

HACKING

Toys, bugs and rock 'n' roll

Joanne Baker

"I like listening to insects," says Thomas Truax. A nominee for Britain's 2008 Indy Music Award for best live act, Truax is making a name for himself by building his own instruments from gramophone horns and pull-string toys. He sings about ants, the ozone layer, the Internet and dogs howling at the Moon.

Truax grew up in Colorado and became fascinated with insect sounds. "I was at a camp in the jungle in Mexico and I heard this insect that sounded like a Volkswagen that couldn't get started," he says. Truax explains how he also records bat chirps near his home in London, editing them to make sample loops.

One of Truax's songs tells the story of an injured butterfly that has escaped being pinned to a specimen board by an entomologist. To evoke the sound of its wings, he plays the guitar with a hand-held rotary fan, creating fluttering arpeggios. To avoid working with difficult musicians, Truax builds and plays his own instruments, such as a drum machine crafted from spinning fly-wheels and tiny cymbals.

Other instruments are created from reclaimed junk. Truax is inspired by toys and simple experiments, such as the two-way 'telephones' kids make from string and paper cups. On stage, he sings down a gramophone horn that is wired up with a Slinky to distort his voice, or he amplifies the percussion of clockwork and the vibrations of a single string held taut by an audience member. "I want to make people think about what music is," he says.

"We are at a point in history where computers can do so much but people are losing touch with tactile things," he says. If electronic instruments and digital editing are depersonalizing sound, Truax is making his own noise. ■

Joanne Baker is *Nature's* Books & Arts editor.

Thomas Truax's single *Stranger On A Train* is out on SL Records (UK) on 31 March, and will be online from 14 April (www.thomastruax.com).



C. SAUNDERS

Thomas Truax crafts instruments from junk to create a new sound inspired by insect noises.