

Are You Using That?

Brooklyn artist-musician Ken Butler does amazing things
with stuff people throw away BY LESLIE GILBERT ELMAN



**Ken Butler and his
Torso Cello, made
from his mom's
1950s-era dress
form, make beautiful
music together.**

YOU COULD CALL KEN BUTLER AN “URBAN beachcomber.” Oh, sure, there was the time he picked up a horseshoe-crab shell on the beach at New York’s Shelter Island, and he probably wouldn’t pass up an interesting piece of driftwood. But he makes his best finds on the sidewalks of Brooklyn, which is where, he’ll tell you proudly, he found much of the furniture in his studio, including a classic Marcel Breuer chair (missing one arm).

Bicycle seats and baby-carriage wheels, broom handles and hockey sticks – these are the things Butler picks up. What he does with them is the essence of his creativity.

From such discarded items Butler builds musical instruments. Then he plays them, beautifully. Who would have imagined that an instrument built from a cane, a tennis racket, a switch plate, an egg slicer, and other random objects could sound so sweet?

Though Butler is always looking for new materials, the Brooklyn studio where he has lived and worked for 14 years is remarkably free of clutter. “I’m very, very picky about what I drag home,” he says. Yet the many electric-fan casings in his workshop indicate that he can’t always resist the urge to stockpile.

“People assume that I choose objects for their sound,” he says, “but what attracts me is completely visual. It’s the relationship that the object has to the shape of a stringed instrument – the head, the neck, and the body.”

In Butler’s hands, the horseshoe-crab shell from Shelter Island became the body of a violin. A wood rifle stock became a cello. An old metal shovel with musical strings attached can be plucked and strummed like a guitar.

“These pieces are not just dust-gathering icons,” says Butler, who has one of his hybrid instruments in the permanent collection of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. “I make them sing for their supper.”

Growing up in Portland, Oregon, Butler was

a serious student of the viola for two years, but he pursued the visual arts in college and earned an MFA in painting in 1977. He built his first hybrid instrument, a violin made from an ax, in 1978.

Then came the question: What to play on such an instrument? Butler answered by composing his own scores, influenced by jazz, funk, blues, and world music. "In live performance I improvise, as well," he says.

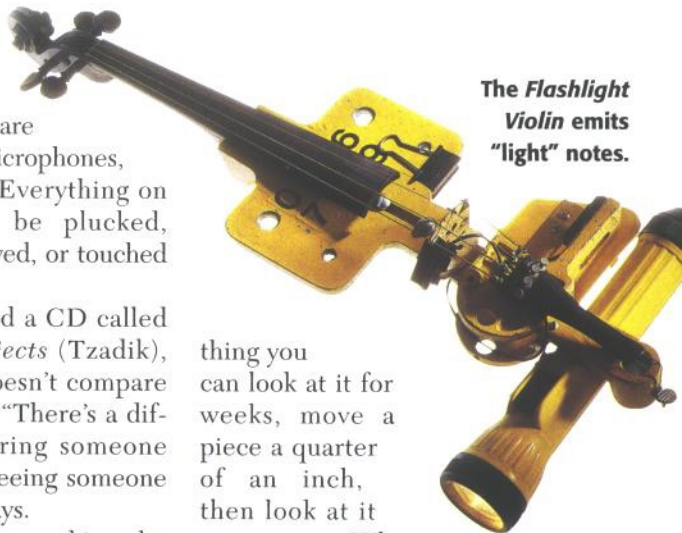


One of Butler's guitars comes with its own case.

"Since the instruments are amplified by contact microphones, it can get quite loud. Everything on the instrument can be plucked, tapped, strummed, bowed, or touched for its vibrations."

He also has released a CD called *Voices of Anxious Objects* (Tzadik), though he admits it doesn't compare to a live performance: "There's a difference between hearing someone play an umbrella and seeing someone play an umbrella," he says.

Butler says he enjoys making the instruments, but enjoys playing them even more. "Building the instruments and performing live gives my life a creative range," he says. "When you're building some-



The Flashlight Violin emits "light" notes.

thing you can look at it for weeks, move a piece a quarter of an inch, then look at it some more. When you perform live you have to deal with the acoustics and the vibe in that space at that time. It's a contrast to the fastidiousness of construction." ♦

Ken Butler's hybrid instruments are also on permanent display at the Knitting Factory in New York City, 74 Leonard Street, tel. 212-219-3006, Web site www.knittingfactory.com.