

Old closet doors: better in guitars than landfill

Description

New Perspectives Guitar
The “New Perspectives Music” guitar made from old closet doors and salvaged poplar.

In this post, we meet Tim Sway of New Perspectives Music, who’s been making guitars from old closet doors and spreading the message that things that are good for the planet can be cool and can be done without compromising quality or tone.

After a fairly heavy post [last time](#) looking at scary big picture stuff, this time we’re dialling things down a few notches. We’re looking at how one guy is aiming to change the world, at least a little, by doing things differently and showing people that acting sustainably can be cool as well as good for the planet.

Tim Sway
Tim Sway. Source: [Soundcloud](#)

Guinea pigs

I knew I was going to enjoy interacting with [Tim Sway](#) when I discovered on his website that one of the many things he has been doing has been making “[guinea pig tanks](#)”. We had guinea pigs in our family most of the time our children were growing up. The kids learned how to take care of other living creatures as well as observing the fundamentals of birth, life, sex and death from the succession of guinea pigs that joined our family.

Guinea pig
Butternut Pumpkin, part of our family’s guinea pig dynasty that included such characters as Speedy, Chocolate, Fudge, Sooty and Cream Bun

Tim’s household also included guinea pigs, and he noticed that they like to run around but also feel the need to hide regularly. He invented cardboard shelters in the form of tanks, cars and other assorted transport modes that the guinea pigs could enter and exit easily and move around while feeling safe in an enclosed area. The result, in the video below, is hilarious, but has also been a hit with guinea pig owners around the world – Tim now markets the tanks under their own [domain name](#).

Guinea Pig Tanks!

New Perspectives Music

The guinea pig tank is a quirky indicator of the kind of stuff Tim does. I discovered his work during one of my periodic forays into the on-line musical instrument site [Reverb](#). My attention was grabbed by an ad for a “[New Perspectives Music](#)” acoustic guitar “*handmade in Connecticut from reclaimed, sustainable and locally sourced materials*”. In this guitar, the back and sides are made from reclaimed

closet (aka wardrobe) doors and the top is locally felled poplar with a local poplar/maple neck/fingerboard.

Closet doors? This was something I had to have a look at, and after Google stalking the maker – none other than Tim Sway of the guinea pig tanks – I knew this was exactly the kind of guitar that the Nature of Music is all about. I couldn't resist paying the relatively modest price for this unusual guitar, and at the same time got in touch with Tim to enquire further about his ideas and activities.

Tim lived up to my expectations based on the guinea pig tanks, and my interactions with him via email and Skype have been both illuminating and hilarious. It's a great delight when you meet someone that thinks along very similar lines and has reached the same sort of conclusions about stuff, but from a very different direction. Tim suggested that we are both "chasing the same dragons". And I don't think I've laughed so much on a Skype call in years.

The closet door guitar

Tim shipped the guitar to me here in Australia, but because it was coming such a long way he added a bit of extra packaging to keep it safe. Not just any extra packaging though. Inside the normal guitar-shaped cardboard box was a neatly-made plywood box that certainly added a bit of extra strength to the package. As with small kids who often play more with the packaging than with the new toy it contains, I was as excited about the box as I was about the guitar, and I've kept the materials to do something with later. Indeed, Tim joked that he had sent me a guitar kit as well as a guitar.

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Guitar packaging from recycled plywood

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Much better than [styrofoam peanuts!](#)

Once the excitement of the wooden box had subsided, I was able to concentrate on the guitar itself. Tim emphasises that he's not making the guitar equivalent of a Lamborghini, but rather a daily driver pickup truck. As the ad said: "*For the working class performer, you need a guitar that sounds good, looks good, is comfortable to play, durable as heck and easy to maintain – even fix – in a pinch*". And that's exactly what this guitar is. It looks great, with a really interesting shape and very nicely finished. But it's also a no-frills construction.

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New Perspectives Acoustic Guitar - poplar top.

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New Perspectives acoustic guitar - closet door back and sides

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The main thing, however, is that when you pick the guitar up and play it, man, it sounds fantastic. And plays like a dream. As nice a sound as many of the fancy guitars I've written about in previous posts. Coming from a guitar made from re-used timber and closet doors!

Poplar

So, the top is poplar and the back and sides are old closet doors. The poplar came from a friend of Tim's whom he called a "deconstructionist" – someone who tears down old buildings and saves any good materials. He tore down a barn where he found slabs of poplar wood that had been stored for decades, and Tim got some to try out on guitars.

As well as poplars, the genus [Populus](#) includes the Cottonwoods and Aspens. It's not clear which species the wood from the barn is likely to be, but the poplars and cottonwoods are pretty common in the eastern US and none are listed as threatened. Just to be confusing, [Appalachian poplar](#) is not actually a poplar, and is instead called *Liriodendron tulipifera*.

Poplar is not really a popular tonewood (sorry, I couldn't resist). It is, however, sometimes used to make electric guitar bodies and apparently has a long history as one of the woods used for [Appalachian dulcimers](#).

It gets a [pretty poor rap](#) as a wood for acoustic guitars and is reputed to neither sound good nor be particularly stable, especially with humidity changes. Despite this reputation, I have no complaints about my poplar-topped guitar.

Lauan plywood

And the closet doors? Again, no complaints from me, even though the closet door material is likely to be pretty bog-standard plywood. I asked Tim about this and he suggested that it was likely to be Lauan plywood. I had never heard this term, but it turns out that Lauan refers to timber from trees of the genus [Shorea](#), rainforest trees from Southeast Asia.

Red Lauan, *Shorea negrosensis*

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Red lauan, Shorea negrosensis. Source: [Philippine Trees and Garden Flowers](#)

The term [plywood](#) refers to multi-layered wood panels where adjacent layers are glued together with the grain running in perpendicular directions. Since its introduction in the mid-1800s, plywood has grown in popularity and use. It, and other composite wood products, provide cheaper alternatives to solid wood for a wide range of products. Today, over 20 million cubic metres of plywood is manufactured and used every year.

According to [Patriot Timber](#): “*Lauan plywood (also known as Luan Plywood) is a commercial term used throughout the United States that typically refers to a 1/8? – 1/4? tropical hardwood plywood panel used for underlayment in flooring, lamination, paper overlay, furniture, and millwork applications*”.

Lauan plywood

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Lauan plywood. Source: [Hancock Lumber](#)

The first Lauan plywood panels were manufactured in Asia, principally in the countries of Taiwan, Japan, and Korea, more than forty years ago. The raw wood logs used to manufacture Luan plywood at that time were imported mainly from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Since then, exports have reached around the globe.

Lauan became a favoured material for plywood because the tree was so prevalent throughout the Pacific Rim. The tree grew in such a way as to create logs which tended to be straight, with fine-grained wood consistent with regards to colour and density, and the wood fibers were relatively stable. Compared to other trees, peeling the wood in thin layers is extremely easy, a necessity for producing skinny plywood like Lauan.

Growth and decline of Lauan

At the same time the wood of the Lauan tree's suitability for plywood was discovered, the demand for hardwood plywood grew globally. This resulted in substantial plywood-manufacturing industries in certain parts of the Pacific, including Indonesia, where an estimated 10 million cubic meters of plywood was manufactured annually.

However, the industry [has seen a decline](#) due to overharvesting and a lack of sustainability management. 148 species of *Shorea* are now on the IUCN Redlist. Today's Luan plywood is made from not only the wood of the Lauan tree but also a range of different tropical wood from such diverse areas as South America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific Rim.

Tropical logs for plywood

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The import of tropical logs for plywood is declining around the world. Source: [Nikkei Asia](#)

All this has led some manufacturers to look for alternatives. For instance, [Patriot Timbers](#) write: “*The Lauan plywood available in the market today hardly resembles the Lauan plywood of twenty years ago. Plywood manufacturers around the globe use tropical hardwood logs from a wide range of sources including Africa, the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, and South America. Most of these tropical hardwood sources are not being managed for sustainable development. The available pool of tropical hardwood logs to make Lauan plywood continues to get smaller and smaller. Lauan plywood varies in appearance from shipment to shipment.*”

Their alternative product, RevolutionPly® plywood, contains no tropical hardwoods, instead using plantation and sustainable woods and yielding a consistent product.

“For the first time in the history of the plywood industry, there is a sustainable, long-term alternative to Lauan that is better for our global environment and a far better use of the Earth’s forest resources.”

So, it’s a good thing that Tim Sway is re-using the closet doors made of Luan plywood – a waste product containing wood from now-endangered trees. Better off in a guitar than in landfill.

Throw it away

And that’s exactly why Tim got into using recycled wood for his guitars. He first realised that there was a trend towards a [throwaway society](#) – even for things like furniture – when he was making rustic furniture as a side venture to music gigging. When we chatted he recalled the event that brought it home to him:

“I remember when I was making furniture still – I was gigging and making tables and chairs – and I’d deliver this rustic coffee table to somewhere in Manhattan. The guy’s all excited to get this thing, and I bring it in and he moves his old coffee table over and says “I can’t wait to throw this thing away”.

Commerce in modern society thrives on encouraging people to replace old things with new things, even if the old thing still works just fine. Even if, as in Tim’s story, the guy is replacing an old table with a funkier hand-crafted one, the old table still ends up being discarded.

In some neighbourhoods (like where I live in Fremantle), there's an effective recycling system and also a culture of putting discarded things out on the side of the road. And usually, someone will come along and pick it up within a few hours or days. So at least the old thing will continue to be used. There are also neighbourhood swap and share networks, as well as the possibility of trying to sell things on Facebook or elsewhere to make a few dollars from the old thing.

But where those options aren't available or easy to use, the old thing generally ends up in the trash. Thrown away. Except that often people don't think where "away" might be. Where the trash ends up may not be of immediate concern to most people, but many places have serious problems with where to put all the rubbish. And more broadly, we've ended up with [plastic](#) and other waste materials reaching all corners of the earth and affecting all forms of life.

Landfill

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What "away" looks like. Source: [Ethical Choice](#)

Don't feed the trend

After the conversation with the table guy, Tim realised that doing what he was doing was simply feeding the trend of making new things for people who would then throw away the old thing. I discovered that this trend is pretty extensive, even for tables and chairs – most folks have heard of [E-waste](#) (electronic waste such as old computers), but I'll bet most people don't know that "[F-waste](#)" (furniture waste) is a recognised thing too. Indeed furniture is the [least-recycled type of household waste](#). And the situation is made worse by the advent of low-cost (and generally lower quality) furniture that people do not expect to last. A recent article in the [Washington Post](#) suggested: "*Furniture used to last generations. Now it barely survives a move*". A [study in Australia](#) concluded that in metropolitan areas, on average each household disposes of around 24kg of wooden furniture per year – they estimated that is equivalent to 800,000 three-seater sofas, 1.65 million dining tables, 3.4 million coffee tables or 6.85 million chairs, thrown away every year in Sydney alone.

Furniture waste

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Furniture waste. Source: [Architecture & Design](#)

And the problem is that most of the material is [not really waste at all](#). An article on [Furniture Link](#) suggests:

"The other thing that E and F-waste have in common is that the materials are really not waste at all and can often be repurposed for community/charitable organizations or resale. This idea feeds into the "circular economy", which aims to reduce waste and pollution by creating products that can be reused, recycled or repaired. The concept has the potential to reshape how things are made, used and reused."

And this is precisely the type of thinking that Tim came round to independently, and as a result he moved away from making furniture and into making guitars from recycled materials.

"The reason I was interested in making guitars, and I don't really make anything else anymore – first I am an artist and I have this need as an artist to create art. And I've always liked the idea of my art serving a purpose and not just being pretty. So that's why I like making tables and chairs and not just framed art. And so now I can make art that continues to create art in the hands of someone else. So

it's like an ecological approach to art.

Of course, if nobody ever made a guitar for the rest of time, there's still enough guitars on the planet. But I have to make something – otherwise what am I going to do with my time? Work in an office and contribute jack-shit to the planet? Or make things worse? So I can make these little monuments to my life – that mean something and go in someone else's hands and maybe mean something to them. Unlike the coffee table, guitars are different – they're going to get passed on when someone's bored with it. It's going to get given to the kid or it's going to get made into a clock.”

Tone testing

Until recently, Tim made mostly electric guitars – using a variety of recycled timbers. But he's now venturing into acoustics, and the guitar he sent me was one of his prototypes. He's been experimenting with different combinations of wood and has used [wood from an old piano](#) for one guitar and is constructing another using only maple for everything.

He's even done a comparison of the tone of three guitars (including the one I've now got) that are identical in design but made with different woods. One has top, back and sides made of old closet doors, the second has closet doors back and sides but a poplar top, and the third is all solid wood with maple and mahogany for the body.

The YouTube video he made about this is both entertaining and informative, and is one of many videos available on his [YouTube channel](#), which is full of good stuff. He says he does the videos to get people thinking.

How Much Does Wood Affect Acoustic Guitar Tone? Tone Wood Study

He freely admits that the comparison of the three guitars is not very scientific:

“Some of these things are very scientific, but I always do mine intentionally non-scientifically, I do them emotionally because music is an emotion art. People complain that I'm not strumming the same way each time and I say, well neither are you. If I'm building guitars for robots then I'll change the way I do it. I'm doing these things tongue in cheek because I know all the flaws – I'm trying to get the discussion going. I know it's not fully scientific, but you can't scientifically experiment something that's subjective, like tone.”

We've explored the subjective aspect of tone in a [previous post](#), and we'll take a look at a range of other studies like Tim's in a future post. These other studies may be more scientific, but they are considerably less entertaining.

Closet doors versus an endangered tree

The results of the tone test? Well, you can watch the “reveal” video [here](#). Or if you just want the bottom line, both Tim and his guitarist friend agreed that all three guitars sounded good, but preferred the all-closet-door. However, when they heard the recorded tests, they switched to preferring the sound of the all-solid-wood guitar. Tim recognises that music can sound different live versus on a recording – mirroring comments people made in the [previous post](#) about what can affect our perceptions of tone.

But, as Tim said when we spoke: *“That’s real nerdy shit which probably isn’t going to make any difference to people listening and dancing at the club”*.

Tim’s on a mission to get people thinking differently about guitar woods. But he’s also keen to change people’s minds not just because acting more sustainably is the right thing to do, but because it’s the *cool* thing to do too.

What I’m trying to do is to get people to start feeling proud that their guitar’s made of old closet doors, not an endangered tree. So, you stand up there and think “this is better – it’s not a compromise”.

Changing the narrative around what’s cool and what isn’t sure sounds like part of the solution to me.

New Perspectives Music guitar - "This machine saves trees"

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“This machine saves trees”, on the pickguard of the New Perspectives Music guitar. A nice nod back to Woody Guthrie’s guitar that proclaimed [“This Machine Kills Fascists”](#).

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