



# The Art of the Sing Along

Can one man turn modern airport terminals into '70s-style campfire scenes? *And should he?*

BY TIM BROOKES PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADAM VOORHES

SO THERE I WAS at an airport in Washington, D.C., the perfect modern traveler. I stowed my cell phone, plugged my laptop into an outlet, and pulled a Voyage-Air travel guitar from its nifty padded black backpack. I hinged the neck into the traditional straight-out position, tightened the nut that held everything in place, and began playing "Someone to Watch Over Me." I was actually hoping for someone to do more than watch. I was hoping someone would gather around and start singing along.

Thanks to the limitless financial resources and intellectual curiosity of the editors of *Spirit*, I was trying a grand sociological experiment, one that might offer profound insight into contemporary American culture or possibly get me arrested.

The plan went like this. I'm a writer, but I'm also a guitarist. One of my latest books was, in fact, a history of the guitar in America. I grew up in the era of the sing-along as the party was winding down—not "Kumbaya," I hasten to add, but the Beatles, the Stones, Dylan, Simon and

## Air Guitars

These axes for all occasions let you take your show on the road.



### BEST OVERALL Voyage-Air VAD-1 Dreadnought

\$1,595, voyageair-guitar.com  
**PRO** Always in tune, always cool.  
**CON** Could slow you down at the airport, since excessive guitar coolness brings excessive passerby ogling.



### MOST PORTABLE Miranda Guitars S-250

\$1,295, miranda-tech.com  
**PRO** Fits into a violin-sized case. Despite not having a solid body, feels remarkably stable and plays well through built-in pickup into headphones or amp.  
**CON** I'd hate to lose a crucial nut or bolt in Death Valley.

Garfunkel, James Taylor. Nowadays, amateurs rarely sing in public and almost never with strangers. So here was my challenge. What would happen if I played to groups of ordinary Americans in an anonymous public space—say, in airports? How would people react? Would they gather round, link arms, and sing as if it were still 1970? Would they ignore me? Report me to security? Spit?

And what would their responses say about today's America? Is the spirit of the sing-along still alive? Or are we too busy or too plain hostile these days? And is the fact that we ever sang in public with strangers a sign of how innocent we were or how naïve? Armed with a travel guitar, a set of acrylic fingernails, and a degree of optimism my friends and family found baffling, I aimed to find out the answers to these questions—one airport at a time.

I STARTED IN D.C., glad for the chance to try out my Voyage-Air. Though you can buy a travel guitar for almost any occasion these days (see "Air Guitars," left), the \$1,595 Voyage-Air VAD-1 Dreadnought is the best on the market. Made by Harvey Leach, it hinges where the neck joins the body. A single bolt holds or releases the neck, and the truly amazing thing—surprising even its creator—is that when you put the guitar together, it's already in tune.

If I had owned a Voyage-Air back at college, I would have been the coolest person imaginable. This guitar was cool even at airport security. The X-ray belt stopped. Went back. Stopped. Transportation Security Administration workers gathered around to look. Sometimes the TSA team insisted I open up the case so they could see how the guitar worked. One X-ray guy peered at his screen and said with a straight face, "I'm sorry, Sir. Your guitar's broken." Whenever I assembled it or broke down the Voyage-Air, women gasped, men got excited over the engineering. But would they break into song?

In D.C., the first challenge was finding a quiet corner. Piped music, people talking on cell phones, a guy yelling into his Bluetooth—the very notion of a quiet corner has become an anachronism these days.

I thought I'd start out by looking for another guitarist, strike up conversation, see if we could play together. Soon enough, I saw what I was after: the classic black pressed-cardboard case of the beater guitar and, sitting guard over it, a

woman in her mid-20s, reading *Allure* magazine. The glossy magazine surprised me. I had expected *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. But no matter.

To work. I unzipped the black case, did the lock-and-load on the Voyage-Air, and began to play, carefully not looking in the woman's direction. As a general practice, I prefer to start out quietly, playing instrumentals. So I began with what I call my sun cycle: "I'll Follow the Sun," "Here Comes the Sun" and "Summertime." A middle-aged couple in the next row turned slightly so as to hear better, but otherwise I might just have been picking my teeth as far as Ms. *Allure* was concerned.

Finally, the mystery was solved. A tall guy in beach gear and with six-day stubble, clearly the boyfriend sent off to buy a latte, strolled over and sat down next to *Allure*. It was his guitar. At once I knew how this scene would play out. Sure enough, Boyfriend cocked an ear in my direction, casually glanced at the Voyage-Air, and fell straight into the abyss of Guitar Envy. Nothing would make him dig out his old beater Yamaha and play along, especially in front of his girlfriend. As soon as the next boarding announcement sounded, the two of them made a big show of getting on a flight to Denver.

Twenty more minutes of playing and still no response. Nobody even looked in my direction. What was I doing wrong? Was I too old for this game? I started formulating increasingly desperate plans for my next airport gigs. Plan E: Dye hair. Plan F: Wear baseball cap. Plan G: Wear baseball cap backwards. Plan H: Wear my pants so low I trip over my belt.

Paranoia set in. A gorgeous blonde sat down three seats away and glanced in my direction. I knew what she was thinking: *If only my mom had come on this trip with me, I could have totally hooked her up with this old guy.*

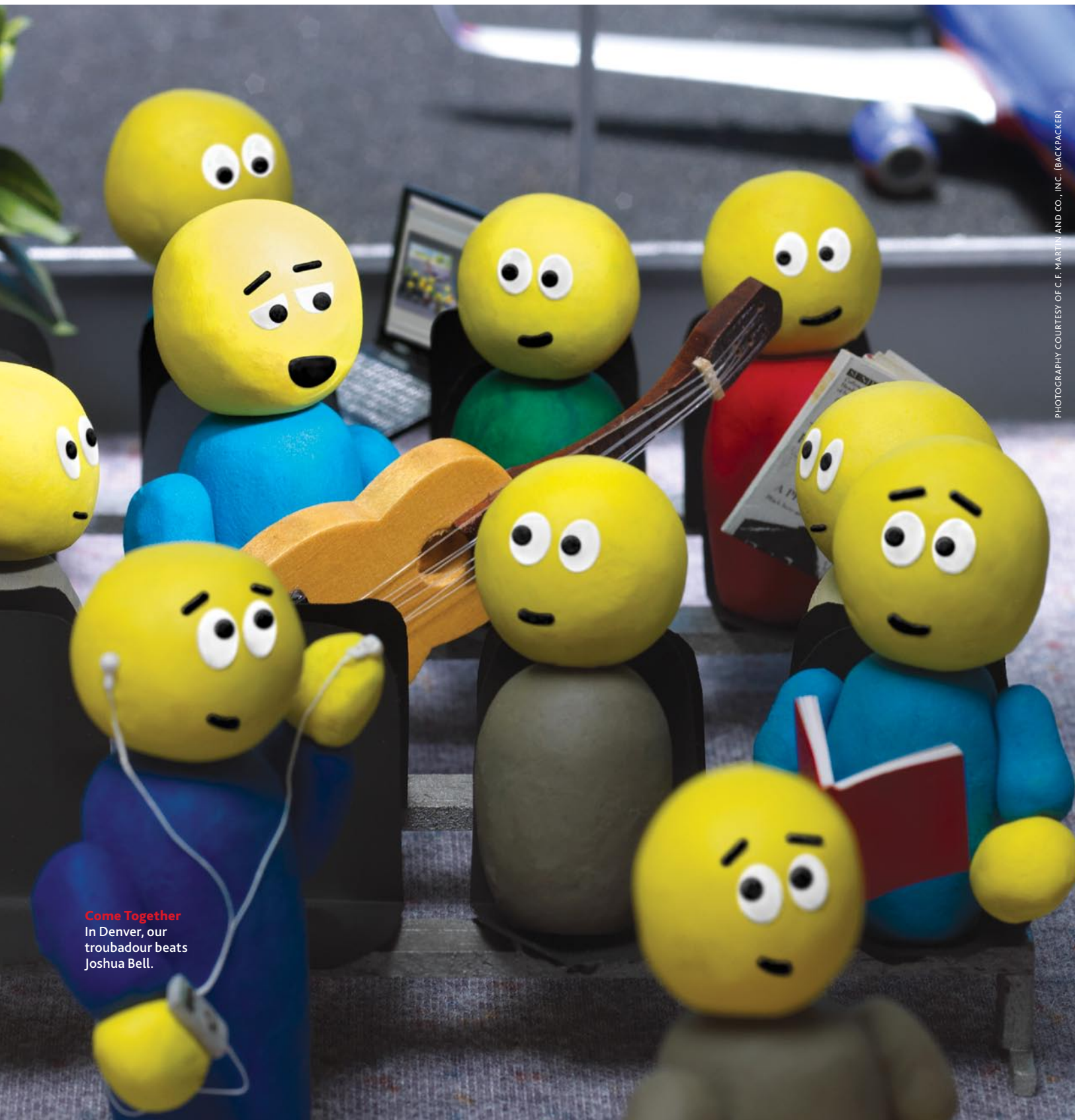
But over the following weeks I came to see that my major problem had nothing to do with age. My competition was other music, other sounds, other entertainment. Thanks to the Voyage-Air and its rivals, it has never been easier to take a guitar with you. But then again, it has never been easier to take any music with you. When you can slip an iPod and your favorite 2,000 songs into your pocket, does anyone need a singing guitarist?

Bluesman Buddy Guy says he heard music only once a year growing up in Louisiana, when

### Savage Beast

The soothing powers of music fail in D.C.





PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF C.F. MARTIN AND CO., INC. (BACKPACKER)

**Come Together**  
In Denver, our troubadour beats Joshua Bell.

a couple of roaming guitarists came through his way around Christmas. Even half a century later, music still had a home-grown quality. When I first flew to the United States on a student charter flight in 1973, the only music available onboard came from the four guitars that we passed around the cabin. When I set off to hitchhike across America, my only competition was AM radio and an occasional eight-track. People were used to the shortage of piped music. If they didn't play an instrument they could sing along. And even if they had voices like donkeys with toothache, they still recognized the value of live music and appreciated the effort.

Now the universal availability of recorded music makes live musicians less valuable, less necessary. If Buddy Guy had had Internet access, a laptop, an iPod, and a stack of CDs, would he have bothered going to see a couple of down-at-heel roaming musicians? I doubt it. I packed the Voyage-Air into its nifty backpack and headed to Philly.

MY GATE IN PHILADELPHIA was a dumping-ground for out-of-service gate desks and trolleys for the handicapped. My audience: several dozen would-be travelers wearing a common scowl, slumped in unparallel rows. News of a shark attack on the TV. I couldn't figure out where to play; gate-area geometry is without focus, no gathering-place, no hearth.

I sat in a corner with my back to a wall and began to play "One Note Samba" and a piece of my own, a Tom Jobim theme turned into a waltz. People went on reading their papers, working on their laptops, scowling at the carpet. One girl shot me a smile—appreciation or pity?—while her boyfriend played games on his phone. So much for the City of Brotherly Love.

My confidence pretty much shot, I chanced on an article in *The Washington Post* about an experiment similar to mine that won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. Joshua Bell—one of the world's great musicians and a youthful, handsome dude—played at a Washington, D.C., Metro station during morning rush hour. There he was, an international celebrity, playing one of the greatest violins ever made, a \$3.5 million Strad that was once owned by Fritz Kreisler. He sawed away for 43 minutes. More than a thousand people walked past him—the *Post* recorded everything on hidden cameras—but only seven stopped to listen. Seven out of a thou-

sand. Nothing to do with skill, then, or youth, or good looks. I could beat seven.

BOISE HAS A SMALL AIRPORT, with views of the snow-dusted Boise Mountains along one wall of windows and the more spectacular Owyhee Mountains along the other. *John Denver* country, surely, I thought. *Flight attendants dressed as park rangers. Passengers toasting marshmallows around a barbecue pit at Gate 14A.*

No such luck. I was just getting into my slide-guitar arrangement of "(Sittin' on) the Dock of the Bay"—slide always turns a few heads because of its novelty value—when a middle-aged guy got up and walked over toward me, digging a coin out of his pocket. Just as I was getting ready to grin and say, "Shucks, no, but you can join in," he stopped at some furniture near me I hadn't really noticed. He put in the coin, pulled back a knob, and snapped. Pinball. I couldn't believe it. It could have been worse: The machine right next to me was Ms. Pac-Man.

Was I just playing the wrong music? Feeling desperate, I sought advice from an expert: folksinger, hobo musician, and friend Rik Palieri. As he sees it, the well of American song was once centuries deep, and folksingers in the '60s could draw on tunes and motifs and idioms going way back. Now, he tells me, even the Newport Folk Festival has cut out traditional folk music because nobody wants it anymore. "I'll tell you how deep that musical well is now," he says. "The Eagles."

Though Palieri has traveled and sung a lot more than I have, I can't agree with him. Last summer I joined my daughters for a day at a camp in the Adirondacks where my 20-year-old was a counselor and my 12-year-old was a camper. The camp had no cell phone reception and no Internet connection. The kids were going out of their minds.

Eventually another counselor and I dug out our guitars and started the perennial search for a common repertoire. To my amazement, the kids knew and wanted the same stuff I played when I was in college: the Beatles, Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel. One of them, to my utter disbelief, even knew some Leonard Cohen. The biggest hit was "Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavor (On the Bedpost Overnight)?"

It was fascinating. The Golden Age of Songwriting had somehow expired in the mid-'70s, as if the advent of eight-, 16-, and 22-track produc-



**BEST ELECTRIC**  
**Traveler Escape MK-II Steel** \$700, [travelerguitar.com](http://travelerguitar.com)  
**PRO** Easy to play, nice sound through headphones or amp.  
**CON** Lighter than most electrics but still a weighty piece of luggage.



**BEST STREET CRED**  
**Martin Steel String Backpacker Guitar** \$309, [martinguitar.com](http://martinguitar.com)  
**PRO** The distinctive wedge shape. Nothing says, "I have hiked Mount Hood" better than that.  
**CON** Tinny sound and fairly hard to hold. The guitar evolved a waist for a reason, people!

tion had turned popular music into a hi-gloss spectator sport. The kids knew the current Top 40 songs, of course, and a few from the last three decades, but not as sing-alongs. And they knew more songs by the Beatles than everyone else combined. My familiarity with the Lennon-McCartney oeuvre gave me hope.

Thus encouraged, I decided to try my experiment in a new venue. I hopped on a plane and headed southeast.

MY LUCK BEGAN TO CHANGE in Denver. In an anonymous area beside the moving walkway, I saw a young mother struggling with two unhappy children. I knew I'd hit my spot. There's something deeply satisfying about playing "God Bless the Child" to a fussy 6-month-old and watching him settle down next to his big sister, both agog.

My small crowd—nine, Joshua Bell, count 'em—got enthusiastic. A college student on her way to Malibu for spring break started humming along. A middle-aged man broke away from his cell phone to say, "Cool! I didn't know we had in-flight entertainment." Another guy suggested we fire up GarageBand on my laptop and have an impromptu

as three hours late. In short, everyone needed cheering up.

I got out the guitar, and at once people wanted to look at it, to hold it. Two college students and I sang "Yesterday" and "Here Comes the Sun." I sang old Boy Scout nonsense songs I learned from my father, and as always the big hit was "Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavor?" It was a real live sing-along, circa 2008.

When planes started landing shortly before midnight, more than a dozen people came over to say thanks and to introduce me to their exhausted friends and family—now staggering out of the gate area—as the guy who had kept their spirits up during the long wait.

I DECIDED TO WRAP UP my epic research project in San Francisco, surely the most music-friendly major city in the nation.

Settling at one of the less crowded gate areas, I got into musical conversation with an elderly couple heading to Palm Springs. "I didn't know we were going to have live entertainment!" they said. The repeat joke was a clue: Nobody expects live music.

*This is the inexplicable alchemy of live music. Four or five complete strangers can get together around some instruments for a couple of hours. Some of them may remember that evening as a highlight of their lives.*

recording session, people singing backup, percussing the backs of chairs like maniacs.

I'd discovered the secret. What makes people want live music is not youth, skill, or repertoire, but need. The more people need music, the more important it is.

Back home in Vermont, I went to the airport to pick up my family. They were flying back from their vacation, and a weather disaster was in progress: ice, snow, and freezing rain all up and down the East Coast. People packed into our tiny airport waiting for flights as much

I played a few things they didn't know, trying to find common ground. The pair said they found my music "soothing," an adjective I used to equate with "soporific" and take as an insult but that I now accept as a compliment.

Then I hit their groove: "Bluesette," "Moonlight in Vermont," "The Girl From Ipanema," "Someone to Watch Over Me." Another couple of a similar vintage settled nearby, feet tapping, and for a moment I was tempted to generalize about generations. But then things crossed over: Two young women joined us, then a young Japanese couple, then

a grad student who recognized "(Sit-tin' on) the Dock of the Bay" and was fascinated by the Voyage-Air's breakdownability. By now we had—well, not exactly a sing-along but at least a small concert going for eight or 10 people. The group created its own gravity. More people drifted over. I played as if I were playing in a restaurant, as the jets crawled past the window and parked.

This is the inexplicable alchemy of live music. Four or five people, maybe not even very talented people, maybe complete strangers with almost nothing in common, can get together around some instruments for a couple of hours. Some of them may remember that evening 20 years later, may remember it as a highlight of their lives, may remember those strangers as if they were closer than family.

On the way home from San Francisco, the Voyage-Air case caught a flight attendant's eye and she asked me to play. It didn't work out in the end, but her request did give me an idea.

Imagine, as the main cabin doors close, the following announcement: "Thank you for flying Southwest's Air Guitar. This is a live-music flight. As soon as our beverage service is concluded, the flight attendants will produce a guitar, or a banjo, or perhaps even an accordion, and the in-flight sing-along will begin.

"Rows 1 to 8 will do country, rows 9 to 17 will do folk, and rows 18 to 23 will do love songs. Lyrics can be found in the in-flight magazine.

"Jimmy Buffet fans, please request pre-departure beverage service. Heavy metal fans should proceed at once to the cargo hold."

Hey, it could happen. I just read an account by a woman who claimed that during a flight she took in 1980 a bagpiper played "Pistol Packin' Mama." With that kind of in-flight entertainment, who needs movies?

*Tim Brookes is the author of Guitar: An American Life. He is currently trying to avoid returning the Voyage-Air to its rightful owner.*