

JAMES “SUPER CHIKAN” JOHNSON

This famed Delta blues musician crafts guitars from cigar boxes.

GROWING UP in the Mississippi Delta of the 1950s, James “Super Chikan” Johnson learned to play guitar from the blues greats who gathered to jam on his grandfather’s porch. “Everyone played,” he says, “but I couldn’t afford to buy instruments.” So he crafted them from materials at hand: oil cans, suitcases and especially cigar boxes. Gradually, this beloved bluesman has gained recognition for the visual artistry of the guitars he creates, as well as his music. “I’m a double artist,” he says, laughing. Part folk art, part musical instrument, his cigar box guitars are in the collections of fans such as Paul Simon, Caroline Kennedy and Morgan Freeman.

Working from his home in Clarksdale, Mississippi, Johnson acquires vintage wooden cigar boxes from friends or at collectors shows. He adds a neck, strings and a pickup for amplification, then paints and bejewels them. The result: slide guitars with a haunting electronic pickup blues-style twang that he plays in concerts around the world. “I enjoy it when people gather around after shows to ask about them,” he says, adding that each distinctive instrument “offers all the colors in my heart.” — **TERRI PETERSON SMITH**



▶ **A one-string** homemade guitar is known as a “diddley bow.” The instrument was made famous by Lonnie Pitchford, a blues musician from Mississippi.

▶ **In 1864**, President Abraham Lincoln signed legislation that required that all cigars be sold in boxes.

▶ **On his wife’s** 43rd birthday, artist Alexander Calder gave her a cigar box filled with tiny versions of his famous mobiles.

THINKING OUT OF THE BOX

Spots in Delaware, Louisiana and New Mexico pay homage to the simple cigar box.



1 The **Winterthur Museum** in Delaware has an extensive collection of the gorgeous lithographic art that has topped cigar boxes.



2 Each January, the **New Orleans Cigar Box Guitar Festival** celebrates the music of the homemade stringed instruments.



3 This frame is one of the impressive pieces of tramp art made from cigar boxes at the **Museum of International Folk Art** in Santa Fe.

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