the above facts would seem to support the generally held theory that, after spreading north throughout Europe ancient Siberians crossed on foot from Asia to Alaska over a land bridge that spanned the Bering Sea. This 1,000-mile land trek was possible because sea levels during the ice ages were hundreds of feet lower than they are today. The Beringia Bridge, existed about 15,000 years ago.

For a long time archaeologists believed that these people (the Clovis – named after a type of spearhead they used which was discovered at Clovis, New Mexico) came South over the subsequent 1500 years surviving by hunting and fishing. There have been new theories proposed recently (with not a few arguments as a result) that call this into question. Some now say the early people were seafarers who travelled down the West coast of the Americas, barely settling in North America, and arriving in Chile (remains have been found at Monte Verde dating from 12,000 years ago) before migrating North to eventually meet up with the Clovis people who later
travelled over the Beringia Bridge to head South.

There are other fringe theories. Cave paintings have been discovered in rock shelters at Pedra Furada in Brazil that archaeologists claim date from 28,000 years ago. That would throw all the previous theories up in the air, wouldn’t it? Then right on the outer fringes is the so-called California Story. Louis Leakey of the British Museum and American archaeologist Ruth Simpson carried out an excavation in the 1960s in the Calico Hills in California where they discovered items they deemed to be ‘tools’ (and which other archaeologists claim to be ‘rocks’) that date from 200,000 years ago! If this were true then the whole ‘Out Of Africa’ hypothesis of human development might need to be rethought.

The jury, it seems, is still out when it comes to America. But here’s the thing - If the above theories about the migration of humans across the Beringia Bridge are true then one might expect that, for the same reasons that there do not appear to be one stringed instruments in Northern Europe, there would be no one stringed instruments in Native American culture. Well, maybe, but take a look at the 1886 picture by Frank Randall from the National Anthropological Archives.

This is an Apache Fiddle.

Let me quote here from the notes accompanying the photograph:

‘The Apache fiddle (Apache: tsii’edo’a’tl, ‘wood that sings’) is a bowed string instrument used by the indigenous Apache people of the south-western United States. The instrument consists of a plant stalk, such as that of the agave or mescal plant. One or sometimes two strings, often made of horse hair, are secured at both ends of the stalk, a bridge and nut added, and the string is played with a bow. The string is touched with the fingers to change its note. The Apache fiddle is
believed to be based upon fiddles brought to North America by European settlers. The Smithsonian Institution holds an Apache fiddle collected in 1875. In 1989 Apache fiddle maker Chesley Goseyun Wilson of Tucson, Arizona won a National Heritage Award.

We are asked to believe that this Apache Fiddle is based upon fiddles brought from Europe. Well, I don’t know about you, but that instrument doesn’t resemble any European fiddle I have ever seen.

Let me show you another picture.

Source: http://debreselam.net/

This instrument is a *Masinko* which comes from what is now Ethiopia and which has remained virtually unchanged for generations. Would you agree with me that this instrument is a more likely progenitor of the Apache Fiddle than a Stradivarius? It is not for me to gainsay the theories of respected and knowledgeable ‘ologists but just maybe some of those so-called fringe theories are not as fringe as we might think.

Of course, theories are just that…theories. A theory only has life until another theory comes along to displace it. What you have in this chapter is a mix of accepted theories, disputed theories and my own theories (which may, of course, be complete nonsense). I don’t profess to have the last word on this, or any subject, but I think it’s fun to speculate…don’t you?

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Welcome to the New World

If you want to know the modern version of the story of how the musical bow made its journey from Africa to the Americas and ended up as what we now call the diddley bow then you need to be aware of the work of three particular ‘ologists who have gathered together much of what we know today.

Gerhard Kubik is a music ethnologist from Austria. He is a professor at the University of Vienna. He spent more than 50 years travelling to Africa and writing about Africa and African Americans. He wrote a remarkable book called Africa and the Blues [Note 1] that should be on your bookshelf if you want to get under the skin of the diddley bow and its brother/sister instruments that were the progenitors of the Blues.

David Evans is Associate Professor of Music and Director of Regional studies in Ethnomusicology at Memphis State University. He has worked with Gerhard Kubik and has done field work in Mississippi bringing to life the story of how the diddley bow came to America and survived to the present day. Some of his best, and most atmospheric writing, in my opinion, features in a compendium volume called Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts [Note 2] which was edited by the third of our influential ‘ologists - William Ferris.
William Ferris is an American author and scholar and former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. With Judy Peiser he co-founded the Center for Southern Folklore in Memphis, Tennessee; he was the founding director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, and is co-editor of The Encyclopaedia of Southern Culture. He is currently a Professor at the University of North Carolina.

Please check out the work of these three men. You won’t regret it. However, to summarize for our purposes the story seems to run as follows. The use of a slider to vary the note produced by a string seems to go back to a variant of the gourd bow from a region called the Raffia Zone in West-Central Africa, where the raffia palm is used to make many domestic implements, among them musical instruments. Musicologists describe these instruments as Mono-ideochord zithers, which means that they were constructed of a piece of raffia palm and that a sliver of the same palm was used to form the string of the instrument, the string being lifted away from the body by inserting two objects (e.g. a bone or stick) to act as a nut and bridge (to use current guitar terminology). You can still find this instrument in Central Africa today, where it is often played by children. One boy strikes the string with two sticks, the other changes the pitch using a knife as a slider.

When slaves were transported from Africa to Southern America they made use of local plants to create virtually the same instrument. An example can be found in Venezuela where it is called the Carangané.

When slaves arrived in the southern states of North America it seems that the local plant and tree life must have been unsuitable because the instrument changed and became what the musicologists call a mono-hetero-chord zither. Simply put, the body and the string of the instrument were made of different materials. The single string was usually a wire taken from a screen door or a broom handle and the body of the instrument was either a flat piece of board or, in some cases, the wall of the cabin itself! If you want to know more then check out William Ferris’ interview with one-string guitar-maker Louis Dotson from Franklin County, Mississippi (Ferris p.199). The one-string guitar had various names including the uni-tar the jitterbug and the diddley bow. A brief search on YouTube for the term diddley bow will give you hours of fun!

The slaves brought with them their mouth bows, too. The westward migration of white farmers and the African people who were enslaved by them took the mouth bow into Appalachia and elsewhere, and the tradition of mouth bow music remains, to some extent, to this day. Gerhard Kubik believes that the farmers’ children may have seen the mouth bow being played by the slaves and, like children all over the world, imitated what they saw and heard.
It is interesting to note that the gourd bow does make something of an appearance in the form of the washtub or gut-bucket bass which made its way (probably via a similar route as that taken by the mouth bow) into the jug-band and so-called Hillbilly Music genres.

It seems that the slaves’ exposure to the classical and folk instruments of the white Europeans (guitar, fiddle etc.) wielded a huge influence on the slaves. The gourd bow that manifested itself in countries such as Brazil as the berimbau doesn’t seem to have featured much in the southern states. A wish by the slaves to imitate the guitar is quite possibly the reason for the evolution of the cigar box guitar with three or four strings and a slide playing technique that transferred from the diddley bow. This is where, for me, the story begins to get interesting.

After the slaves won their freedom they migrated into the cities and towns looking for work. It comes as no surprise that they began to use the European instruments like the guitar to make their music, which evolved into what we now know as blues and jazz. The diddley bow and the other instruments made from cigar boxes seem to have become of little relevance other than as a children’s plaything…at least for a while. In the latter part of the twentieth century there was a revival of interest in these instruments in North America and, subsequently, in other parts of the world. This revival of interest coincided with the arrival of the internet and resulted in the eventual creation of internet forums such as ‘Cigar Box Nation’ and the ‘Handmade Music Clubhouse’ and numerous other groupings. We now have cigar box guitar superstars like Justin Johnson, Shane Speal and others. The diddley bow has suddenly become famous through artists such as Seasick Steve. These rustic, home-grown instruments are becoming ever more sophisticated. There are festivals all over the world to celebrate the music played on these instruments. And yet - the music played on these instruments remains mostly raw and primitive.

Now why is that? For me this is the question I want answered. Why is it that some of us are drawn away from the technically and musically sophisticated music of these times towards the primitive sound of home-made instruments made from things most of us would throw away? Why does the Diddley bow survive? Why is its music compelling? Let’s begin to look at that next.

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Why do we like the sound of slide?

What does the science have to say?
Okay - in really simple terms we now have one possible version of a story of a journey through time and space from the early humans in Central West Africa over 40,000 years ago to the current revival of interest in the diddley bow and its music in North America, Europe and elsewhere. The next question, for me, is: ‘who is drawn to this raw, elemental music and why?’ I don’t want to get drawn into too much scientific detail. Let’s look at some of the real basic stuff.

How do we listen to music?
There is lots of detailed information out there if you want it, but here are some of the basics. Check out Daniel Levitin’s book ‘This Is Your Brain on Music’) [Note 1]

The brain is composed of three parts: the brain stem; the cerebellum; and the cerebrum

The cerebrum is the largest part of the brain and is composed of left and right halves or hemispheres divided into four lobes; Frontal; Parietal; Temporal; Occipital

In the brain there are a number of areas relevant to the way we engage with music:
Motor Cortex – Movement, foot tapping, etc.
Sensory Cortex – Tactile feedback from playing or dancing
Auditory Cortex – Perception/analysis of tone
Prefrontal Cortex – Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with what we hear
Amygdala – Emotional reactions to music
Hippocampus – Musical memory and context
Visual Cortex – Visual appreciation of performance

If you are a brain surgeon (and the chances are that among you diddley bow makers and players there are one or two at least) you could probably criticize and comment on that list but it will serve our purpose, I think. The point is that the brain is an incredibly complex organ and when we listen to music we use an awful lot of that capacity.


Does music have a purpose?

When we humans listen to music it is processed throughout all these parts of the brain producing stimuli similar to those we experience in other areas of our lives (enjoyment of food, sex, etc.). Many of the ‘ologist in the anthropology world will no doubt tell you that there may have been some evolutionary advantage for early humans to be able to recognize and relate to music. A female could think, for example, that a male who shows ability in singing, music or dance would be displaying evidence of good genes and the likelihood that he would father fine children. There are many species of birds, for example, where the male does all the dance display and singing during courtship and the female stands or sits looking like a judge on American Idol. If you care to speak to any ladies of my acquaintance who have seen my attempts at dancing they will probably give you a long list of drawbacks to this method of selecting a mate. If selection of a mate were one of the criteria for early humans to have music then we might expect that the appreciation of music might have evolved differently in males and females. Yet, as far as we can tell, that does not seem to have happened…well, maybe there are exceptions…Heavy Metal, maybe? But, joking apart, the question of an evolutionary basis for music needs some thought.

Genetic science would have us believe that it takes about 50,000 years for a human adaptation to show up in the human genome as a trait that can be identified throughout the species. If that is true then, when we ask the question ‘Why do we like the Diddley bow and its music?’, surely we need to consider what music might have been like 50,000 years ago. We need to ask ourselves if we are somehow revisiting a primal response to a music that was far less sophisticated by our current standards of what we consider as music and how we make and enjoy music.

In an earlier chapter I mentioned that many cultures do not separate music and dance. If you want an example of this take a look at a new mother with her babe in arms and watch the way she first communicates with her baby using sing-song sounds rather than words. Some experts refer to this as ‘motherese’. Almost invariably this first attempt at communication is accompanied by a rocking movement whether in arms or in the crib or pram. Is that a child’s first experience of dance?

Are we different from animals?

Well, yes…and no. For humans there are three component parts of music that determine how we react to it:

Pitch (or frequency) – the rate at which the air vibrates to stimulate the auditory nerve and send signals to our brain.
Rhythm – To quote Duke Ellington in 1931 ‘It don’t mean a thing if you ain’t got that swing’

Timbre – The quality or tone of a musical sound. For example, why a trumpet sounds different from a violin.

Humans make an assessment of all three of these characteristic parts of a musical sound to determine whether or not we like it. The emphasis placed on these characteristics varies from individual to individual but animals hear things differently, it seems. It is not so much a question of whether they enjoy music the way we do as much as how they perceive the sounds themselves.

Scientists who study animal behaviour have carried out experiments with owners tasked with playing music to and for their pets. Scientist Charles Snowdon has worked with cellist and composer David Teie to compose music that is tailored to suit cats. In 2012 he said:

‘We have some work-in-progress where we’ve transposed music and put it in the frequency range for cat vocalizations, and have used their resting heart rate, which is faster than ours…We find that cats prefer to listen to the music composed in their frequency range and tempo rather than human music.’

It seems that, for cats, frequency is the dominant factor. A quick note: just in from the ‘It could only happen in America’ department we hear that, on the basis of their results, Teie has started selling cat songs online (at $1.99 per song) through a company called ‘Music for Cats.’

Charles Snowdon goes on to say:

‘We [humans] can recognize that a sequence of notes is the same whether it’s in the key of F or A flat. I have found that animals have very good absolute pitch, but they don’t have relative pitch. They can learn to recognize a sequence of notes, but if you transpose the notes to a different key, so that the sequence uses the same relative notes but the key is different, they can’t recognize the relationships between the notes anymore…to that extent, we understand music in a different way than animals do.’

You see…it’s all about relative pitch. We humans have the ability to process music in a pitch that we don’t naturally like…in that way we are different to animals.

What’s all that got to do with the diddley bow?

Well you may ask. Let me tell you a little story.

In the course of research for this book I undertook a simple survey of a number of makers and players of the diddley bow from all over the world. Not a proper survey in the scientific or academic sense of the word, but what you might call a ‘structured conversation’ to elicit their contribution to my research. You will hear more about what they said in the next chapter.

I had a brief conversation on Facebook with a maker and player of diddley bows from Dallas, Texas by the name of Eugene ‘Butch’ Mueller. During our correspondence he said something that really got me thinking again about this subject of the difference between human and animal perception of music. He said:

“I have been obsessed [with] finding the ‘sweet spot’ of string gauge vs. tuning on my 22 5/8” scale diddley bows.”

To translate for those not versed in the mechanics of building and playing stringed instruments
Butch was saying something important. For him it seems that he has found a scale length for his instruments with which he is comfortable (presumably because he can reach all areas of the instrument comfortably while playing). What is causing him pleasure or frustration (depending on your point of view) is finding a balance between the thickness or gauge of the string he uses and the tension of the string, which he achieves using the tuning peg on his instrument to achieve a tone that pleases him while playing. [Butch – I hope that is close enough to what you meant.]

In current society we are surrounded almost all the time by music that is relatively sophisticated both musically and in terms of the technical delivery. But what if some of us still have an inherent instinct to hear music that, like the Charles Snowdon’s cats, is closer to that of our own voice? What if there are a lot of us that, like Butch, are searching for that ‘sweet spot’?

We all have a voice which has a pitch, rhythm and timbre that is unique to us. The diddley bow, typically, has a scale length of about 2 or 2.5 octaves – not unlike the range of the average human voice.

Early human attempts at music would not have been restricted by adherence to a ‘tonic’ regime (in other words music based on a musical scale) because no such regime existed. They would have made sounds anywhere within the tonal range accessible to them. In this way the voice is similar to the diddley bow, which uses a slide – it is not fretted and has a full range of frequencies available to it if its player chooses to use them.

Could this explain why diddley bow players like Butch spend their time looking for their ‘sweet spot’?

Could this be why some of us are drawn to music played on such a deceptively simple instrument? In the words of another of my correspondents, George Dean from Hillsborough, New Hampshire, USA:

“I love the music that can be played on the diddley bow because the musician that has truly mastered the instrument can make it sound like nearly anything!”

I couldn’t have put it better, George.

What do the makers and players have to say?

Another good question with no easy answer - or perhaps I should say that there is a different easy answer for everyone you ask.

If you ask Google the question ‘Why do we like slide guitar?’ you are informed that there are 18,700,000 results. I lost the will to live in trying to find one of them that really answered the question…almost all were concerned with learning to play slide guitar or appreciation of artists who already play. Everybody wanted to talk about how, but nobody wanted to talk about why.

You may be familiar with Derek Trucks, the eminent slide guitarist who has played with the likes of Bob Dylan, Joe Walsh and Stephen Stills and who is now a certified member of the Allman Brothers Band. In an interview with musicradar.com he had something interesting to say: ‘It’s a dangerous instrument. It can sound like the most beautiful woman’s voice in the world, or it can sound like someone skinning a cat.’

He felt there was something about the power of slide guitar, the way it emulated the human voice. He goes on to say:
‘...it’s the microtones you can get...y’know...the way you can lead up to a note, or fall away from a note. There’s no distinction between one note and the next: you’re hearing every inflection in between. On a good night, and in the right hands, it’s a pretty powerful thing.’

Well, you will get no argument from me on that. Nor, as we shall see, from the makers and players I contacted in researching this book. The sound of a slide or bottleneck moving along a string is a primal sound. To some degree I think we are all attracted by it, but in some of us it awakens something that creates a particular resonance. I wanted to explore this further so I put the word out among the community of players and makers of diddley bows, cigar box guitars and other roots instruments that I was interested in their thoughts and feelings in this area. I was rewarded by thoughtful, considered opinions from all over the world from Tasmania to Tennessee. It seems that this is a world where the making and playing of the instruments comes together with the nature of the music itself in a pretty unique way.

Penny Nelson hails from Brisbane in Queensland, Australia where she ran Australia’s first CGB festival. She told me:

'I ran a diddley bow/canjo-making workshop [a ‘canjo’ is a diddley bow with a tin can as a resonator]. It was hugely popular and even though they were just made from cat food tins and tomato stakes some people still take them to festivals four years later. Diddley bows are without doubt the best way to understand the dynamics of music. They provide a thorough introduction to rhythm, tone and the basics of stringed instrument construction.'

Penny later says ‘Remember – I can’t play for crap!’ but then goes on to say that she has acquired some mastery of electrics and created instruments with pickups and built amplifiers. That’s not uncommon.

George Dean also said:

'I am attracted to the diddley bow because it is the bare essence of string music. With only one string, you must be more creative. I love the music that can be played on the diddley bow because the musician that has truly mastered the instrument can make it sound like nearly anything!'

Scottish maker Phil Hayes made a couple of interesting points about the simplicity of the diddley bow:

'It is such a simple instrument and yet the range and diversity that you can get from it far outreaches its simplicity. Unlike multi-stringed instruments it never goes out of tune, I found that the ‘tuning’ thing with instruments certainly held me back with traditional guitar.'

This is an interesting point. The diddley bow has no frets - it is not what musicologists would call a ‘tonic’ instrument. It does not require the player to play music rooted in a doh, ray, me type of scale so the player and listener does not have to conform to a notion of whether a note is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ - in tune or out of tune. It gives access to the frequencies in between the notes in the scales we recognise - the microtones - we can play whatever sounds good to us. Lots of makers and players have told me that they attach importance to the simplicity of the diddley bow but, musically speaking, the music of the diddley bow, with its microtones and options for unrestricted creativity, is actually rather complex. Players of the diddley bow should feel proud of the music they create.

Phil Hayes makes another point…
‘One of the really interesting things for me is that many very good guitar players are unable to play a diddley bow well although I am not sure of the reason behind this. When played well any thoughts of it being a somehow lesser instrument due to its simplicity are quickly forgotten.’

For a while now I have been in touch with Paul Smith, who runs ‘STOMPIN’ HOGG’ Cigar Box Guitars out of Gloucester in the West of England. He approaches the music and the instruments from a slightly different, but no less valid, direction:

‘I find that the most simple blues progression can be a kind of meditative practice. Perhaps the vibrations from the d-bow put us in tune with our heartbeat and the essence of life itself. Who knows! The d-bow is also the kind of instrument that makes ‘believers’ out of people with little or no previous musical experience. (This was true for me!)’

This is also borne out by Jeff Sacrée who sells his CBGs from Dirtbox Guitars in Cornwall in the South West of the British Isles when he says that his instruments ‘…always create an interest whenever they are shown’.

Kevin Lassiter lives in Portland, Tennessee in the USA, where he makes and plays diddley bows under the name ‘Trashmun Johnson’ [have a look at the pictures at the beginning of this book]. An amateur researcher himself he has been a second pair of eyes for me during the creation of this book. Like Paul Smith he also has something of a spiritual approach to the music:

‘Building, playing and teaching others has brought me more joy than strumming a ‘legitimate’ guitar - I feel that those who play these forgotten gems, or even those who just listen to the music made from them, are drawn to them because we all have a vibration that resonates within our souls and diddley bows ride the frequency of this vibration.’

You can’t talk about the diddley bow without mentioning Justin Johnson. If there is such a thing as an Eric Clapton or Jimi Hendrix in the world of the diddley bow it is probably Justin. If you have not heard of him you will soon, I’m sure. Head over to www.justinjohnsonlive.com and find out more. Justin is known as ‘The Wizard’ and for good reason. He seems to be able to play anything with strings on including 3, 4 and 6-string cigar box guitars and a double bass made from a bicycle! No I am not joking! However, Justin is a great advocate for the diddley bow, which he sees as a first step on a path to understand music in its fullest sense.

‘My first experience with the diddley bow was as a child. My family moved around a lot, but no matter where we went, it seemed we always had this ancient, beat-up old Stella guitar sitting in the corner. The neck was warped and almost unplayable, and it only had one rusty string. I remember laying that Stella in my lap and pushing the string against the frets, playing simple melodies like ‘Louie Louie’ and ‘Wild Thing’. At the time I had no idea what the diddley bow was, but like many others before me, that simple one-stringed instrument became my introduction to the world of music. I see the diddley bow as a distillation of the guitar. It’s the simplest form of stringed instrument, with just one string and no frets. However, there is an endless amount of musical and emotional depth that springs from its simple design. It can be played like a drum, cranked up like an electric guitar, or gently plucked to conjure the sounds of a human voice. Once you can make one string sing, you realize how much music can actually be produced by other instruments like the 6-string guitar. The diddley bow opens up new doors of musical understanding, and opens up the mind to new and exciting possibilities for all stringed instruments.’
Justin does not make instruments, as far as I know, but he makes a point of seeking out instruments from the best makers around the world and providing a showcase or shop window for their work. He plays all kinds of music on all kinds of instruments and the diddley bow is a tool in his tool box – there to be used when the time (and the music) is right. He is, without doubt, a serious professional musician who accords the diddley bow the respect due to a ‘real’ musical instrument. His story sounds very rock ‘n’ roll - very American - someone should make a movie (one day maybe they will). But there are other influential characters in this one string world.

One such character is Shane Speal from York, Pennsylvania. To quote Premier Guitar Magazine:

‘[Shane Speal] is universally recognized as the prime mover of the CBG cult, a man who has made it his life’s crusade to spread the word and promote the popularity of CBGs… [Shane says] a cigar box guitar is quirky and appears ‘broken’ from the start. They just don’t look like they should play any music. I love to see jaws hit the floor when I shove a sock on my finger and wail away.’

Crusade is the right word. Shane has made it his mission to tell the world about the CBG and is the man responsible for the creation of the Internet phenomenon that is the Cigar Box Nation where many get their start building these instruments. He is also a ‘mover and shaker’ who brokers introductions and sets others on a path they didn’t, perhaps, expect to follow. Let’s see what ‘One String Willie’ has to say about that. ‘One String Willie’ is the alter ego of research scientist David Williams from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania:

‘I started playing guitar when I was fifteen years old, and bottleneck slide guitar when I was about twenty-seven. I had known about diddley bows since reading ‘The Land Where the Blues Began’ by Alan Lomax in the mid-1990s. In fact, I had saved the broom wire from an old straw broom we were going to throw out with the idea of making one someday. However I did not know what a diddley bow sounded like. In 2004 I came across a newspaper article about Shane Speal, a musician a couple of hours away from me who made guitars from cigar boxes. I built my own fretless cigar box guitar (electrified!!) using plans on his website, and we started a musical friendship that has lasted to this day.’

Shane knew that David welcomed a musical challenge, and in the spring of 2006 he suggested he listen to the CD ‘One String Blues’ by Eddie ‘One String’ Jones. The recording was made on Skid Row in Los Angeles and at a house party in Hollywood in the early 1960s. The music was raw, and unlike anything else he had heard up to that time. Eddie Jones was a master of the diddley bow, and was clearly confident in his mastery. The album notes included photographs and drawings of his instrument, he built replica of Jones’ instrument in July of 2006. Then set out to learn to play.

‘Later in the summer of 2006, I showed Shane my replica of Eddie Jones’ instrument and my budding ability to play it. He was excited and told me I should work it into my cigar box guitar sets. It was at that point I decided to call myself ‘One String Willie,’ because my last name is Williams, and my nickname in school and in the military was therefore ‘Willie.’

Willie reiterates a point made by several of the other players concerning the impact which the diddley bow has on an audience that sees it for the first time.

‘Audience expectations are low when you pull out a home-made instrument, and if you have
even intermediate level skills, the audience is pleasantly surprised if not amazed.’

One String Willie concerns himself with playing the music at its most raw and on instruments that are as primitive as he can make them. If you wish to try your hand at making a diddley bow (and I encourage you to do so) then you won’t do much better than to visit www.onestringwillie.com where you will find step-by-step instructions for your first instrument.

Clearly, for some of us at least, there is a primal, elemental connection to the music played on these single-string instruments. Biology and neuroscience both have a part to play in understanding why this is. But what about culture? Where and how we live and were brought up. What part does that have to play in all this? There are some who say ‘You are what you eat!’ but maybe it would be more appropriate to say ‘You are where you live’…or, more correctly, ‘you are WHAT you live!’

That’s what we will look at next with help from scientists at Cambridge University and elsewhere.

What do our musical tastes say about us?

If you take a stroll through the academic literature you will find that ‘ologists of all kinds fight (well I guess they would say ‘discuss’ or ‘debate’) about the reasons why we like what we like when it comes to music. When you get right down to it the argument is about whether the prime influence on our likes and dislikes comes down to biology or culture. There has been a lot of research done over the years about this subject and the argument still goes on. I would be surprised if you want to read all the research yourself so I want to refer briefly to some important work done by teams of researchers from Cambridge University in the UK and Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA that get right to the nub of the matter and then maybe you will feel better able to draw your own conclusions.

For some scientists it all comes down to consonance and dissonance.

Consonance is defined as ‘a combination of notes which are in harmony with each other due to the relationship between their frequencies.’

Dissonance is the ‘lack of harmony among musical notes’, which is sometimes referred to as atonality or even cacophony.

Simply put, we make a decision almost immediately when we listen to music as to whether we like it or not. We make some very quick value judgements about whether or not the sounds we hear seem to fit together well and in a manner that seems pleasing to us – are they consonant or dissonant?

Many scientists believe that the way we make these decisions is rooted in biology - that all humans make these judgements the same way – though they cannot yet explain the processes themselves.

The ethnomusicologists reckon that the idea of consonance has come about because of culture. They believe that the way we have come to live in our modern, so-called civilized world has brought about cultures that predispose us towards consonance. Some might even say that modern living has made us lazy and that is why we choose to listen to music that is easy and comfortable for us.

It is difficult to prove or disprove either theory because there has not been much study of the
differences between the approaches of different cultures to the issue of consonance versus dissonance.

However, in 2014 a team of researchers from Cambridge University, Massachusetts set out to look at some of these questions, led by Josh H. McDermott. They conducted experiments with three groups. The first was a group from the Amazonian Tsimane tribe that has had minimal exposure to western culture. They compared the results from this group with groups from Bolivia and the USA that had varying levels of exposure to western music. It turned out that the Tsimane people didn’t seem to let consonance or dissonance affect their judgement of whether they liked a piece of music or not. The group in Bolivia showed a significant preference for music with a bias towards consonance and the group from the USA showed a significant dislike of dissonant music. The study seems to suggest that the more exposed you are to the musical harmony inherent in much western music the less likely you are to persevere with dissonant music, which can be perceived as difficult. This is my quick summary of a large piece of work. Don’t take my word for it. The results of their work were published in July 2016 in the journal Nature - you can investigate further if you wish.

In Cambridge, UK a research team led by PhD student David Greenberg (who also happens to be a jazz saxophonist) set out to investigate whether our choice of music might be influenced by cognitive style. They conducted a massive study of over 4,000 people using modern social media tools they tested the theory that people fall into two main groups: empathizers and systemizers.

Empathizers are those who have a drive to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. They react emotionally and physiologically to music. Systemizers were more likely to be analytical when perceiving and interpreting music.

The findings were really interesting. People who scored high on empathy tended to prefer mellow or unpretentious music and contemporary music. They disliked punk and heavy metal. People who scored high on systemizing favoured intense music, but disliked mellow and unpretentious musical styles. Do you find yourself wondering, as I did, which group you would fall into? Well wonder no more! You can take the test yourself here while it remains available online (be aware it takes a while). But be warned! If you decide to take the test be sure that you want to know the results! I took the test and, in a spirit of openness I give you my results below.
‘Your Empathizing Quotient is 29. Baron-Cohen (2003) suggests that this means ‘you have a lower than average ability for understanding how other people feel and responding appropriately’.

‘Your Systematizing Quotient is 27. Baron-Cohen (2003) suggests that this means ‘you have a lower than average ability for analysing and exploring a system’.

Well, that was a bit of a surprise, I can tell you! I like to think that I have empathy with others. My musical tastes are pretty eclectic - I listen to everything - jazz, classical, rock - the diddley bow! Yet my test result seems to indicate that I am neither one thing nor the other. I suppose that you could interpret that as meaning that I really don’t know what I am talking about. I leave you to judge. If you are feeling brave…take the test…you may learn something.

Does this take us any nearer to an understanding of why some of us like the music of the diddley bow and the cigar box guitar so much? What do you think?

To me it seems most likely that the answer is a mixture of all of the above. Each of us is a unique and complex individual who is a product of what we are (our biology) and where and how we live our lives (our culture). To an extent maybe we exert a little more control over our culture in that we can (mostly) choose where and how we live our lives and who we share them with. However, the jury is still very much out on how much our physiological and genetic make-up steers us towards one particular cultural life or another. I don’t think it is as easy as saying ‘you are empathetic therefore you will like Joni Mitchell and James Taylor’ or ‘you are well organised therefore, obviously you will like jazz’. That’s nonsense…isn’t it?

Speaking for myself, I find the whole consonance/dissonance thing a bit…well…precious, to be honest. When I play my diddley bow I like the sound I get when I slide into or out of a note when I play. Technically I may be playing a quarter tone between an A Flat and an A Natural so, again technically, it is out of tune…but is it dissonant? Does it matter? Do I care? Not really. I enjoy listening to Stravinsky’s ‘Rite of Spring’ when I am in the mood. Does the dissonance spoil my enjoyment? No. Do I seek out dissonant music sometimes? Well…yes, I probably
do...again, when I am in the mood a little jazz from Sun Ra is perfectly acceptable, thank you. Just as a little BB King suits me just fine when my mood goes in ... (Ahem!) ...other directions. Sometimes music sounds great with a beer in your hand even if the guitar is ‘out of tune’ and the guitarist has had a couple more beers than you have...see what I mean?

What about culture? I have a diverse group of friends and acquaintances. With some of them I share an interest...music...cricket...whatever. We talk to each other and, from time to time, recommend activities we might enjoy. Am I influenced by them? Sure...sometimes. I have other friends with whom I have little in common other than the love of conversation and argument. Am I influenced by them? No chance! Er...actually...I probably am sometimes. Complicated isn’t it? I was born in London, England and now live in another city...Cardiff in Wales. Am I a city boy? Probably a little. They do say ‘You can take the boy out of London but you can’t take London out of the boy’. I expect there are similar sayings all over the world. But my culture isn’t defined by city life...well not since I turned 60 years old, anyway. How did I end up with an interest in diddley bows? Just lucky, I guess. Isn’t it like that for most of us?

Beau Dudley is, in a way, my alter ego. My pet ‘ologist who has been peering from behind metaphorical bushes and round walls as I have waded through all the information, speculation and wild or wacky theories that you can find out there if you care to look. I said at the outset and I will say again that I am not the fount of all wisdom on this subject. I do not claim that all the information is 100% correct and accurate...it would be a foolish man who claimed that! However, I have tried to be as accurate as I can. What you have here is the story of my journey to try and answer some of the questions that occurred to me when I first attempted to make a diddley bow and found myself sporting a wide grin (I expect some of you reading this will recognise that grin) as I found myself making music on an instrument I had built myself. After playing for a while the grin was replaced by a rather puzzled look and a number of questions that, mostly, began with ‘But what about...?’ I suspect that most people who get into making and playing the diddley bow and other instruments like the cigar box guitar have the same questions...or some of them, at least, from time to time. After poking around in old books and the dustier corners of the web this book might just offer one version of the story of how we got where we are. You don’t have to accept it as truth. At the very least it might provide you with a short cut to the parts of the story that might be of particular interest to you. In any event it seems a good time to find out what 'Beau Dudley' (aka 'me') thinks about the future of the diddley bow at this stage of the journey.

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What does Beau Dudley have to say?

Americana the Beautiful

Like it or not – and I can see no reason not to like it – the diddley bow as we think of it in the early part of the twenty-first century is considered to be something of an American thing. Diddley bows are made and played all over the world but it is hard to deny that a lot of people think of the instrument in terms of Blues and Roots music, or maybe, at a stretch, as part of the genre of music that has become known recently as Americana. It’s hard to be surprised by that. Most of us have found our way to this instrument through the hard work (some would say almost the missionary work) of people like Shane Speal, Ben ‘Gitty’ Baker (his business at www.cbgitty.com has made it easy for many of us to get started making our first instruments), Justin Johnson (check him out on YouTube or at www.justinjohnsonlive.com) and Seasick Steve who has brought the instrument onto music festival stages around the world. Most people know that the Blues is thought to have its roots in Africa and they are also aware that there is a connection with the slaves transported from that continent but it’s hard, when someone mentions the diddley bow or cigar box guitar, for an image of the Stars and Stripes not to pop into your mind. I live in Cardiff, Wales and that is certainly true for me. I know other maker/players in Britain and Europe who, I think would say the same. So, despite the tortuous journey you have read about here I think we can say the spiritual home of the diddley bow, for now, is probably the USA…but don’t overlook the fact that there are makers and players in Australia, New Zealand, Russia…everywhere. There is something about the music of the Diddley bow that doesn’t need
to have an American accent. Ain’t that cool?

**A Musical Magnet**

Let me remind you of a riddle we heard way back at the beginning of this book.

‘It walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon and three legs in the evening. What is it?’

Answer: Man (or woman). A baby crawls on all fours, then walks on two legs as an adult and uses two legs and a cane when they’re old.

This serves to remind us that life doesn’t just move in a state of continuing advancement. In both mental and physical ways we sometimes head back towards childhood as we approach the end of our time. Life is a series of forward and backward steps. Music can be like that…the path can be pretty erratic…but that’s part of the fun, I think.

‘What is this guy drinking?’ I hear you ask. Well, bear with me, because I will get there soon. Most of those who make a Diddley bow go on to make other instruments like a cigar box guitar, a foot drum, a washtub bass, an amplifier made from an old radio, maybe. This sense of achievement in playing something you have made gets to be addictive. In fact it must be one of the few addictions that does little harm. In the course of my research I have talked’ to a number of makers and watched hours of footage on the web of these people doing their thing. There are some common threads. Many of us start making a Diddley bow because it is relatively simple and then go on to make more complex guitars…some of them very complex indeed. There are those for whom the journey takes them to the far reaches of lutherie (guitar building) and even what could be described as art creations. But most of them still seem to find satisfaction in returning to the humble Diddley bow. However good they get the ‘bow’ holds a fascination. There are others who start by making a cigar box guitar using the wealth of DIY information that is out there on the web and in excellent books like Cigar Box Guitars by David Sutton. But here’s a strange thing. It seems that having done so there is a wish to go back to the roots of what they are doing and many end up making a diddley bow…just because they want to. Strange? I don’t think so.

Some of us seem to think of it as a bit of a revivalist activity. We are returning to something that used to be commonplace in some communities that then fell out of favour or fashion for a while until undergoing a revival of sorts in the late twentieth century. There is a folklore that has sprung up around this instrument that supports the view that the diddley bow was a toy for children to use to explore music before moving on to ‘real’ instruments like the guitar. There are stories from Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry, Ry Cooder and the like who began playing on these simple instruments before moving on to bigger and better things. Who can say there isn’t some truth to this? But if it’s just for kids why do many of us keep coming back to it as adults…in some cases, like myself, VERY adult? We have already talked about the enjoyment from playing on an instrument you built but is there more to it than that? Is there something in the nature of the music itself that has a magnetic pull for some (most) of us? I believe so.

The instrument has a range of a couple of octaves – about the same as a human voice. You can choose a range or key for the instrument by selecting a string of appropriate thickness or gauge, or by changing the overall physical length of the instrument. There are no frets – no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ notes. Because of this there is no formal or recognized tablature or written notation of music for the instrument (at least not yet…I believe some are experimenting with this now, including Shane Speal and others at the Cigar Box Nation). Songs and tunes are learned by ear
and transmitted from player to player in the same informal way. This can lead to delightful
variations in songs and tunes. Have you ever played the party game Chinese Whispers? Sit in a
circle with a few friends. Someone whispers a phrase (try something like ‘Lend me fifty dollars I
need some groceries’). Each player passes the whisper in turn to the person next door without the
other players hearing. Just wait and see what comes out the other end after five or six players.
The same thing happens when songs or tunes are passed from player to player. It’s part of the fun
of a musical tradition. The point is - you play your own music in your own way for your own
reasons and enjoyment and if people don’t like it well - you know what I’m getting at. There are
some talented individuals like Justin and Shane and Dave ‘One String Willie’ Williams who play
for a wider audience. I guess they would tell you that the audiences are interested in and attracted
to the raw simplicity of the music as much as the novelty value of the instrument itself. The
instrument is not yet a part of mainstream popular music culture – there is not yet a cadre of
music journalists or experts to tell you whether or not your instrument has the right tone or
timbre. You can make up your own songs or tunes. Sure there are some rules or conventions to
playing the blues but if you choose to break with those conventions does anybody really mind? -
A thirteen bar blues, anyone? I haven’t yet come across examples of a Diddley bow being used to
play jazz - but I bet there is someone out there doing it! It is my belief that this total freedom to
express yourself without critical oversight is the magnet that draws us to the Diddley bow.

It's a Family Affair

My apologies to Sly and the Family Stone for ripping off the title of their 1971 hit but I think it’s
appropriate for this bit. If you have been on the internet and visited some of the Cigar Box Guitar
Networks like Cigar Box Nation or Ted Crocker’s Handmade Music Clubhouse you will realise
that the internet has made it very easy for an individual to connect with others around the world
who share a similar, if minority interest or hobby. Hundreds and thousands of miles melt away to
nothing. It is easy for a builder in Arizona to share ideas, music, plans and parts with a fellow
music maker in Alaska or Albania. It is easy to feel a part of a family - or a movement - or a
revolution - whatever floats your boat. Increasingly makers and players are coming together in
all parts of the world to take part in festivals, workshops and concerts. It seems that the internet
is not enough. We want to meet face to face - see the instruments up close - and make music
together. It’s just like any family. It doesn’t matter how far flung we get - we still need to get together from time to time - even if it’s only for weddings and funerals!

But what about the wider family? At a family wedding we meet the aunts, uncles, and cousins but what about great aunt Emily who ran off in 1865 with a soldier and went to live in Australia? She’s long dead but there’s another part of the family still out there somewhere. A bit of a stretch, I know but I want to get to the wider musical family of the Diddley bow. It can be easy to think of the Diddley bow as being a small niche in the musical world. We can feel special and different and that’s great. But let me assure you that there are long lost cousins in this one-string musical family all over the world. Instruments that have survived for generations and that remain current and valid in cultures for all sorts of reasons. If you make and play a Diddley bow you are a part of something bigger than you can imagine. There is a lot out there to discover if you are prepared to go and look for it.

In the last section of this book I have compiled a list of some of the one string wonders still in use around the world along with links to sources of information, videos, audio recordings, and in some cases sources of information to help you have a go at making some of these distant relations to the Diddley bow. It is by no means a complete or exhaustive list, but I hope it will inspire you to take your making and playing in new and exciting directions.

I hope it will be fun…enjoy the journey!
One-stringed musical instruments of the world

Here is a whistle-stop tour of a range of one string instruments from around the world that may give you some idea of the family of instruments to which the diddley bow belongs. There are links to sources of information where you can find out more about the diddley bow's 'cousins'. To the best of my knowledge and belief all the images used here are in the public domain (some are my own illustrations others under a creative commons licence – I have made every effort to credit sources but if I have erred in any way please let me know). This is not an exhaustive list by any means. There are many more instruments and much more information to be found by the curious researcher. Good luck in your searches.
The **gusle** comes originally from the Dinarides region of Southeastern Europe. It is used to accompany epic poetry, which is sung rather than spoken. The player holds the instrument between his knees, with the left hand fingers touching the strings but not pressing them down to the neck. The result is a haunting harmonic sound unlike anything I have heard elsewhere. If you want to know more try reading The Singer of Tales by Albert Lord (pub. Harvard University Press)

See the instrument here [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQkNaYjns60](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQkNaYjns60)
The **Gopichand** is a one-string instrument used in traditional music from the Bengal region. Played by the Baul wandering minstrels. It is plucked with one finger. The tension of the string is altered by squeezing together the outer uprights. Those adept at the instrument play it one handed (a remarkable sight!) while singing and sometimes dancing too.

If you would like see a version of this instrument made using a tin can have a look at this video on YouTube. [https://youtu.be/PAyCK-UTykc](https://youtu.be/PAyCK-UTykc) – how to make a DIY Gopichand

In some parts of India this instrument is known as the **Ektara**, which translates as ‘One String’ (Ek = One Tara = String). This is a drone instrument used in Indian Music. There is a two string version called a **Dotara** (unsurprisingly, DO = two) and there are various sizes according to the tonal range you require. You can see a video demo of the full range of instruments on the video link below.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISrFBN1_AAA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISrFBN1_AAA)
The **tumbi** (also spelled **toombi**) is made from a small piece of round hard wood, hollowed out, and covered with a thin animal skin; usually glued around the edge, but sometimes nails are also used. Very like the Ektara though this instrument is usually played horizontally. It is becoming popular in modern Bangra music. It is used particularly in North India. Watch an amazing demonstration of this tiny instrument here [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Er7MRG33BkA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Er7MRG33BkA)
The Dan Bau is an unusual instrument. The body is a long box, often highly decorated. The single-string is stretched across a bridge at one end and fixed to a long arm at the other that functions much the same as a tremolo arm or ‘Whammy Bar’ on a modern electric guitar. The string is struck using a small mallet with the other hand producing a harmonic tone in the way some guitar players do today with vibrato added by the long arm. The instrument is unique to Vietnam (as far as I can discover) where it was traditionally played by blind musicians. See it being played at www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5smV8NbWiA
The *berimbau* is a bow-like instrument that has its origins in the gourd bow. It is African in origin but now commonly found in Brazil where it is used to accompany the martial art of *Capoeira*. The single-string is stretched across a bow and a gourd provides the resonator. A small stone or disc (the *Dobrao*) is used to vary the pitch of the string, which is hit with a small stick (the *vaqueta*). The gourd is held against the abdomen and moving it towards and away from the abdomen causes a strange ‘Wah-Wah’ effect. Check out this video to hear and see it being played: www.youtube.com/watch?v=hcW_NODVVhc
Goje – Africa

The goje is a one- or two-stringed fiddle from West Africa. A gourd is covered with snakeskin or similar. A stick provides the neck and a horsehair string is stretched across a bridge and played using a small bow. The goje is used to accompany song, and is played as a solo instrument.

See and hear the Goje in this video. www.youtube.com/watch?v=cxDB3aPoqzU
This is probably the closest instrument to the first ‘string’ instrument still existing. It is played in Colombia, though now, I believe, quite rare. Made from a branch of a local tree. A sliver of the bark is made to create a ‘string’. The string is tensioned with blocks of wood at either end. The string is struck with a stick and different notes are produced by stopping the string at various points using a gourd filled with pebbles (rather like a maraca). This is close to a diddley bow. There is a fascinating video on YouTube showing how the instrument is made and played (in Spanish but easy to follow if you don't have the language).

www.youtube.com/watch?v=caI4K04jaxw
Anghbindi (The Earth Bow) – Cameroon

Remember right at the start of this book we talked of the origins of the Diddley bow way back in time as an earth bow or ground harp? Well this instrument is still played today. The Baka forest people live in South East Cameroon, Gabon and the northern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo. They still play the earth bow. They call it the Anghbindi. You can see and hear it in the video below.

www.baka.co.uk/baka/films_earthbow.html
- And there's more - there are others out there who are making modern electric versions of the earth bow called an ‘Inindi’. It's somewhere between the earth bow and a tea-chest or washtub bass. It looks great fun and I recommend you visit http://walleymusic.com/inindi-bass/inindi-info/ where, courtesy of Dave Whalley, you can find instructions on how to make and play one.
The Last Word

I hope you have enjoyed reading this book. It is intended to be free and for you to share with others in whatever way you feel appropriate. If you wish to quote from or make reference to anything in this book in your own work then that is fine. I would appreciate a credit where appropriate, as would my colleagues Dafydd Owen (illustrator) and Kevin Lassiter (Diddley bow maker a.k.a Trashmun Johnson). When I say it is free I mean just that…no strings. At no time should anyone ask you to pay for this book. If they do then please let me know. I wrote it because I had something to say…that’s all. My other collaborators all felt the same. If you would like to be kept informed about future publications as my work progresses then please head on over to my blog at homemadeblues.wordpress.com and click the widget to sign up for updates. I promise not to give your details to anyone else. I would like to know what you think of the book.

Though I am now retired I am a qualified and experienced college lecturer in popular music and would be pleased to receive invitations to deliver lectures and presentations to students and others with a musical or musicological interest. My lecture demonstrations are hands-on and fun!

If you should feel that your enjoyment of this book has a value there is something you can do.

In 2015 my partner, Eirwen, to whom this book is dedicated, was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. If she was an inspiration to me before her diagnosis she is even more so now. If you would like to express your appreciation for this book (absolutely no obligation, I assure you) then please click on this link and make a donation of a small amount to the Michael J Fox Foundation that is working to find a cure for Parkinson’s Disease.

At the outset of this project I talked with illustrator Dafydd Owen about where the diddley bow might go in the future and also where Professor Beau Dudley might end up as he follows its path into the unknown. This was Dafydd’s final drawing as the book neared completion and it seems a fitting way to leave – with a smile.
Thank you for reading. I hope our paths will cross someday.

Philip Thomas

Cardiff, Wales
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I am an experienced lecturer and am happy to deliver lectures and demonstrations for educational programs, festivals, conferences and conventions anywhere in the world subject to costs being agreed. Just ask!

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