



GUITAR SHOP

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There's a poetry in wood and string, a kind of primal whisper that recalls sweat-soaked days and moonlit porches. Vernacular string instruments – banjos, box guitars, makeshift contraptions cobbled together with ingenuity and grit – are more than tools for music. They're the beating hearts of stories, born from the collision of cultures and the ceaseless grind of history. To understand them, you need to dig deep, past the polite museum plaques and glossy concert posters, into the dirt roads and riverbeds of America's past.

The banjo, that twangy, percussive muse of countless Appalachian ballads, didn't start as an icon of Americana. Its origins lie across the Atlantic, in the savannas and coastal villages of West Africa, where instruments like the *akonting* and *ngoni* sung for centuries. Enslaved African people carried these musical blueprints to the Americas, where they were reborn on plantation soil – and while the banjo has often been co-opted by white musicians and minstrels, its voice remains synonymous with resilience and identity.

Enter the cigar box guitar, a scrappy descendant of the banjo and a portal straight to the birth of blues. With their broomstick handles and rusty wires, these discarded boxes were first wielded by poor musicians across the Mississippi Delta in the mid 1800s. Eventually, innovators like Bo Diddley took the instrument's raw, homemade aesthetic and electrified it, literally crafting sounds as jagged and vital as the lives which they reflected.

Meanwhile, in the hollers of Appalachia, poor white farmers were also making their own instruments; and, as worlds collided in juke joints and church gatherings, something alchemical happened. Rhythms rooted in Africa met melodies from the British Isles, and from this fertile chaos emerged the folk and country traditions that would one day shape the sound of rock 'n' roll.

The guitar, with its European pedigree, had a similar transformation in American hands. Elegant Spanish and parlour instruments brought over by colonists soon became workhorses for bluesmen and rambles; later, men like Robert Johnson moved the guitar even further from its refined origins, into something that could growl, cry, and wail. Through a constant process of exchange - often unequal, but undeniably transformative - the guitar joined the banjo as a bridge between races, classes, and traditions.

Today, these ancestors of contemporary commercial instruments linger in museums, where the

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THE GALLERY OF EVERYTHING



strings are preserved but the sweat has long since dried. The Musical Instrument Museum in Phoenix pays homage to the banjo's journey from Africa to Appalachia, while the American Banjo Museum testifies to the instrument's diverse incarnations, from minstrel-era relics to bluegrass mainstays. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, 19th-century banjos crafted by William Esperance Boucher, Jr., sit alongside Spanish guitars, while the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., houses the vernacular instruments that have defined American history.

But don't let the glass cases fool you ... these instruments are alive. They vibrate with the spirit of the people who crafted them, played them, and handed them down through generations. The banjos, box guitars, and bluesy hybrids of the past didn't just entertain; they were tools of protest, joy, grief, and survival. They wailed in backrooms, rang out over hollers, and whispered prayers in front of sagging chimneys. Today, they carry not just music, but the weight of lives too often forgotten.

No doubt others are still waiting to be found, tucked away in pawn shops and flea markets, each a masterpiece of necessity, born in the places where cash was scarce but creativity was abundant. Some bear intricate carvings – faces, animals – while others are nothing but a box, a stick, and a few strings. Nonetheless, each is a sculpture, a history lesson you can hold, and a song waiting to escape.

These are not mass-produced relics: they're living, breathing artefacts, ready to be played again. And they're affordable, too, unlike the gilded fossils sold to collectors. Buy one. Own it. Make it sing. Pieces of a musical biography that still smoulders, each is ready to ignite if you know where to strike the match.

The Gallery of **Everything**, November 2024

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