

# OUR FAVORITE THINGS

STN writers and extended family share their most cherished objects of musical desire.

By Glenn Weyant



Glenn Weyant with "The Rail"

**My favorite fetish object** *du jour* is a weather worn hunk of ragged edge steel rail that lies baking in my backyard beneath the Arizona sun. It may not look like much to the untrained eye, but to me the narrative it contains is almost as interesting as the sounds it produces when played with bows and implements of mass percussion.

The exact details of this rail's origins are a bit sketchy, but it appears to have been forged about 100 years ago and served in the transportation of trains before being shipped to the U.S./Mexico border where it was welded into a barricade as a deterrent to illegal drug and immigration traffic.

How I came into possession of this sonically pleasing hunk of portable security rail begins with the arrival of Jon Rose and Hollis Taylor to The United States from Australia in July. Jon is an inventor of wonderfully original instruments, an enthusiast of all things bowed and the Les Paul of fence playing. Hollis is also a musician, author, photographer and fence player in her own right. Both were in town as part of a weeklong jaunt to play the newly built border barriers running from California to New Mexico.

Unfortunately, once in Tucson, Hollis found herself up against a sudden and immediate deadline for transcription of a three hour long bird song and could not accompany Jon and I when we set out the following morning at first light.

Our destination was Sasabe, a sleepy port of entry town where Border Patrol, Homeland Security and fence building workers far outnumber the residents living there. It had been two years since I'd played the fences and assorted ephemera in the area as part of my Anta Project recording ([www.sonicanta.com](http://www.sonicanta.com)). Back then the border was mostly a hodge-podge of open space, informal barricades and simple fences. Today, a uniformly sprawling wall of steel tubes, lattice work and so-called "virtual" fences costing millions of American taxpayer dollars is being built. While impacts of the new walls on endangered species and sites of cultural importance in the area are an increasing concern, statistically they have done little to stem the flow of migrants.

As the saying goes: Show me a ten foot wall and I'll show you an eleven foot ladder. Before attempting to play the wall, Jon and I decided to explore the sonic properties of the rail barricades lining either side of the port of entry. These substantial looking barricades are basically short rail segments welded into X-shapes which support longer horizontal rail segments.

All of the rails we played were imprinted with a 1907 or 1908 date and I think the excellent sound quality is attributable to the use of vintage American steel. After hooking up contact mics and searching for sweet spots, we engaged in an improvised duet for

an audience of idling trucks, cars, birds and Mexican nationals waiting for the port of entry to open.

With the sun already burning off the early morning monsoon clouds, we eventually packed up and traveled west down an unmarked dirt road along the border towards the Baboquivian Mountains, a place that is sacred to the native Tohono O'odham.

Along the way dismantled and discarded rail barricades, most likely removed to make room for the new wall, rose up from the earth in odd twisted angles like the scattered ribs of some great beast.

As a sound sculptor always watching for found object instruments, this trash trove was a treasure. Searching through the brush, wary of scorpions, thorns and rattlesnakes, I poked around until I discovered my favorite thing: an easily transportable rail segment capable of producing some elegant tones.

Later that day, after playing the wall with a circling Border Patrol helicopter in accompaniment and being inspected for radiation contamination at a roadside Homeland Security checkpoint, Jon and I headed back to Tucson with the rail safely in tow, a handful of recordings and a powerful thirst for strong margaritas.

I look forward to finding out where the rail's narrative is headed next. \*