

To the beat of a very different drum

Ken Butler brings his unique art and music to Clackamas

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Staff Writer

For almost 25 years, Ken Butler has been creating instruments made from axes, telephones, gardening tools and a plethora of other unusual items. He has formed a career around his unique talent, and his work has sent him from Amsterdam to Thailand and finally to Clackamas Community College.

On May 11, as a tribute to the artists that recently adorned our campus with their engaging sculptures, Ken Butler took the stage. His brother John Butler accompanied him on the guitar, while Martin Zarzar played the drums. Butler calls his creations "hybrid instruments. Most of my instruments come from off the street," he admits. His inventions are not

only a hybrid of instrument and strange object, but also of string and percussion.

The first number was called "Par 12," and Butler played an instrument made from a golf club and one guitar string. He picked the string to produce a whiny guitar sound, and banged on various parts of the club to create rhythm. His second song, "Untengo," was played on a two-stringed violin made from the end of a cane. He then played "Building a Desert Wizard" on a small snow shovel that he'd formed into a guitar.

From there, Butler's instruments grew more unusual and elaborate. His next tune was played on a combination of a cane, a metal tennis racket, a vegetable slicer, some hairpins, and various other items. I was amazed by the myriad of different sounds that this conglomeration emitted.

The finale was entitled "Icon Ergonomics," and Butler began it playing a hockey stick attached to a wooden tennis racket and adorned with bits of saw blades, a plastic comb, a spring-style door stopper, and several other small objects. I heard noises resembling car horns, old-fashioned telephones, and some almost human sounds. Throughout the last song, Butler switched instruments frequently, playing an umbrella, a violin bow, a knife, a paint brush, tooth brush, the zipper on his pants, his own head and nose, and a "viberband" (a long, flat piece of rubber that sounds amazingly like a trumpet.)

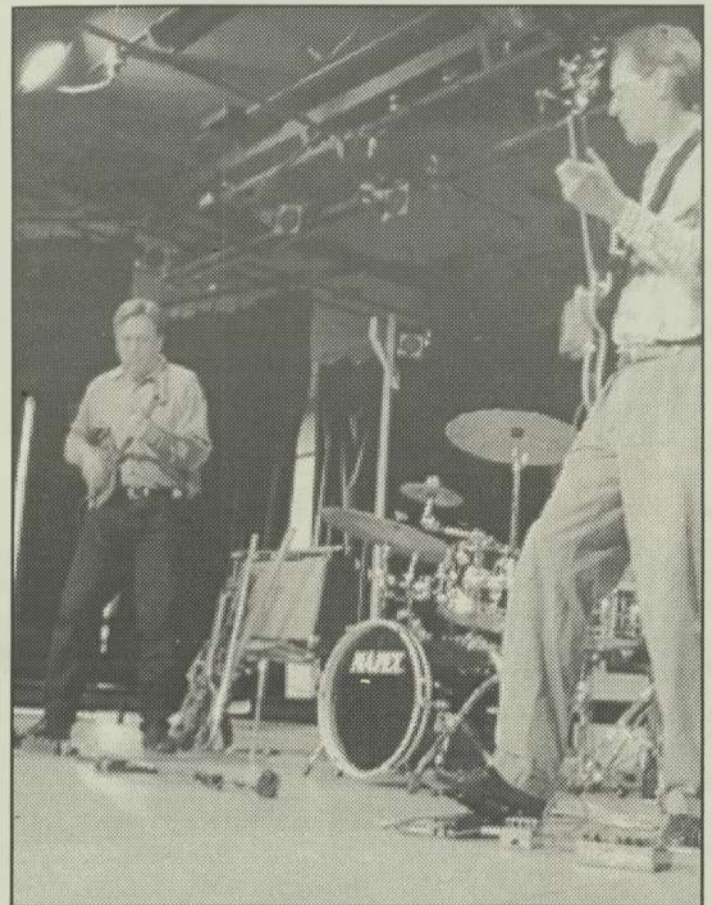
Following the performance, Butler presented a slide show containing pictures of instruments made from bike seats, plastic guns, coat hangers, chairs, sleds, pool cues, and

all sorts of other unexpected objects. When Butler is asked if all of his instruments are playable he responds, "what is playable?" or "what is music?" Butler's career in creating hybrid instruments began when he noticed that many objects resemble the bodies of instruments. He

admits that his work is created primarily for visual reasons, and often refers to his instruments as "sculptures".

You can visit Butler's website, Hybrid Visions, at www.mind-spring.com/~kbhybrid/.

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Above: Ken Butler (left) plays a tune on one of his hybrid instruments made from a small snow shovel.

At left: Ken Butler (right) jams on one of his hybrid instruments with his brother John (left) and Martin Zarzar (center)

Photos by J.J. Pearson/The Clackamas Print

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