



Trashmagination Podcast #44 – Musical Instruments from Trash

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

Today our topic is musical instruments made from trash. I want to discuss three ideas related to musical instruments and creative reuse, which are:

- 1) Performance groups who make musical instruments from trash
- 2) How to make some simple instruments from trash – and I'll play some so you can hear how they sound
- 3) Items made FROM recycled musical instruments

I think musical instruments are a great way to engage people on the topic of creative reuse because it appeals to our sense of hearing rather than sight. Sometimes people dismiss items that are made from trash because they don't like their aesthetics. But it's hard to deny the beautiful sounds that can be created from recycled materials.

Performance Groups who Make Instruments from Trash

My very first Trashmagination blog on Christmas day in 2012 was about a movie called Landfill Harmonic [<https://trashmagination.com/musical-instruments-from-trash/>]. This movie was about a group in Paraguay called Orquesta de Reciclados de Cateura. Cateura is the largest landfill near Asuncion, the capital of Paraguay. The orchestra was put together by Favio Chávez working with local people who built all sorts of instruments from trash. I recommend the TED talk about Favio as well, where some students perform.

Later this month, I'm going to see a group called Scrap Arts in Maryland on April 20 [<https://www.strathmore.org/events-and-tickets/scrap-arts-music-children-of-metropolis>]. This is a Canadian group who built their instruments from trash materials. It is primarily a percussion-oriented group.

Many percussion groups play recycled materials. One of the best known is Stomp which started in 1991 so it has been performing for almost 30 years.

In episode 12 of my podcast a year ago, I talked about taiko and creative reuse. As I mentioned then, I play taiko with the group Nen Daiko. Taiko are Japanese drums and they are great examples of instruments made from recycled materials. Here in North America, they are typically made from recycled whisky barrels. So be sure to listen to episode 12 for more info on that.

Are you familiar with the word "luthier?" It means "a person who makes stringed instruments." Zeke Leonard is a professor at the University of Syracuse. He makes banjos from recycled pianos [<http://scfoiw.blogspot.com/>]. Lots of pianos are thrown away, and Zeke has found the wood is great for making other musical instruments. I mentioned Zeke in episode 21 about creative reuse of wood scraps [<https://trashmagination.com/21-scrap-wood-reuse/>]. Zeke also teaches people how to make "canjos" or banjos from a can [<https://trashmagination.com/making-musical-instruments-from-trash-and-nature/>] and "diddley-bows" which are a stringed instrument that wraps around pretty much any object [<https://makezine.com/projects/make-22/the-diddley-bow/>].

Ken Butler is a luthier who pushes the limits of what can be made into a stringed instrument. His instruments often look like optical illusions because they have such unusual shapes. For example, he used a snowshoe to make a cello. He has

stringed instruments made from wooden hangers, guns, golf clubs, chair backs, a hatchet, a cowboy boot, a wooden sled, crutches, skeletons, shovels and mannequins. He has made at least 400 instruments and performs in the New York area. His website is called Ken Butler's Hybrid Visions [<https://kenbutler.squarespace.com/>].

The last performance group I'll mention is Bash the Trash [<http://www.bashthetrash.com/>]. They originate from New Jersey and visit many schools and community events teaching people how to make musical instruments from recycled materials. Some of the instruments I made today are based on their tutorials.

I would love hearing about performance groups who make items from trash. I'm sure there are hundreds. Often when I see videos of music from around the world, the instruments are clearly made from whatever was available. Let me know your favorites at trashmagination@gmail.com.

How to Make Musical Instruments from Trash

I was born in Newfoundland, and a popular instrument there is called an "Ugly Stick." This looks like an upside-down mop stuck in a rubber boot with lots of metal caps hanging on sticks along the sides. The floppy part of the mop goes on the top and often people take a tin can and give it a face, so the mop forms the hair. It makes a great sound that sounds like a tambourine and a drum at the same time when you thump it on the floor.

The way to play an Ugly Stick is to thump it on the floor while hitting it with a shorter stick. Sometimes that handheld stick has notches in it to make a quick sound like this (roll tongue). Often the Ugly Stick is accompaniment to an accordion (or a "squeeze box") or a harmonica.

Ugly Sticks are most often made around Christmas time because they are part of a tradition called mummering where you dress up in all your clothes hopefully to the point where you are not recognizable, and then visit your neighbors for a "scuff and a scoff" or a dance and some food. I'll share a video in the show notes showing how to make an Ugly Stick. I will also link to a page where they show how you could run your own Ugly Stick making workshop [<https://www.somethingsaturdays.com/the-blog/ugly-stick-Sunday>].

There are so many musical instruments you can make other than an Ugly Stick. I put together a bunch of tutorials for how to make musical instruments from recycled materials on a Pinterest board [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/musical-instruments/>]. I'm going to share ideas for very simple instruments from trash.

I mentioned Bash the Trash and they have many video tutorials for instrument making. I made a rubber band guitar following their video – here's how it sounds: [play]

A xylophone from glass bottles filled with different amounts of water sounds nice: [play]

It's fun to make shakers or maracas by putting beans in any container: [play]

My gomi-daiko is a practice taiko made from recycled garbage cans: I'll link to the blog where I showed how I made mine [<https://trashmagination.com/preparing-a-taiko-act-for-the-school-talent-show/>]

Items made FROM Recycled Musical Instruments

What can you do with musical instruments that are in such bad shape, they don't play anymore? We bought a clarinet secondhand for my daughter in elementary school, and she played it for four years. We did regular maintenance but finally our technician said it would cost more to replace parts than the instrument was worth. So that got me thinking about what happens to old instruments.

If your instrument is still in good condition, of course you can sell it secondhand or donate them to help students who can't afford instruments. You can usually bring it to your local school or google "donate musical instruments" to find lots of community organizations.

For instruments that are beyond repair, check out my Pinterest board. People transform them into furniture or lamps. In terms of my daughter's clarinet, the best ideas I saw were a lamp with a clarinet as the post holding up the lampshade and earrings made from the circular metal keys. In one case, an artist painted a clarinet with bright colors and designs so it became a colorful art object.

As I mentioned earlier, pianos can be made into many items. There are many jewelry crafts that involve piano or guitar strings. Some woodworkers transform the piano body to make it into a bench, a bookcase or a desk.

There are lots of crafts for sheet music, such as a paper poinsettia made from Christmas music. You can frame a particularly meaningful piece of sheet music and writing a relevant message with hand lettering.

If you have made items from recycled musical instruments, please let me know at trashmagination@gmail.com.

Until next time – may you see trash as a source of music in your life.