

Don't Piss Off A Songwriter

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Whatever you do, don't piss off a songwriter! There are many, many examples where a songwriter has gotten annoyed with another person, or company, and had a bit hit with it. Examples include Carly Simon's "*Your So Vain*", Alanis Morissette's "*You Oughta Know*", Billy Joel's "*So It Goes*", etc.

My partner, Jocelin put me onto this example she'd seen in TikTok. Some of you may have heard of this one before and it's a totally true story! Amazing, but definitely real.

In 2008 on a United Airlines flight from Halifax Airport, Nova Scotia, to Omaha, Nebraska's Eppley Airfield the flight had a layover Chicago O'Hare International Airport. Canadian musician Dave Carroll was travelling on that flight with his guitar (\$3500 US 710 Taylor) in baggage as he was playing a show with his band, Sons of Maxwell.



At the Chicago Airport Carroll heard a passenger behind his bass player exclaim that they were throwing guitars around from the baggage! They asked her again and she repeated what she'd seen. The band's bass player looked out the window in time to see his bass being flung without regard by the United baggage handlers. Carroll's guitar had been sent sailing just before.

He tried talking to the flight attendant who cut him off saying, "Don't talk to me. Talk to the lead agent outside." Carroll tried talking to the "lead agent", but they refused to speak to him. Speaking to a third United employee that the baggage handlers were throwing expensive instruments around at O'Hare he was brushed off, "She stopped her call long enough to say, "but hun, that's why you signed the waiver." Carroll tried explaining that he hadn't signed any waivers and that wouldn't explain what was happening outside.

When Carroll got to his destination, he found the guitar badly smashed up and broken. He'd saved hard to afford the guitar and there it was with a big hole and the cedar top coming off. He tried to talk to someone at the Omaha United Service Desk, but it was late at night, so he tried ringing the 1-800 number for complaints. "That was the beginning of a really frustrating customer service maze," Carroll said.

This happened to a friend of mine who had his Ovation in a non-destructible moulded flight case, but after going through L.A its neck was broken in three places. About the only way you could do that is if you ran it over with a truck!! Not sure why US baggage handlers hate guitars so much?

Carroll was asked why he didn't carry the guitar on with him, as its so valuable, but was told he wasn't able to do that. A similar thing happened to me in Hong Kong after I'd flown back from the UK, stayed a few days in HK, then coming back to Sydney. The guitar was only in a plastic case and would have been matchsticks on arrival. This was 1996, so pre 9/11, and I kicked up a stink so the girl at the counter called her manager and looked at the guitar and said "No problem, that's an easy carry on" so the guitar made it home – I still have it! But Carroll's guitar was in a solid protected guitar case.

He had brought this to the attention of three United Airlines employees in Chicago, but they didn't give a damn and brushed him off. So, Carroll duly filed a claim with United Airlines only to be told that he'd failed to make a claim in the stipulated 24 hours timeframe.

Luckily Carroll's wife worked in customer's service at the time, and he took her advice to be friendly, but relentless, and not give up. For over nine months of being moved from one person to another, being hung up on, ignored and even given lame excuses like having to go back to Chicago to complain in person.

However, like a dog at a bone Carroll kept gnawing away trying to get the airline to take some responsibility. In the meantime, he'd gotten the guitar repaired, but it cost him \$1,200! As well it didn't sound as good. He'd eventually gotten onto an agent called Ms Irlweg, who was ticking boxes rather than helping the customer with emails going back and forth. Carroll's final offer of a settlement of \$1200 in flight vouchers, to cover his repair costs on the Taylor, was rejected.

Eventually Carroll wrote to Ms Irlweg in frustration, "If I were a lawyer, I would sue United Airlines. But I'm not." He looked to the side and saw his repaired guitar sitting there and he thought: "I've got other tools at my disposal." He did warn Ms Irlweg he would be recording a song about this experience and putting it on YouTube, but he was ignored again.

So, Carroll did what all good songwriters do when they are frustrated, pull out a guitar and let the words flow. Within hours he'd written "*United Breaks Guitars*" which even mentions Ms Irlweg by name. However, just having a song doesn't help unless you can get it out there.

Carroll rang around his musician friends and those who'd worked in the film industry to help him record the song and put it on video. As Carroll said, "What I discovered, early on, is that I wasn't the only one that had a problem. It turns out that every professional musician who's ever travelled enough has had an airline damage to their instrument. So, there was no shortage of people willing to help out."

Once the video was finished it was posted on YouTube on July 6th, 2009. Carroll sent out a message to his 400 Facebook followers that said, "United broke my guitar, please watch this video" and went to bed. By the time he'd woken up it had 300 hits, by noon 5,000, by dinnertime 25,000, by the time he was ready to go to bed it was 150,000. As Carroll said, "It was going viral at a time when I didn't even know what a viral video was". Within four days the song had hit over a million views! Eventually "*United Breaks Guitars*" became the number one music video in the world for a month! It has had 23 million views!

The song's refrain is extremely catchy "I should have flown with someone else, or gone by car, 'cause United breaks guitars." Can you imagine 23 million people singing



along to that? It been widely reported that within four weeks of the video being posted online, United Airlines' stock price fell 10%, costing stockholders about \$180 million in value.

To hammer the nail home, and as he'd promised Ms Irlweg he released two other sequels: *"United Breaks Guitars: Song 2"* (August 17th 2009) which was a humorous look at his dealings with Ms. Irlweg and targeted the "flawed policies" that she had to uphold; *"United Breaks Guitars: Song 3"* (March 2010) in which he says not all United employees are "bad apples" but hits with the final line, "You say that you're changing, and I hope you do, 'Cause if you don't, then who would fly with you?" Both of these songs individually exceeded the one-million-hit mark he was originally aiming for, but neither came close to the original's impact.

This caused United Airlines to update their customer service training, using Carroll's videos, and they gave him \$3000 in compensation. This was donated to the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, which is funded and chaired by United executives, so a bit underhand. Eventually they gave him \$1200 for the repair and \$1200 in flight vouchers.

However, Carroll has had some other subsequent developments from the song's success:

- The song's attention helped Carroll land an endorsement deal with a guitar case company.
- Bob Taylor of guitar manufacturer Taylor Guitars rang Carroll. "If you like Taylor guitars, that's like God calling you on the telephone," he said. Carroll was invited to tour the Taylor factory in California and pick two guitars to take home as gifts!
- Companies and organisations began to contact to him to tell his story, seeing his story as a textbook example of the perils of inattentive customer service and the power of one consumer in a digital age. He even is invited to talk to United Airline employees.

Carroll even still flies with United Airlines, and the funny thing is they have lost his luggage on his trips. United Airlines policies seemed have changed, but in 2017 a video was released showing United Airlines physically forcing a passenger, Dr. David Dao, off Flight 3411 to make room for crew members, knocking his unconscious and injuring him. Carroll thinks that it "has to do with the culture in United Airlines which showed a lack of compassion."

So, what ever you do don't piss off a songwriter! The pen is way mightier than the sword and some of these greedy executives need to realise this small fact.

The video, and more depth story, can be found at <https://www.davecarrollmusic.com/songwriting/united-breaks-guitars/>

Other songwriters have had the same experience and have done a similar thing, but in this day and age you can reach more people:

Folk singer Tom Paxton also had a guitar damaged in transit which he recounted in the song *"Thank You Republic Airlines"* on his 1985 album *"One Million Lawyers and Other Disasters."*

Bing Futch had his unique double mountain dulcimer when Northwest Airlines damaged it in transit. He then wrote and recorded *"Only a Northwest Song"*. He tried to be quite different to Tom Paxton's or Dave Carroll's songs and made its title a parody of The Beatles' *"Only A Northern Song."* Once the song was released on video Northwest Airlines apologised and quickly offered him compensation – I think they learnt from what happened to United Airlines.

