

Sonic Fascinations...

The audible art of Jon Free

"I didn't think it was unusual to fiddle with guitars," says Jon, unlocking a creaking metal cabinet and bringing out a trio of small aluminium jelly moulds. "My latest acquisition," he says, "found them in a charity shop... they have a very bright tone," – he pings one with a fingernail against his ear and winces – "I think they might work on a resonator..." These three jelly moulds form part of Jon Free's quest for the "perfect sound", a quest which has taken him from teenage deconstructor to ingenious sonic inventor, through 20-odd brilliantly innovative and unconventional years as guitarist with Gin Palace and Penthouse, playing with such luminaries as The Fall, Link Wray, Bob Log III and The Kills amongst others. This quest has ultimately taken him to strange new worlds involving recycled tin, kitchen sink strainers, table legs and microwave buzzers.



of tone, resonance, reverberation and volume are constantly being ruminated upon, night and day: like all great inventors, Jon's innovations are his obsessions.

Jon is tall and gentlemanly, with a sharp wit, erudite mind and a wry chuckle. He's a striking figure, quiet and thoughtful, but with perpetually enquiring thoughts that whirr around him like a circle of bees. He works from a tiny, elegant room in a crumbling Georgian townhouse in Stoke Newington, once the home of Daniel Defoe, with a large window onto Church Street displaying an old fashioned glass sign which reads *Tin-Tone - Sonic Fascinators*. Jon shows us a collection of Turkish delight tins and explains that he has ideas to transform them into little amplifiers. Problems

"It started when I was thirteen. I'd always been one of those kids that takes Christmas presents apart to see how they work or, at least, how to *break* them. My uncle gave me an unplayable wreck. It was a cheapo thing, a fucked up 1959 Czech-made Futurama guitar, and the finish was cracked and flaking. I decided I was going to fix it up, so I spent weeks surrounded by geraniums and spiders in the freezing corrugated plastic shed, with a kitchen knife, a pair of pliers, a hammer, and a dream! I was a kid, I had no idea what I was doing, but I was determined to find out how the thing worked. I refinished it, put it all back together,



it looked great," he chuckles, "but in retrospect, I don't think its looks were its main problem!"

It takes a pretty ingenious 13 year old to take a guitar to bits and meticulously put it back together again so that it works — but Jon has a deep-seated curiosity for how things work, and how they are made. He also wanted to be able to play guitar. "The Futurama only had three strings ... an E, an A and a G. My uncle showed me how to play *Sunshine of Your Love*."

Jon was then given a "real guitar", an Ibanez ("not very interesting"), and began to learn to play. "Then I got a Shergold but it sounded terrible, so I started mucking about with the electrics. I always bought guitars because they looked cool, but I wanted them to sound better. I loved the Birthday Party, and they had this recording technique where the guitarist would play opposite a piece of corrugated sheet metal with a microphone attached – it was a great, harsh, metallic sound. I

spent ages trying to replicate that sound. I was on the dole for a long time, had no money, so I had to be inventive to try and achieve this mysterious sound. I had a Fender Jaguar, and it just sounded so *nice*; so I cut out a piece of beer can and slipped it in between the neck and the body, and it sounded so much better, harsher. I love harsh dissonance rather than pleasant musicality."

As with most creative endeavours, necessity is the mother of invention, and Jon found that his finances prevented him from getting his various guitars and amps fixed professionally, and when he did pay out for professional help it often wasn't anything special. "I discovered the hard way that professionals don't always do things right, having paid out for a guitar to be mended and the bloke basically did a bodge job. I got it home and thought, 'I could do better than that!' After a while I had managed to break everything I could possibly break, and couldn't afford to pay for them to be fixed, so I was getting more into doing running repairs and 'improving' things. Friends started asking me to have a look at their guitars for them, and I would do it for nothing because I was hungry to know what went on inside a 60s Vox Phantom, or whatever. I used to travel across London to Earls Court and Denmark Street, and stand at the windows of the vintage guitar shops.

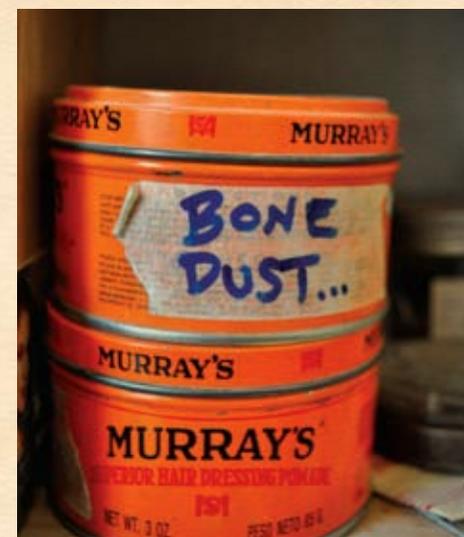
I wanted to have one of every guitar ever made, but of course that's never going to happen, so I wanted to be around them instead, investigate them. Every guitar has its own solutions to the intrinsic problems, they're all ingenious and fascinating. I didn't want to work in a guitar shop, looking at them on the walls all day, I wanted to get *inside* them, take them to bits, find out what makes them work."

Jon realised he could buy knackered old guitars, fix them up (while quenching his thirst for the inner details) and sell them for a small profit.

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His friend Kev suggested they put in a few hundred quid and club together to buy a load of cheap guitars. A small group set up a stall in Camden, and Jon soon found it was a win-win situation. "If we sold them, then great, we got to keep the money; if we didn't sell them, then great, we got to keep the guitar." For a few years they were successful, "Kev was great with the public, and I had the chance to work on the guitars. We came across some incredible things."

After a while Jon began to get frustrated with market stall life, fed up with talking to people all day about guitars and not getting a chance to work on them enough. On tour in Germany he came across a shop which had a collection of old archtop guitars for sale. "From the outside it looked uninspiring, it had Casio stickers in the windows, a very modern shopfront. It seemed that the Germans were fiercely uninterested in their history following the war, and they were queuing up to exchange their crappy old Czech-made archtop guitars, made by violin makers, for new crappy Japanese-made guitars. Every time we went there on tour I would come back with one or two, and would fix them up and make my own electrics for them. I made them for myself at first to play in the band, but then people started asking me to make them." So he left Camden and started fixing up and making guitars on his own,



which he has been doing ever since, repairing guitars for bands from Gallon Drunk to The Bad Seeds, Grace Jones, the Tom Waits band and beyond, and has gained a great reputation in the process for the quality of his work.

The Tin-Tone is the natural child of these years of striving for that "harsh dissonance". Jon spent many hours lying in bed thinking about cigar box guitars and how they work. "I had an old wood-grain biscuit tin on my bedside table, and I would lie there looking at this tin and visualising circuits and stuff, how you would make a cigar box guitar." He tried to find a source of cigar boxes, but failed – they are not easy to find in the UK, and when you do find them, they're expensive.

Funnily enough, it was Kev again that instigated the birth of the first Tin-Tone. "On the morning of Kev's birthday somebody had dumped a load of wood outside our house, broken furniture. There were a couple of old table legs sticking out of the pile. I thought, 'they look like guitar necks', as I walked to the shops to find Kev a birthday present. I trawled the shops and couldn't find anything, all the while thinking about the table legs, so I phoned my wife Meaghan and said, 'Should I spend the



was really pleased with it, and I decided it was worth pursuing further, so I got the other table leg and made another out of my bedside tin."

For the next six months Jon developed the tin guitars, improving their design, and lying in bed at night visualising how to electrify them. It was a tricky one to solve, and it took a long period of development and experimentation to work out how to get it right. "Joe Meek said if you shout down the horn of a gramophone, the sound will be transferred onto the vinyl. Speakers theoretically can also work as microphones. I discovered these transducers, little beeper things for microwaves, and I managed to make them into pickups which worked in the tin. I love the sound of them, because they pick up the sound of the instrument, not just the strings — they have a gritty, deep, metallic sound. People don't seem to believe a guitar is electric if they can't see the pickup, so I started adding normal pickups to them too. These pickups really just amplify the sound of the strings, but I have made it so you can blend between the two with a chicken-head knob."

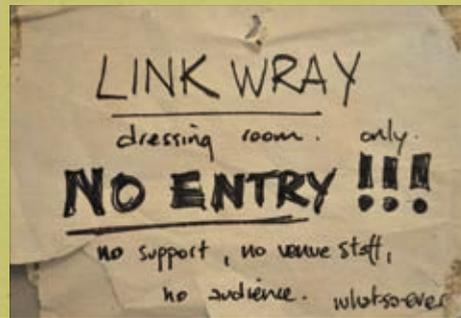
whole day trying to do this stupid thing, or just buy him a bottle of wine?" And she said, 'Go for it!' At midday I went everywhere looking for cigar boxes, but the only thing I found which was even slightly suitable was a biscuit tin in a junk shop, which I discounted because it was tin. By 3.30pm I had decided I should probably buy the tin, so

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I brought it home and sat and stared at the tin and the table leg *really, really hard*. The leg had a wing-nut in one end, so I thought, well the strings could go to that. I had three tuners that a customer had asked me to replace on their guitar, so I used them the other end. I cut two holes in the tin for the neck to pass through, and used the same bridge that I used on the archtops, which is held on by the strings. It was rudimentary, but it worked! And surprisingly it sounded great – Ev

Jon is on a constant search for table legs – he can't go for a walk without looking in skips and around bins. "I thought they'd be really easy to get, but they're surprisingly hard to find." He has spent a long time cycling around London, buying tables in charity shops and leaving the tops behind.

Its fabrication from society's flotsam and jetsam makes every Tin-Tone unique. Jon has tried to standardise the process, to make them more efficient to make, but each time he does so he accidentally discovers another way of doing it. "They are continually developing, and of course all the tins and the necks are different. I



go through charity shops, junk shops, relative's houses... you name it... to find suitable tins. They have to be a certain size, and look a certain way, so eBay has been pretty useful." Jon muses that there are an awful lot of tins in Britain, but bugger all cigar boxes.

The Tin-Tone is a beautifully crafted and brilliant invention; it not only looks fantastic but sounds amazing. Among the proud owners of these little sonic gems can be counted Sonic Youth, Heavy Trash and Seasick Steve. They go for between £150 for an acoustic up to £250 for an electric model, and each one has its own look and sound. If you would like a Tin Tone made to your own specifications, you can pick out a tin of your choice from Jon's collection and he will make you one to order. So what does the future of Tin-Tone sound like? "That's Top Secret. If I told you, I would have to kill you."

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