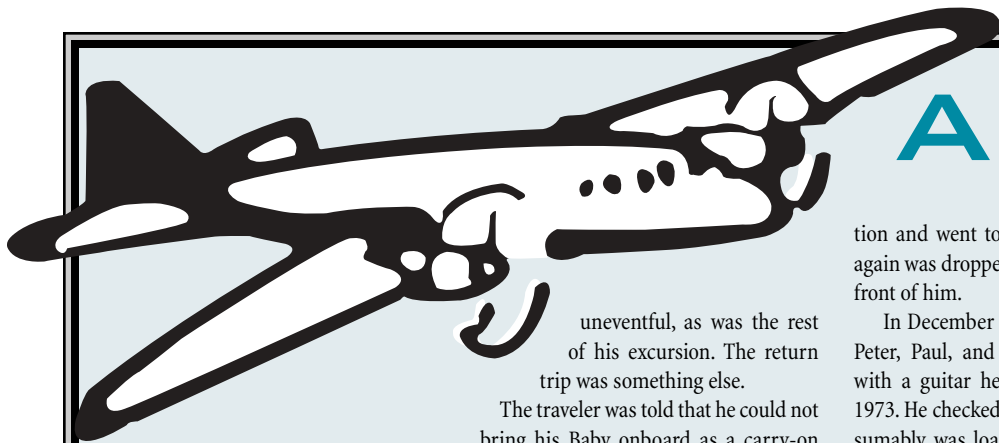


WOOD & STEEL

A Mid-Summer Dream

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It's here – *Sounds of Wood&Steel 3!*



AIR GUITAR

BY DAVID KAYE

Usually, when we say that changes are in the air, we don't mean it quite this literally. Responding to lobbying by the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has adopted new guidelines by which guitars can be considered carry-on luggage. According to the new policy, which took effect January 24, 2003, musicians are allowed to carry a guitar onboard *in addition* to the current limit of one carry-on bag and one personal item.

In its diligent pursuit of improvements in the way the airlines deal with travelers lugging musical instruments, the AFM also had petitioned the House Transportation Committee and representatives of the airline industry. In theory, the relaxed rules would seem to mark a sharp turning point in the long-contested struggle between the airline industry and guitarists who want to keep their instruments safe and close at hand while airborne. For years, this has been less a pitched battle than a continuous contretemps with no clear-cut solution to please all parties.

But if the new policy provides some much-needed clarity, don't pop the Dom Perignon just yet; all regulations are at the mercy of the people who implement and enforce them, and airline policies have a history of being open to individual interpretation.

Flying commercial airlines with one's guitar always has been a risky and unpredictable experience. The policies and procedures by which the airlines govern "guitar travel" can seem murky, even arbitrary. It's entirely possible that the rules applied to one flight won't be adhered to for the *next* flight, even if it's the return leg of a round-trip.

True story: recently, a gentleman was flying with his Baby Taylor. He encountered no problems carrying it onboard for the outbound leg of the trip, and was able to stow the 3/4-size guitar in the overhead compartment. The flight was

uneventful, as was the rest of his excursion. The return trip was something else.

The traveler was told that he could not bring his Baby onboard as a carry-on and would have to check it — meaning, of course, that it would make the trip in the cargo hold. Same airline, same passenger, same trip, same guitar, different policies. Unfair? Seemingly. Actionable on the traveler's part? Nope.

As with referees officiating from a rulebook, guidelines are subject to "judgement calls" at the airport level — especially at the ticket counter and the boarding gate — and that gray area can make flying with a guitar uncertain and frustrating. After 9/11, heightened security measures at our nation's airports exacerbated the situation to the point that many players wondered if their instruments would survive, let alone win, the airlines-versus-guitars battle. Let's look at another real-life example.

A legendary folk musician was told he couldn't carry-on his guitar, even though he'd done it many times before. After a long "discussion" with an airline employee, he relented and checked his guitar as baggage. Because the discussion was protracted, the conveyer-truck had long since left the area for parts unknown, leaving the guitar at the mercy of manual handling.

Distraught, but with no other options available to him, the musician boarded the plane. His window seat gave him a prime location from which to watch the baggage handler attempt to heave his guitar into the waiting cargo hold. Undaunted after missing on his first try, the handler picked the guitar case off the tarmac and "slam-dunked" it into the cargo hold.

The musician could do nothing but watch in horror, but the experience wasn't over. When he reached his destina-

tion and went to retrieve his guitar, it again was dropped — this time right in front of him.

In December 2000, Peter Yarrow (of Peter, Paul, and Mary) was traveling with a guitar he'd been playing since 1973. He checked the guitar, which presumably was loaded into the airliner's cargo hold. Yarrow never saw it again. "It's been traumatic," Yarrow told the *Washington Post*. "The way we make music is so wed to the instrument."

Lest we appear to proffer a blanket indictment of the airline industry or its employees on the subject of guitar security, it's only fair to point out that the vast majority of guitars checked at the counter do not suffer any kind of damage. But it also is true that your Taylor might be at its most vulnerable when its only travel companions

guitar and sending it on its not-so-merry way down that serial guitar killer, the conveyor belt, which winds through a cavernous maze that would excite any Tolkien fan.

Those conveyors are designed to carry suitcases full of clothes, hard-plastic golf-bag containers, duffel bags, and boxes of souvenirs, not carefully constructed guitars made from highly figured maple or rosewood. The baggage handler on the other end of that belt doesn't know (and probably wouldn't care) that you thoroughly wash your hands before even touching your guitar, that you meticulously monitor the humidity level in your guitar, that after playing it you return the guitar to its case as gently as you would place a newborn baby in a crib.

Airline staffers have a lot to do in a short amount of time, and they don't have the luxury of discriminating among various types of containers, let alone of worrying about the delicate nature of their contents.

Travelers who derive security from an airline's liability insurance would be well advised to remember that there is a good reason why airlines refer to the coverage's "Limits of Liability". Just ask performing songwriter Don Dunn, who not long ago boarded a flight from San

Diego to Vienna, Austria with Taylor 915ce in tow.

Things went bad from the beginning, when the flight was delayed for 90 minutes. Twenty minutes after liftoff, the passengers heard a loud bang — the interior upper bulkhead had buckled and was protruding several inches into the cabin. The plane made an unscheduled stop at LAX in Los Angeles, and from there all the passengers were re-routed to Vienna via the German carrier, Lufthansa.

Upon arriving in Vienna, Dunn nervously waited at the airport's baggage carousel for his one suitcase of personal belongings and his 915ce. He wait-

ed some more. Finally, exhausted and battling a sense of dread, he gave up and went to his hotel. The next day, his suitcase was located and delivered, in perfect condition, to his hotel. When the 915ce was delivered 30 hours later, its case was severely damaged. Holding his breath, Dunn opened the case to find a grisly mesh of wire and wood.

As anguish over the destruction of his Taylor mixed with the very practical urgency of being without a guitar at the start of a European tour, Dunn sought recompense in the insurance he'd purchased through Lufthansa. When he inquired about receiving reimbursement for his "kindling", he was astonished to learn that the airline's liability was measured at only \$23 per kilogram, or approximately \$10 per pound. The total reimbursement would come to about \$250, roughly five percent of the guitar's value, perhaps enough to cover replacing the case. After much petitioning and letter-writing to the airline's German headquarters, Dunn was able to get an extra few hundred dollars from the company, hardly enough to offset the cost of a new guitar.

Unfortunately, most airlines have similar policies in place. Travelers are urged to check with individual carriers for precise limits to liabilities. It also is wise to investigate "excess valuations" and other available insurance options. We asked Taylor clinician Dan Crary to weigh in on this matter. Crary, a globe-trotting picker who has logged innumerable miles over several decades, recounted one of his heart-stoppers for our Winter 2000 issue ("Travel Travails 2").

"The small-potatoes compensation that air carriers offer is industry-wide," Crary says today. "And, it's a given that if the handlers run over your guitar case, or if it gets caught in the kink of a powerful conveyer belt, not even a good case is going to prevent its getting busted. The only real answer is to travel with an expendable guitar, one that is insured by your homeowner's policy or a special policy from a local musicians' union or other sources."

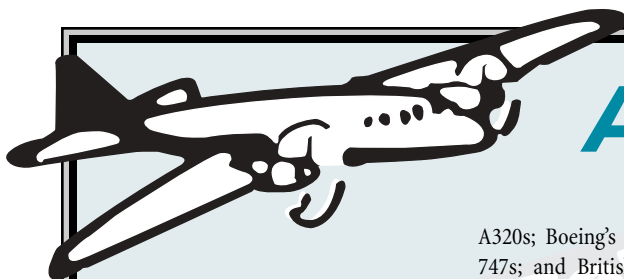
Certainly, leaving a dream guitar at home is a sure-fire way to prevent it from being damaged, destroyed, even lost. But, frankly, we've always been a lit-

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between airports are other people's bags, when the only humans who touch it are baggage handlers.

One can't assume that airline/airport staffers are aware either of the value of a Taylor or that acoustic instruments must be handled with care. The person who prepares your boarding pass can't tell the difference between a \$50 "beach" guitar and a Taylor Presentation Series. His or her job ends with unceremoniously "tagging" your



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the ambivalent about giving that advice, because for many musicians that means leaving their Taylors at home. When people tell us about taking their “other” guitars on the road as a precaution, it’s obvious that they mean it as a compliment — they don’t want anything to happen to their precious Taylors. But Bob Taylor wants his guitars to be *played*, not enshrined, and we think it’s a shame when a player tours with a guitar that isn’t his or her best performance tool. The problem remains getting your Taylor on the plane.

For so long, the pre-boarding period for guitarists has been plagued by anxious uncertainty. If, at the ticket counter or boarding gate, an airline or airport employee prohibited you from carrying your guitar onboard, it would be too late for Plan B; you’d have no choice but to follow their dictates. That’s why the newly relaxed regulations offer a welcome ray of hope, and not just for dues-paying members of the musicians’ union, according to Eric Beers, Contract Administrator in the AFM’s New York offices.

“The new policy covers both union members and non-members alike,” Beers said, “and the latest update is that [AFM] is working with each individual airline to create a consistent policy regarding carry-on musical instruments. As it stands now, each airline has different ‘size requirements’ for carry-on — linear measurements of height-plus-width-plus-length that vary from 42 inches to 56 inches. The AFM wants all airlines to have the same requirements and policies.”

With or without standardized requirements, there are more practical considerations that still might pose problems for high-flying guitars. Travelers are strongly urged to investigate an airline’s space regulations and the specific configuration of the aircraft on which you will be flying. With a few exceptions, today’s larger aircraft feature overhead compartments that are quite large, and they should be sufficient for stowing your guitar.

Such aircraft as McDonnell Douglas’ MD-80s, MD-88s, DC-9s, and DC-10s; Airbus Industries’ A300s, A310s, and

A320s; Boeing’s 737s, 757s, 767s, and 747s; and British Aerospace’s BA-146 generally have ample space in their overhead bins.

Space-challenged aircraft include Boeing’s 777s (and some older 727s); Lockheed’s L-1011s; Canadair’s 100; and various “puddle jumpers” (twin-engine turbo props), including the 18-seat Beechcraft B1900. Of course, it’s a good idea to arrive early at the airport and at your gate so you can be among the first in your boarding group to board the plane, before those compartments get too full.

Taylor clinician Christopher Shaw, who has flown far and wide with his Taylors, offers his perspective.

“It used to be that a Taylor case, regardless of size, would fit in the overhead compartment of any plane larger than a Folker 100,” says Shaw. “Sometimes, an airline pillow was required to prop-up the case to achieve the angle necessary to close the overhead latch, but the case fit nonetheless. I understand that the overheads in some of the larger planes have been reconfigured, making that more difficult, but I haven’t encountered that yet.

“Now, if you have a gig bag with a permanently attached hook, you can hang your guitar between the Brooks Brothers and Armani suits in the first-class closet as you’re entering the plane. Another thing — if you are forced to check your guitar, and it doesn’t come out on the baggage conveyer belt when you arrive at your destination, don’t automatically panic. Check the ‘oversize baggage’ area designated for your carrier; some carriers always deliver guitars there.”

To give travelers at least a *little* more peace of mind prior to departure, the AFM recommends downloading a copy of the new TSA policy letter from the Internet and carrying it with your tickets. AFM members can find it on the union’s website (www.afm.org); non-members can see it at www.local1000.com/pdf/carryon.pdf. If you experience any problems during the screening process, ask to speak to a screening supervisor, and, if necessary, present the downloaded document.

“That TSA letter was deemed necessary because of the heightened security restrictions after 9/11,” said the AFM’s

Beers. “Screeners were just glancing at the musical case — whatever it was — and telling people, ‘No, you cannot bring that onboard.’”

Problem solved? Well, not exactly, or at least not yet. *Wood&Steel* visited numerous airline websites and didn’t find anything about changes to their carry-on guidelines. In fact, we found almost no mention of guitars and other musical instruments. Visits to guitar chat rooms and the independent Taylor Guitar Forum “online community” proved much more fruitful, if not much more conclusive.

One very pleased chatter was e-mailing from the Sea-Tac (Seattle-Tacoma) airport to say that when he told the people at Continental’s ticket counter that he had to carry-on his electric guitar, and that it had to be stored in the upright compartment inside the plane, they responded with a simple, “Okay.”

Another said that he never takes his Taylor on flights because he’d been told he’d have to check it. Instead, he takes an older guitar by another manufacturer. He thinks he might need to buy a Baby Taylor at some point.

**THE MUSICIAN’S
WINDOW SEAT GAVE
HIM A PRIME LOCATION
FROM WHICH TO
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CARGO HOLD.**

There was some agreement that the same Taylor hardshell case that does such a nice job of protecting our guitars works *against* the flying musician in two respects: 1) it’s too big to fit into many overhead compartments, and 2) it *looks* durable and airworthy, so airline personnel are more likely to want to check it. Conversely, say a few pundits, a Taylor gig bag looks more “fragile,” and therefore is more likely to be allowed onboard and handled with more care.

The most sobering caveat came from one person who pointed out that while the TSA’s new directive about carry-on guitars might ease you through security

checkpoints, it won’t automatically get you past the ticket counter or the attendant at the boarding gate — both of whom work for the respective airline and thus are not governed by the TSA.

At this point, if we’re not exactly back at square one, we’re definitely doing the two-steps-forward, one-step-back shuffle. Let’s say, therefore, that you just don’t want to hassle with all this rigmarole. Or, for whatever reason(s), you know in advance that you won’t be able to carry-on your favorite Taylor, and you absolutely *don’t* want to check it. There are other, less-obvious alternatives.

One admittedly expensive option is to purchase a ticket for your six-string companion and let it ride in the seat next to you. Advantages include the never-out-of-sight safety factor; the reduced likelihood that you’ll be stuck next to someone with halitosis who drones on and on about direct-marketing; and the convenience if you get the urge to lead your travel mates in a rollicking chorus of “Kumbaya.”

A less-prohibitive but still not inexpensive option is to enlist a reputable shipping company to ship your guitar to your destination in advance, so it will be waiting for you. This won’t guarantee that your guitar will be treated with care and consideration, but if the hardshell case is placed in a secure box or crate, your chances of receiving it undamaged at the other end are pretty decent.

The boxes we use to ship Taylors to our dealers are ideal for this purpose (in fact, they are specifically designed for that). But dealers rarely keep them in their stores because of their bulk, and we don’t ship empty boxes. Those planning to travel with their Taylors are well advised to contact their local dealer(s) and ask them to save a relatively intact Taylor box from their next shipment of guitars.

Now let’s take the opposite tack and imagine that you have exhausted all the alternatives and are resigned to checking your guitar at the ticket counter. Remember Dan Cray’s caution: even though a Taylor case is of the highest quality and provides excellent protection, it will not defend against *all* unforeseen terrors that lurk in the bowels of airports and airplanes. We asked our own Customer Service department for input on the subject of protecting

your guitar while flying.

“We get this question a lot,” says Glen Wolff. “Flying with your guitar is always risky because baggage handlers toss guitars as if they were suitcases. There is no case that will absolutely protect the guitar from damage, but if you must check your guitar, the best protection is an Air Transit Approved, or ATA case. Those are designed to take more serious abuse than our standard cases.

“Two popular brands of ATA cases are Anvil and Calton. Anvil cases are the large, metal-trimmed cases you typically see used by touring bands. The Calton-style cases are lighter and smaller than the Anvils. They are popular among individual musicians flying with their guitars because they are more easily hand-carried. These cases typically cost anywhere from \$400-\$800.”

Even among our travel-hardened team of Taylor clinicians, there are differences of opinion as to what is the best type of case to use. Some prefer the versatility of a soft “gig-bag”. Others prefer the protection of a hard case. One even espouses using both, in tandem.

“There’s no perfect solution, but any ‘fix’ has to protect the Taylor case,” says Chris Proctor. “I use a padded [Ensolite and fiberfill] nylon gig bag, which zips tightly around my Taylor hardshell cases. And my Taylor cases have added peghead protection, a kind of a foam-and-cloth ‘sandwich’ at the top and bottom. Beyond that, I’m afraid it’s ‘fly and hope,’ because they can run it over, steal it, or lose it at their pleasure.”

Like other Taylor clinicians, Pat Kirtley has traveled the world with his guitars. “My Taylor travels with me in a gig bag, as carry-on luggage. I store it in the overhead compartment. The transition from prop planes to regional jets has meant that there is a lot more room available. Of course, since 9/11, the carriers are as concerned with examining *who* you are as what you are carrying.”

This is where we’d like to wrap up this discussion with a nice, neat conclusion. But, realistically, the fact that the TSA policy is too new, and its repercussions and ramifications too unpredictable, precludes that. Nevertheless, for the first time in a very long time, there’s hope that the days of the discordant duet between guitarists and the airlines might be drawing to a close. ■