

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH DR CLAWHAMMER

Jane Venis

I am a multimedia artist working across sculpture, sound and performance. I have made musical instruments since 2001. Many of my earlier works served a dual purpose, not only as playable instruments but also as *chindogu*, which are objects that have been purposefully designed to be somewhat useless.¹ I reference *chindogu* as a starting point to address issues surrounding the design and proliferation of arguably useless and wasteful consumer goods and systems. This position also influences the resources I use. Recycled and re-purposed objects and materials are used to construct my absurd contraptions and instruments. In some cases I rework these assemblages to become, rather ironically, shiny (but pointless) objects of desire. Recently I have been making stringed instruments, some of which are more at the playable end of the spectrum, yet continue to be made from unusual materials.

My practice as a maker of musical instruments is situated in the blurry boundary between art and design. In my current project I am creating a solo exhibition of bespoke instruments, many of which have an element of humour. These works employ a combination of designed parts and found objects and will be exhibited in the Forrester Gallery in Oamaru, New Zealand, from May to July 2016. This exhibition will function partly as a retrospective, as it will have some of my earlier wind and percussion instruments; however, it will also feature recent works (and works presently in progress) such as the *Dr Clawhammer* series of stringed instruments.

In this article I will discuss the making of three works in the *Dr Clawhammer* series. They comprise *The Carrot Grating Ukulele* (2010-12) a corrugated iron ukulele with an inbuilt vegetable grater; *The Banjolele in Morris Minor* (2014), a hybrid banjo-ukulele that sports a Morris Minor hubcap resonator; and lastly, *The Panjo* (2015) which, as its name suggests, is a banjo made from a copper-bottom frying pan. I will also discuss the histories of both the ukulele and the banjo as they are relevant to this project and explore the present surge in popularity of the ukulele. This positioning is vital, as my works serve not only as playable instruments but also as contemporary art objects designed to comment on popular culture.

The ukulele was introduced to Hawai'i in 1879 through visiting Portuguese sailors. At the time, the lute-like four-stringed instrument was, rather ironically, called the machete. Its original tuning was lost and various open tunings were developed by the Hawai'ians.² The ukulele, which means 'dancing flea,' became significant in the musical culture of Hawai'i and to a lesser extent in other Pacific islands.³ It also became a popular portable instrument in Western cultures, particularly in the United States and also in England during the first half of the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, the ukulele has had a reputation of being a mass-produced and often ill-made kitsch object found throughout the Pacific as a cheap airport souvenir. The public perception that it is not a 'proper instrument' has also been reinforced by its use in humorous songs and performances. Songs such as *Tiptoe Through the Tulips* by Tiny Tim, a performer with too many teeth and too few chords, has left the ukulele with a long-lasting legacy as a joke instrument. However, in the last decade there has been a remarkable resurgence of interest in the ukulele. This interest has been sparked in part by ukulele music being produced by extremely accomplished musicians such as Jake Shimabukuro and James Hill. There are also now high-quality instruments available right across the price spectrum.

Ukulele virtuosos aside, the public perception of the ukulele as a user-friendly instrument that anyone can play is indeed true at the beginner level. With only four strings and shorter fret distances than the guitar, a novice can soon learn to play easy songs with three chords. However, although performances by hordes of school children with colourful ukuleles playing *The Lion Sleeps Tonight* may have warmed the community's heart, they have left more than a few cynics in their wake. There are those who in a backlash of anti-uke sentiment would love to give the 'dancing flea' a swift slap. For example, Rhodri Marsden, in his article "Am I the Only Person in the World who Hates the Ukulele?," featured recently in *The Independent* online,⁴ commented scathingly that "the plink-plonk of the ukulele is being harnessed by corporations and repeatedly used to sell us everything from dating services to mortgages."⁵

As a musician, I am undeniably drawn to the ukulele's charm. However, entranced as I am, I have to admit that not *all* things sound good on the ukulele. The *Ukulele Songs* album by Pearl Jam's front man Eddie Vedder is a good example of an idea that should have remained just that. To use Rhodri Marsden's phrase, there is far too much 'plink plonking.'



Figure 1. Jane Venis, *The Carrot Grating Ukulele* (2010), baby iron, wood and stainless steel.

The growing visibility of ukuleles within mass popular culture prompted the making of my performance work *The Carrot Grating Ukulele* (Figure 1). This work is designed for the 'niche market' of multi-tasking musicians who wish to play music while cooking. The instrument has a grater installed over the sound hole and can be played using firm vegetables as picks; carrots have proved to be the best so far. The grated carrots are retrieved through a cunning hatch created by sliding the grater to the side. However, there is a paradox implicit in all chindogu 'products' such that any problems solved tend to generate new ones.⁶ For example, when vigorously playing *The Carrot Grating Ukulele*, the player will find that more much carrot flies around the room than ends up stored for future cooking within the body of the ukulele. This work also doubles as an instrument for the masochistically inclined if no vegetables are used.⁷ *The Carrot Grating Ukulele* positions the ukulele against the prevailing popular image of the 'extra cute' instrument that is just too damn happy. This is one of several works I have made that employs irony to critique 'labour saving' devices and multi-purpose products.

My second instrument in the Dr Clawhammer series is *The Banjolele in Morris Minor*. This instrument is tuned and played as a ukulele but sounds like a banjo. This sound inspired me to learn to play 'clawhammer,' a rhythmic and percussive banjo-playing style that originated in Africa, as did the banjo itself. In her book *The Half-barbaric Twang*, Karen Linn writes about the history of the banjo and traces its origin from a simple skin-covered gourd known variously as the banjar, banjer and banshaw that was played by African slaves on plantations in the Southern United States and also in the Caribbean.⁸ The banjo also became popular with white musicians before the American Civil War when, rather ironically, minstrel acts featured white banjo players wearing 'blackface.' This was a blackening of the features created by smearing on burnt cork in a rather bizarre bid to emulate the black slave musicians who (musical skill notwithstanding) had no status at the time.⁹ Blackface acts were prevalent well into the twentieth century.



Figure 3. Jane Venis, *The Banjolele in Morris Minor* (2014). Back view.



Figure 2. Jane Venis, *The Banjolele in Morris Minor* (2014). Front view.

In poorer communities where players could not afford expensive manufactured instruments, banjos were often made from scratch from whatever materials were available. Various banjo styles and instruments developed over time, including both four and five-string versions with varying neck lengths. The most notable playing style change was the adoption of a 'new' finger-picking style learned from guitarists that spread during the time of the American Civil War.¹⁰ This new approach helped the banjo gain a reputation as a more genteel instrument which was now touted as suitable for ladies to play.¹¹ During the 1920s, Dixieland jazz also incorporated the banjo as a strummed rhythm instrument, as its loud 'voice' could be heard above the brass instruments.

Meanwhile, the clawhammer or 'frailing' style derived from African banjar playing was still prevalent in the Appalachian Mountains where geographic isolation helped preserve the method.¹² This was the style shown in the 1974 movie *Deliverance*, a film that did no favours to the profile of banjo players, as it embedded

the notion of the banjo as an instrument of 'interbred hillbilly rednecks,' a trope that (despite its humour) was also present in the *Beverly Hillbillies* TV sitcom of the previous decade.

The history of the banjo as a homemade instrument – made with whatever materials come to hand – is reflected in the construction of *The Banjolele in Morris Minor* (Figures 2 and 3). The key materials in this work are all found objects, including an adapted existing soprano ukulele neck, an eight-inch tambour drum frame, a Morris Minor hubcap and a vellum (calfskin) head. There is an ongoing debate in the banjo-making community about the advantages and disadvantages of using either synthetic drum 'skin' or vellum for the head. I decided on vellum as it has a mellower tone, but was prepared for having to retune the instrument more often as moisture affects the natural skin. On completion of the instrument, I was pleasantly surprised by both the sweet tone and its lack of weight in comparison to commercially available banjo ukuleles. After an initial settling-down period common to all new stringed instruments, the banjolele held its tuning well despite the choice of vellum. *The Banjolele in Morris Minor* had its first real outing when I played a set at the 2014 FIUL International Ukulele Festival in Lorraine, France, in July 2014. On that occasion, to acknowledge the history of the instrument I played both clawhammer and blues.

I consider that *The Banjolele in Morris Minor* is the 'odd one out' in my trio of instruments. Unlike both the *Carrot Grating Ukulele* and *The Panjo*, it doesn't incorporate materials one would associate with the kitchen. Essentially, I made this instrument to 'cut my teeth' in gaining some of the skills needed to make a skinned string instrument.

Skills learned in the making of the banjolele have been very useful when creating *The Panjo*, which is a five-string banjo with a full-length neck. *The Panjo* has a tailpiece made from a fork and also uses a copper-bottomed frying pan base which acts as the resonator (Figure 4). A skin was added to the instrument by using a tambourine body as a stretcher. I made clip-on tensioners to tighten the skin to the frying pan rim. Many trials were needed before the action – the distance of the strings from the neck – was correct for comfortable playing. The neck was lengthened by adding in a small block to ensure that the bridge was in the correct position for the instrument to play in tune (Figure 5).

My intention is to create a larger collection of kitchen-themed instruments in order to work towards a future performance and video work. The concept is to take an ironical look at the current obsession with both reality



Figure 4. Jane Venis, *The Panjo* in progress, 2015.



Figure 5. Jane Venis, *The Panjo* in progress, 2015.

television cooking programmes and talent quests, with a view to making a rather absurd connection between the two. This idea is still in the development stage; however, my intention is that the work will be resolved in time to become part of the Forrester Gallery exhibition.

The body of work discussed in this article exemplifies the tension between instrument design and contemporary art practice, communicated through the creation of objects that not only critique popular culture but reference the history of the instruments. This Artist's Page forms a snapshot of evolving works a year out from the exhibition.

Jane Venis is a sculptor, musician and installation artist. As part of her practice she is a maker of musical instruments that are made with repurposed or unexpected materials. Some of her instruments are particularly impractical, allowing her to reference the Japanese art of Chindogu to comment on popular culture. Jane is a Principal Lecturer in the School of Design at Otago Polytechnic and supervises students in the postgraduate programmes in both the School of Design and the Dunedin School of Art. She has an MFA from the Dunedin School of Art and a PhD in Fine Arts from Griffith University Queensland.

- 1 Kenji Kawakami, *Chindogu: 101 Unuseless Japanese Inventions* (New York: WW Norton, 1995).
- 2 Jim Tranquada and John King, *The Ukulele: A History* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 2012).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Rhodri Marsden, "Am I the Only Person in the World who Hates the Ukulele?" *The Independent*, 16 June 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/rhodri-marsden-am-i-the-only-person-in-the-world-who-hates-the-ukulele-9553063.html> [accessed 20 June 2015].
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Kawakami, *Chindogu*.
- 7 Jane Venis, "Chindogu: Not so Useless after all," *The International Journal of the Arts in Society*, 55 (2011), 189-202.
- 8 Karen Linn, *That Half-barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Bob Flesher, *The Banjo: Our American Heritage*, <http://www.drhorsehair.com/history.htm>. [accessed 20 June 2015].
- 12 Cecelia Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study of Folk Traditions* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995).