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about 6,600 words

The Sluggards

Elson Krause was a typical Guitarro. He had the Rod Stewart shag cut, the earring, and the black T-shirt with the Fab Four walking across the street. His brown hair and fortyish cigarette-creased face gave him the overall Keith Richards look so coveted by Guitarros the world over.

Now, I'd just come into Krause Guitars for strings -- Elixir elevens. I paid, and on the way out Elson followed me into the empty parking lot. He was anxious to talk and, of course, my natural instinct was to run because usually when a

Guitarro approached me, he wanted something -- most often to start up the next greatest rock 'n' roll band on earth with me.

Elson wanted something all right, but this time it wasn't that. He wanted help with a completely different matter, although it did have to do with guitars.

I remember his first words to me that day: "There's a Sluggard I promised I'd introduce you to."

"You WHAT!!!? I screamed. "Have you lost your ever-lovin' mind?"

I was going to storm off in a snit, but Elson grabbed my arm and whispered desperately "Listen to me!!"

And by good fortune or by the power of Divine Providence, instead of leaving him there or punching him in the nose, I did. I listened, and I promised to get back to him. Then, I walked out of that empty parking lot in a daze.

The possibilities!

The more I thought about it, the more obsessed I became with the hope that what he said could possibly work, could possibly be true.

I said the parking lot was empty. It was. Like everybody else who shopped at Krause's I left my car a good half mile away. Who, after all, in his right mind was going to park in the

Krause Guitar Store lot? For Christ's sake, there was a Sluggard in there!

The Sluggard sat, day in and day out, on a ratty couch inside, watching football on the TV, sipping beer, and munching corn chips next to the racks of Fender Squiers and Ibañez square-shouldered dreadnoughts. It must have been tough on Elson to have a Sluggard planted smack dab in the middle of his place of business. But, of course, there was no way to get him out of there. He'd sit there forever unless he got the urge to wander outside and crowd his way into somebody's car. They do that from time to time. No one knows why.

What's a Sluggard? I'll tell you, but not until I tell you what a Guitarro is. That has to come first.

I'm proud to say that my christening of guitar hacks like Elson Krause has resulted in a word today so ubiquitous that any Google search of it will result in endless millions of hits no matter what language you set your preferences to.

Guitarros! Who would have thought that a member of that undistinguished guild would one day bring us the promise of a better world and, more importantly, deliverance from the Sluggards?

Elson Krause was a Guitarro deluxe. That is to say a life-long wannabe, a musical mediocrity who was unwilling to

recognize -- or lacked the personal introspection to recognize -- what he was. And so he just kept strumming along through life doggedly with the same four or five CAGED guitar chords whose very names he could never quite seem to get straight.

Now, I'm not knocking him. The debt we all owe him makes that something I just wouldn't do. And Chet Atkins himself wasn't so good that he could go around criticizing other guitarists, however bad they were, and get away with it for long. Nevertheless, understanding the minds and the musical shortcomings of Guitarros was the key to emancipating humanity from the globally pandemic annoyance of the Sluggards. To achieve liberation, you had to first understand Guitarros and subsequently make a practical application of that knowledge so you could force the Sluggards to do what you wanted them to do.

Guitar playing is a guy thing. Oh, I know there are some great female players. You don't have to list them all for me. It makes no difference. It's still a guy thing just the way anything a Sluggard does is a guy thing. Anything. I'll get no argument with that last bit anyway.

My wife Laura always says that the rounded, curvy shape of a guitar is the reason guys become infatuated with them, which doesn't say much for us (but speaks volumes of my wife's high opinion of her kind). And once when I scoffed and said, "The

curves do it? Then why are there so many dudes on stage wailing away on Gibson Flying V's? Answer me that," She didn't even pause. She had her theory all worked out.

"Can you think of a word that begins with the letter V?" She replied with a smirk.

"Oh, please!" I said.

It was a typical conversation with her. Laura was a piano player and singer. We were a good match and shared a life full of wine, work, music, and laughs.

But she was full of baloney on this explanation of Guitarros. The mistake Laura was making (apart from being dead wrong) was the question she was trying to answer. Why, you see, doesn't matter! Not with Guitarros or Sluggards. I keep saying it and saying it: What is all that you need to know.

Ever since the first Sluggard wandered into the first unfortunate family's living room twelve years ago, everyone -- scientist, layman -- everyone had too often made it their business to talk in terms of why and what for, and that's not being very practical with regard to addressing mankind's new primary goal: getting rid of them!

Naturally, everywhere you went people were talking about the Sluggards. An awful lot of the conversation centered around the question of where. Where in the hell did they come from?

Plenty of folks thought they were invading body snatchers from outer space. In fact, that's why they were at first called not Sluggards but Snatchers, a name that quickly fell out of usage. No surprise there. In the first place, nobody was missing, so obviously no bodies had been snatched. Secondly, a Sluggard is simply not capable snatching anything. A snatcher? Spare me. A three-toed sloth would better deserve the name. A Sluggard didn't snatch your living room couch -- he just kind of slowly horned his way onto it -- and into your formerly happy and comfortable life!

I have to admit that the space alien theory in one form or another would be my best guess about where they came from. After all, it's clear that in many ways Sluggards don't resemble any earthly life form except perhaps guitarros. But where, like why, doesn't gain you anything. You can have fun and make up any theory you like about the nationality or galactic origins of the Sluggards. But even if you knew where they came from, you wouldn't be able to send them back. And you'd still be stuck with one in your living room -- that is if your household was among the unlucky one in four that was Sluggard-infested.

The Infestation took place in 2020. It happened quickly. Everyone recalls that the Sluggards one day came down from the hills, out of alleys, and out from around street corners. Some

were observed climbing down from trees. Others were said to have washed up on the lonely shores of big, open lakes and inland seas as well as on the crowded beaches of Miami and Cancún.

That's where they came from -- everywhere. They wandered out of corn fields and bus station wash rooms. They were suddenly seen riding up and down the escalators at Woolworth's and walking about in malls. That's what I remember about the Infestation anyway. It's a cloudy memory though.

You know, it's funny; when I ask people, somehow no one seems to remember that terrible day as clearly as you'd think they would. Perhaps they choose not to remember.

The past was once blurry for me as well. I mean about the pre-Infestation days. For the longest time, it was as if I were beset with some kind of mild yet dreary form of amnesia. I yearned for the past, yet was somehow unable to remember how things used to be. It wasn't really amnesia. It was simply my inability to any longer even imagine a world without those big, boring bullet-headed changos in it!!

It was residential neighborhoods that the Sluggards sought out. It seems they wanted nothing more than familial surroundings and the chance to exchange some banalities and hang with other bipeds. In other words, they wanted to ruin your life!

If one of them got into your house, that was it, my friend. He wasn't going to leave unless he felt like it. He would stay and drive you absolutely insane, and there wasn't a damned thing you could do about it. Well, of course, you could try to sell your house, and your realtor would run an ad that looked something like this one that I clipped from the paper a few years back:

Lovely Santa Fe single level home in a Glenview neighborhood with No HOA!

This home features 3 large bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, and a spacious dining area. You will love the orange trees in the west facing patio with diving pool.

Only one Sluggard! Stays on the couch. Drinks bargain beer and bulk chips. Doesn't talk too much. Isn't a yowler.

Priced to sell fast!

"Isn't a yowler?" Well, that was false advertising. They're all yowlers and people know it. And, believe me, the house wasn't going sell anytime soon either.

I said that they crowded their way into cars occasionally, and that's true. And if one of them did, you had two choices: abandon the car or drive the Sluggard home with you. Sadly, the result was the same either way. Even if you ditched your car out in the desert or up in the mountains and hiked back home, the Sluggard would eventually get out, make his way to your house, and push his way inside. And it didn't matter if you welded your

door shut; he'd keep at it until he got in one way or another. Or he'd yowl so incessantly that you'd have to let him inside yourself to keep from going crazy along with all of your neighbors who were ready to kill you.

How he knew where you lived no one can say. Some people think the Sluggard would rifle through your glove compartment with his big meaty fingers and get your address off of the registration or track you down by your license plate or Vehicle Identification Number. (Yes, of course they can read!) However, when people everywhere took to carrying their documents with them in wallet and purse, filing off their VINS and using fake plates, nothing changed; the Sluggard would unerringly make his way from their abandoned car to their place of residence. How he did it remains today just another mystery.

So what are the Sluggards? I promised to tell you and now I will. Sluggards appear at first glance to be big, stocky guys. They are completely bald and uniformly about five feet eight inches tall and 280 to 300 pounds, although the weight is a guess as they simply will not submit to being weighed (or to doing absolutely anything else they don't want to). Their fingers are as big around as beer cans, their legs like tree stumps, their foreheads bony and protruding. The title of a

popular self-help book also gives you a good way of picturing them. The book is called How to Manage Your Curly Joe.

Oh, I almost forgot; they dress in denim dungarees. Where they procure these garments is an absolute and total mystery. Maybe they're born wearing them -- that is, if they're born at all, which I doubt. No one has the slightest idea.

I know what you're going to ask. If they're such trouble, why haven't people just gone ahead and killed the sons-of-bitches? People get away with killing home invaders all the time. Well, believe me, that's been tried. And quite often.

Only it doesn't work.

You can fill a Sluggard full of lead and he will simply give you a reproachful look and start yowling. You can blow a Sluggard up with a case of TNT and he usually stays in one piece -- and even if he doesn't, he'll just grow back whatever part got blown off. Poison? You jest. You can lace a Sluggard's beer with a double dose of cyanide and he'll just drink it and then look at you with those big dumb, beady eyes and say, "U got nudder gwass beer?"

Similarly, you can't knock a Sluggard unconscious, anesthetize, or even tranquilize one. As anyone who's got a Sluggard can tell you, they are always wide awake. That's not just what makes them horrible houseguests; it's also what makes

studying them nearly impossible -- that and the fact that they don't want to be studied and they won't be -- not while they live and breathe. Try getting one to stand still for a physical. Good luck. They simply won't have it. They'll bawl like babies and struggle endlessly and tirelessly.

News of only one medical examination has ever become common knowledge. I think it was about three years after the Infestation. There was a Sluggard who had chosen to take up residence in the Medical Examiner's office in Queens. One night, the story goes, the doctors with the aide of a special SWAT team jumped him and somehow managed to get him bundled and padlocked up in enough chain and steel cable that he actually couldn't move. What then ensued was a kind of live autopsy where the living cadaver screamed like a banshee through the entire procedure.

Everyone involved was severely traumatized. As far as I know, such a thing has never been attempted again and no official report was ever issued from the Medical Examiner's office. Rumor has it, just the same, that no internal organs were discovered in the Sluggard. All they could find inside him was a doughy mixture of beer and chips and that didn't tell them anything they didn't already know.

The Sluggard, needless to say, came out of the experience none the worse for wear. And would you believe it? Eight years later he was still living in the same office in New York!

Of course it was possible to relocate a Sluggard by force. For example, you could conceivably get a Chevy Silverado, install a gooseneck hitch in the center of the truck bed, and affix a hefty chain to its lifting arm. Then, if you (along with half the male population of town) could somehow be able to get that chain attached to the struggling Sluggard, you might possibly succeed in dragging him down the road to somewhere else. But what was the point? He'd just make his way back. And even if you threw him in a jail with walls of steel reinforced concrete, you knew he'd get out sooner or later. Sluggard perseverance always wins in the end. This is now accepted as a basic cosmic axiom.

No, relocation wasn't an option. Even governments couldn't manage the task of corralling them in prisons or concentration camps. There were just too damned many of them. It would break the bank. Better just to let the citizens foot the bill for beer and chips.

In 2022, José Luis Mendoza, a guy from the Mexican side of Nogales in Sonora became something of a world celebrity. It was

he who found the first practicable guy thing connection between male Homo sapiens and Sluggards. It was American football!

Mendoza discovered that the Sluggard who had expropriated his home would stay on the couch as long as the TV played non-stop NFL games and there was goodly supply of corn chips and beer within easy reach.

Mendoza shared his secret with the world in a 400-page treatise in Spanish entitled El proyecto Medoza, ¡Ouédate en el sofá! which was instantly translated to virtually every language in the world.

Its publication was a godsend for the peoples of earth. Before that, life for many had been sheer hell. Nothing less. The Sluggards would wander around people's houses yammering idiotically, making saccharin observations, and asking incredibly stupid and annoying questions -- and there was no respite from them whatever. They'd wake you up in the middle of the night to ask what time it was. They'd push their way in when you were trying to take a bath and say, "You water woam nuff?" If you ran out of beer, they'd get this piteous, crestfallen look and start hollering "Wah! Wah!" until you went to the store for more.

Of course, life after the Mendoza Project was still hell for a lot of people, but I guess you might call it a balmier

form of hell -- one that the majority of people at least could endure. Mendoza was the first person to ever impose any kind of control upon a Sluggard. Before then, every attempt at such had been a total failure.

The Mendoza project gave people back the run of their houses and it gave them back their lives. Sure, you had to permanently forfeit your TV and living room, but that was better than giving up the whole house. And sure, you had to keep the bags of corn chips coming in and the beer flowing, but the Sluggard was going to drink all your beer anyway and he didn't talk half as much with his mouth full of Fritos. It was a net gain. No doubt about it.

It goes without saying that football season now absolutely had to go on all year long. That's why Mendoza proposed in his treatise the concept of a Rookie League, which was an instant success. It let the pros keep their jobs and let sports fans watch quality athletics while the Sluggards could be content with third string washouts, the sports world's equivalent of Guitarros. Some people feared that the Sluggards would notice the difference, but if they did, they didn't seem to care and so a special international channel was created to broadcast Rookie League games twenty-four seven.

No one had ever tried to make the guy thing connection with Sluggards before. But finding another one was tricky. Sluggards were pretty finicky that way. There didn't seem to be any other sports they liked. Not soccer, not racing, not rugby, and of course not boxing. I guess I didn't say it before, so I'll say it now in case it isn't obvious to you already: Sluggards are completely and totally nonviolent. Ask a Sluggard what he thinks of the UFC and he'll just say, "Cage-fight seem puddy wuff to me."

Forget sports for a minute. It's time to get to the heart of this story, and the story began if you remember with what Elson told me in the Krause Guitars parking lot. This is what he said:

"I told my Sluggard to scoot over on the couch and I would teach him a few guitar chords."

To which I replied, "I won't even ask why you did that-- I already know you're nuts."

"He was getting chatty, bothering customers," Elson explained. "I thought the distraction would make him miss his TV football and he'd go back to concentrating on it and watch with his big gab shut. It's a technique I read about in Rolling Stone. Bore them a little and they'll focus more on the TV."

How in the hell does one bore a Sluggard? My God, I thought. You can publish anything these days.

"And?" I asked.

"And," Elson said with a smile. "He scooted over!"

That's why I walked out of the parking lot in a daze.

You surely know by now that Sluggards don't mind. It doesn't, like, happen. They NEVER do what you say. Ever.

So the next day, I parked my car midtown and walked to the music store. I found Elson vacuuming the carpet. When he got to the couch, the carpet sweeper started making a lot of crunching sounds as it began to suck up all the little bits and pieces of spilled corn chip.

Elson worked the vacuum around to the front of the couch.

"Move your feet," he said.

The Sluggard sat there munching Tostitos.

"Move your feet or I won't teach you how to play "Stairway to Heaven," Elson insisted.

The Sluggard lifted up its feet and Elson vacuumed under them.

I was amazed, and it wasn't just that Elson knew how to play "Stairway to Heaven." What was this? The second time in history that a Sluggard had actually obeyed a human being?

"Sweet Jesus," I breathed. The possibilities!

Elson shut off the vacuum and said, "Let's go in the back and talk."

We did, and afterwards I often found myself repeating the words, Guitarro doesn't mean stupid!

"A Sluggard is the perfect parasite," Elson began. "The quintessential freeloader. He attaches himself to the host through the means of two indestructible and highly evolved traits: mule-like stubbornness and absolute indifference. That's how they've conquered us! Their obstinance is utterly implacable and they don't care about a goddamned thing! That's their main strength. They don't give a shit!"

"They care about beer," I observed. I could see through the door into the front room. The Sluggard was finishing off his noontime twelve-pack.

"Oh, they'll anguish over beer, true enough," Elson said. "But that's different. Deny them beer and they'll shriek to Jericho, I'll grant you. But don't you see? You cannot hold it over them. You can't tell them to shut up or no more Coors Light. I'm telling you, they don't give a shit!"

Elson was right. No one ever had gotten anywhere by threatening to cut off a Sluggard's beer supply. The Sluggard didn't care enough to go out for more beer himself -- especially when he could just yowl louder and louder until you went out and

got it for him. "The quintessential freeloader." That was a very good way to describe it.

"Another thing," Elson went on. "Like any parasites that want to thrive, Sluggards don't kill the host -- but, of course, that ain't the half of it: they can't be killed themselves. And I'm telling you, not being able to be killed is one hell of an evolutionary strategy!"

I lowered my voice a little so the Sluggard wouldn't overhear. "It's true we can't whack them," I said. "But what we can do is find out more things -- guy things -- that we can lord over them. Like guitar lessons. Beer's already out. You're right. They don't care enough about it."

"Hell, they only barely care about football."

"But guitars," I said and looked over to the Sluggard in the other room. He was finishing a bag of chips, most of which had fallen on the freshly vacuumed floor. He popped open a beer, chugged it down, and tossed the empty can in a corner. I looked back at Elson. "Look at him. That's the same Sluggard that lifted up his feet when you told him!"

"Yes, he now cares about something. That's his downfall and our salvation -- and you know what? I've got the feeling Sluggards care a lot more about guitars than you might think."

"Well, I hope at least this one does."

"They're all the same," Elson said. "That's one thing I'm absolutely sure of."

It was all very exciting. This guitar thing was a major breakthrough and very possibly more important than José Luis Mendoza's. I was beginning to believe that we could get these lugs out of everyone's hair once and for all. I told Elson as much and his answer surprised me.

"We can do a lot more than that," he said. "We can turn the tables on them. Get them to do things for us."

"What? Like do the vacuuming?"

"You set your sights too low. I mean things for industry, medicine."

"Those boneheads?" I said.

"They're smarter than shit!" Elson declared.

How right he was. Today I still remind myself -- Guitarro doesn't mean stupid!, and parenthetically neither does Sluggard – technically anyhow.

Elson kept a bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label in the back room. It was safe enough there. Sluggards don't like scotch. Won't touch it.

He poured us both out a glass saying we ought to toast our new adventure over a slug of Mr. Walker's Amber Restorative.

We hoisted our glasses. "To possibilities," I said.

The next day, Elson called me on the phone. He had bad news. The Sluggard wouldn't cooperate with him and wouldn't sit through another lesson.

Elson didn't want to say so, but I'm sure he knew what the problem was. In very short order he had taught the Sluggard everything he knew about guitar and so the Sluggard had gone back to alternately watching TV and bothering customers with his insufferable chinwag.

"I'll be right over," I told Elson, and as crazy as it sounds, I drove to Krause Guitars and parked in the lot.

I really had to. It was clear that Elson wasn't up to the task of saving humanity from the deadly mixed cocktail of irritation and ennui. The torch had been passed. To me. Mankind's future was at stake and this bid for freedom was a duty I simply could not shirk.

Oh, I knew Laura would probably leave me if I brought the Krause Guitars Sluggard home with me. But if I succeeded, I'd be richer than José Mendoza as the adage goes. And even if my quest failed completely I was pretty sure I'd get free guitar strings for life. So I did it.

A quick guitar lesson was enough to convince the Sluggard that he and I were meant to be and he wandered out and squeezed into my car for the drive to his new home.

"Later!" I shouted to Elson as I drove off. He smiled and waved from the doorway.

I have never seen such joy on a person's face.

"His name's Bud!" Elson shouted happily.

Well, of course it was. Bud was perhaps the most common Sluggard name -- at least in America. That and Miller. In England, Sir Boddingtons was a popular one, in Ireland, Mr. Murphy, etc.

When I got the Sluggard home, I realized I must have been planning this subconsciously; I found that I had already laid in an ample enough supply of chips and beer to keep the Sluggard on the couch for several hours. I turned the TV on and tuned it to Rookie League Football. To my delight, Bud settled right down to staring, chugging, and munching and I took the opportunity to go out to Home Depot and buy one of those Tough Sheds for the back yard. It was delivered the next day.

A shed. A little grandma cottage in the back yard. If I could get him out in the shed, I would have the battle won. After all, that's all the world really hoped and dreamed of anymore, wasn't it? Getting a sluggard banished to a shed in the back yard -- just that. Nothing more. I really didn't think it was asking too much, and so to that end I set my sights.

I followed Mendoza's lead and called my endeavor Project OUST! I didn't mean it to be an acronym, but the public immediately took to calling it the Organization to Undo Sluggard Trouble, which sounded so stupid that I really began to worry that people had been around Sluggards a little too long and something was beginning to wear off.

Anyway, I first focused my musical instruction on what Guitarros never seem to learn: the Nashville number system -- or at least my version of it.

"Today, Bud," I told the Sluggard. "We're going to work on three-chord songs!"

"Bobby McGee!" Bud shouted.

"Excellent suggestion," I said, although I was dying inside. I mean, the things we guitarists will endure to save humanity! I tell you, we really should be given medals.

Don't get me wrong. "Bobby McGee" is a great song, but like "Brown-eyed Girl" it's been so overdone that to guitar players, hearing it is something akin to listening to a sluggard claw at a chalkboard.

But I persevered and gave Bud the same three-step lesson on three-chord songs that I always give to Guitarros and which they NEVER understand.

"Okay, Bud," I began. "Today we're going to learn the one-four-five chord pattern for songs. Step one: Sing do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do."

He croaked it out and then shouted excitedly, "Julie Andwooz! Sound o' Moosik!"

Did that surprise me? No. I, like all of the other people of earth, have long since given up even wondering about how Sluggards come to know the things they do.

"Step two," I told him. "Instead of do, re, me, sing C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C."

"Owfobet!" Bud exclaimed, and sang it.

"Now for step three. Instead of C, D, E, sing 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8!"

He did.

Now for the moment of truth. "What note is number one?" I asked.

"See," Bud said.

"And four and five?"

"Eff an' Gee!"

"Very good! You've got the one-four-five chord pattern! One, Four, and Five are C, F, and G!" I said. "Now you can play any three-chord song in the key of C!"

But he could do more than that. With that one bit of instruction he could now play any three-chord song in any key. I sensed this somehow and I tested him.

"What are chords 1, 4, and 5 in the key of Eb?" I asked him.

"E fwat, A fwat, and B fwat!" he answered without one second of hesitation.

Bud had the pattern down and automatically knew all of the possible combinations. Elson was right. Sluggards were smarter than shit!

Of course, I had to show him where to put his stubby fingers, and even though the fingerboard was much too small for them, he was soon enough strumming away at "Bobby McGee" in Eb as he sang along hoarsely.

It was torture, but least he didn't start singing the Janis Joplin version. You know, "Bobbity, Bobbity, Bobbity!" the way female buskers invariably do on street corners and subways the world over.

But again, you got it: Bud was an idiot genius. And get this: he could also tell you the notes that each chord contained.

I showed him the 1, 3, 5 triad, the basic recipe for a major chord. For C major, the notes in the chord are C, E, and

G. When I told him that, he also immediately knew every note for every major chord.

Then, I did what I had always tried to do unsuccessfully with Guitarros; I showed him how to embellish the triad with a flatted third to make a minor chord, or by adding the seventh to make a major seventh.

When I told him he could flat both the third and the fifth note to make a diminished chord, he frowned, disappointed and observed, "Only thwee diminish!"

Amazing. Nothing less. No Guitarro could ever do that.

Bud was right. There are but three diminished chords in the known universe. Mathematically the notes in the diminished chords kind of blend into one another so that if you slide a diminished chord up the guitar neck, you can play the same one every four frets always leaving two frets in between for the other two.

Ah, but here's the crucial part: Bud couldn't devise any different chord voicings. Similarly, he couldn't couldn't play a song by ear. He simply lacked the creativity to do so, and that was most excellent news; as smart as he was, he lacked any originality or spontaneity. That meant he'd have to depend on me for absolutely anything new musically. I could teach him lessons and control him until the end of time!

No, a sluggard wasn't innovative. That made the work hard for you if you wanted him to write out the blueprints for a matter tele-porter or a faster-than-light space drive. But you couldn't have it any other way. The Sluggards' utter inability to improvise was the only thing that let the instruction go on forever and kept them out in the shed.

Just the same, Elson was disappointed when I first told him this.

"Shit," he complained. "I had visions of you just telling the Sluggard you'd teach him another Neil Young tune as long as he came back from the shed with the cure for cancer."

Would that it were that easy -- but we still could learn plenty from them if we put them to work. Don't forget how Bud had been told a few musical concepts and instantly knew that mathematics limited the number of diminished chords to three.

Elson and I hired countless guitar teachers. We also sought out teams of scientists to join Project OUST! They knew what data to give to the Sluggards and what questions to ask. The Sluggards would answer the questions too! They had no choice; any time they didn't, they'd be docked one guitar lesson.

Who can even imagine where we'd be if all the greatest scientists of history had had their own personal Sluggard? Just think about it. When the apple hit Isaac Newton on the head, he

could have just relayed this information to his Sluggard who would likely have said, "Gwavity!" Johannes Kepler could have shown a Sluggard his preliminary planetary data and said, "How do you like the nice round orbits, Herr Lowenbrau?" To which the Sluggard would cry, "Not wound. Ewipses!" Einstein himself wouldn't have had to wrack his brains to come up with a theory based upon the speed of light being constant. He could have just asked a Sluggard about how fast it was and, "Wight fast!" might have been the answer. "Beddy beddy fast. But stay same. Stay SAME!"

The scientists we hired had the difficult part. They had to give the Sluggards the right data and come up with the best loaded questions. I didn't envy them.

Making lesson plans, however, was dead easy. Here's how the class went a few days after I first drove Bud to my house:

"Buddy Boy," I said. "Listen to this four-note C minor sixth." And then I strummed it on the third fret.

"Weel puddy!" Bud said joyfully, twanging out a clunky imitation on the old Washburn dreadnought I had given him.

I winced and said, "Very good! You can also play it here." And I played another C minor sixth on the eighth fret.

Bud slid his big horny paw up the neck of the guitar and mangled the chord with a grin.

"Which chord voicing do you like better?" I asked, ears threatening mutiny.

"Bud wike boaf!" Then, with the mention of his own name fresh on his lips, he blinked stupidly, was reminded of something, and grabbed a beer off of the coffee table which he consumed in two gulps. He eructated loudly.

"And now, my friend," I said. "Off to the shed with you until you hear from me tomorrow afternoon."

Bud just sat there hugging his guitar, a blank, disappointed expression on his face, cheeks stuffed with Doritos.

"If you don't go out to the shed immediately," I said coolly and evenly. "I swear I won't so much as teach you how to play 'Little Brown Egg!'"

He lumbered out the door dejectedly.

That may seem cruel, but it really wasn't. I had put a new couch and TV in there with a few cases of Budweiser and about twenty-five jumbo bags of bargain brand tortilla chips. I even let him take the guitar.

Did I have control of the Sluggard? You bet. He was like a dog on a leash.

This is not to say that Project OUST protocols didn't have limits. For instance, a sluggard would stand for only 14 hours

of exile in shed or store room. After that, all bets were off. He'd be back in the house demanding more guitar instruction. But that was quite workable. I had plenty of time to get my lesson plan ready and, again, that part was easy work -- at least it was in the early days.

Then some guy in Kentucky started manufacturing a guitar with gigantic fret heights and widths to fit the fat, clumsy fingers of the Sluggards. He was something of a comedian and named his new axe "The Louisville Sluggard" and it became a huge hit, which pissed me off.

I had counted on the Sluggards plodding slowly through my materials encumbered as they were with their blunt fingertips and the guitar's narrow frets. Now they were burning through my curriculum at twice the pace and I found myself scribbling like mad in preparation for each and every lesson. Elson and I got a team working on it and we managed all right, but it was touch and go for a while.

EPILOGUE

Well, now as everyone knows, modern civilization is being completely retooled through the willing efforts of scientists and engineers and the coerced efforts of the Sluggards.

Laura, as I predicted, left me the minute I brought Bud home and the divorce was final before he had learned his first three chords, but she came back a year later after I was filthy rich. We said our vows again and have been happily married ever since. It's nice to be back to our old life of wine, work, music, and laughs.

Speaking of which, there was an old joke:

What do you call a guitar player without a girlfriend?

Homeless!

The joke doesn't work anymore because today there isn't an unemployed guitar player on planet earth. They live in mansions. I didn't say Guitarros did. Sluggards know the difference -- and care about it. We couldn't supplement our workforce from that unfortunate group, so my worldwide Project OUST! was often understaffed.

In addition, with millions of Sluggards to teach and that fourteen-hour turnover from the shed, guitar instructors were getting run ragged. They needed a set schedule of vacations. That meant that we had to find another guy thing that might interest the Sluggards and get them occupied with it from time to time.

I, too, was pretty sick of my endless tutelage of Bud. One day I was in my house chatting in the living room with Laura. I poured myself a glass of wine and another one for her.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I've got to have a break. When Bud wanders in from the shed, just take his guitar and leave him on the couch with the TV and chips. I'm going fishing!"

I felt a tap on the shoulder. When I turned, Bud was standing there looking like a 19th Century Iowa dirt farmer in those dumb dungarees. He'd left the shed and was carrying his guitar.

Damn! I'd miscalculated the time!

He gave me a woolly look.

"You show me catch feesh wid loodle hook?" he asked.

Laura smiled at me.

"Possibilities?" she asked.

I raised my glass.