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NATURAL ROCK STARS: Texas eco-musicians inspire young naturalists through music By Tolly Moseley

[The full article also includes profiles on Bill Oliver and Lucas Miller]

Purly Gates



When it comes to the environment, Gates uses her musical know-how somewhat differently. She starts with recycled materials, a do-it-yourself spirit and a burly set of power tools.

“Well, you need something to drill through all that plastic!” laughs Gates. “Seriously though, I like showing girls how to work a drill. Boys, too, of course, but girls sometimes have this idea that they’re not supposed to ... and I change that thinking.”

I went to one of Gates' instrument-making workshops at the Wimberley Community Center, where a couple of parents, a table full of youngsters and I crafted Brazilian cuícas: instruments that sound either like stepping on a creaky wooden stoop or the mating call of an amorous bullfrog.

"Does anyone know where plastic comes from?" she asks the table. "Petroleum. The same stuff they make oil out of," she explains. A few pairs of wide eyes stare at her.

"It's true! Weird but true," she assures us, right before busting out an impromptu percussive beat on her cuíca. "And I figure, why not use that oil stuff again? Make some music with it?"

Gates' easy banter is a quality she picked up performing everywhere from the Texas Book Festival to Disney World. She narrates her craft lessons with stories, telling us how she got the water for our cuícas by traveling to the Amazon River. When it's passed around for our use, we are so careful we might as well be handling liquid gold.

"You can use everyday things for music, you know, like jug bands," she says. I grin immediately, thinking about Gates with a washtub bass, plucking away in suspenders and a newsboy cap.

"Is this a jug?" one girl asks, pointing to her new cuíca.

"Nope, that was a bucket of almond butter from Wheatsville," says Gates, referring to an Austin grocery store. "But we're giving it a new existence."

The girl shares a mischievous eyebrow raise with the boy next to her, and I hear her whisper to him: "We have buckets at home. Like a hundred."

They giggle conspiratorially, thinking about all the old buckets they are about to surprise into a new musical existence.