

Jug Band Music

by Michael “Hawkeye” Herman

The good timey sounds of jug band music – infectious and influential – have enjoyed popularity since its beginnings in the “spasm” and “novelty” bands that developed in New Orleans in the late 19th and early 20th Century.

The spasm bands not only featured improvisation on a wide variety of standard musical instruments, but the instruments themselves were often homemade and improvised – like the jug in place of a tuba or upright bass. Hence the name, “Jug Band.” Homemade instruments like the jug, washboard, spoons, and one-string ‘bucket’ bass have a long tradition in both early African American and white American cultures.

These early New Orleans jug bands expanded to other regions like Memphis and Louisville by the turn of the 20th Century, playing jazz and blues long before the music was recognized and labeled as such. Jug bands played on the Ohio and Mississippi riverboat paddle wheelers and in many southern night clubs. They were in vaudeville, on the streets, and in traveling medicine shows. These bands created a colorful and exciting aspect to country blues, classic jazz, country & western, and hillbilly musics.

In the 1920s, some of the first jug bands to record were: Clifford Hayes (Louisville Jug Band, Old Southern Jug Band, and Dixieland Jug Blowers); Earl McDonald (The Ballard Chefs, the Original Louisville Jug Band); Buford Threlkeld (Whistler’s Jug Band); and the Birmingham Jug Band of Ben Curry (aka Ben Covington) and Jaybird Coleman. Many of these bands played popular dance band jazz, using the jug as a novelty element. Vaudeville-blues singer Sara Martin and “The Father of Country Music,” Jimmie Rodgers, both employed jug band ensembles. Some of the biggest names in jazz, blues, and swing worked in these “novelty” bands: Louis Armstrong, Johnny Dodds, Clarence Williams, King Oliver, Willie “The Lion” Smith, Lonnie Johnson, Eddie Condon, Jimmy Dorsey, Gene Krupa, Eddie Lang, Red McKenzie, Jack Teagarden, Frankie Trumbauer, Muggsy Spanier, and Glenn Miller.

The Memphis area jug bands were more firmly rooted in country blues and earlier African-American traditions. Groups such as Jack Kelly and his South Memphis Jug Band, Jed Davenport’s Beale Street Jug Band, Noah Lewis’ Jug Band, Will Shade’s Memphis Jug Band, and Gus Cannon’s Jug Stompers recorded the great songs that became the basis for the later jug band revival: “Stealin’,” “Jug Band Music,” “On the Road Again,” “Whoa, Mule,” “Minglewood Blues,” “Walk Right In,” and many others. Blues great Ma Rainey’s tub-jug band featured the first recordings of slide guitarist Tampa Red, who later formed his own Hokum Jug Band. Blues legends Big Bill Broonzy and Memphis Minnie cut a few sides each backed up by their own jug bands.

The Great Depression of the 1930s and the devastating effect of radio on record sales reduced the output of jug band music to a trickle. The sound of the washboard and tub bass, however, lasted into the 1940s as an integral part of the “Bluebird Beat” in Chicago, a form of vaudevillian-rooted classic, country, and Delta acoustic blues. Slide guitarist/singer Bukka White’s “Fixin’ to Die,” recorded in 1940, is driven by the syncopated rhythms of Washboard Sam.

There was a revival in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the United States. Gus Cannon’s “Walk Right In” was

a #1 hit for The Rooftop Singers in 1963; the only time a jug band song topped the charts. This sparked the formation of a number of jug bands that reached national prominence: the Orange Blossom Jug Five featuring Dave Van Ronk, the Jim Kweskin Jug Band, the Even Dozen Jug Band, The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, and many others. Jug band music was experiencing a revival in Europe as well, where it was called “Skiffle.” The word “skiffle” – meaning “rent party,” a house party with admission to raise money to pay the rent – originated in 1920s Chicago.

Jug band music certainly influenced rock & roll. The Even Dozen Jug Band featured John Sebastian, who later formed The Lovin’ Spoonful, and Steve Katz, who became a member of Blood, Sweat & Tears. Maria Muldaur was in the Even Dozen and the Jim Kweskin Jug Bands before embarking on a solo career as a blues/jazz and country artist. Zal Yanovsky had been a member of The Mugwumps Jug Band before joining The Lovin’ Spoonful. Fellow Mugwumps Cass Elliot and Denny Doherty went on to become famous as one half of The Mamas and the Papas. Mother McCree’s Jug Champions – featuring Jerry Garcia, Bob Weir, and Ron “Pigpen” McKernan – evolved into the legendary rock band The Grateful Dead. Country Joe and the Fish began as The Instant Action Jug Band. Mungo Jerry, who had evolved from an earlier blues group, Good Earth, was initially a jug band. Jesse Colin Young of The Youngbloods’ first hit was “Grizzly Bear,” a jug band standard.

Tributes to jug band music can even be found in pop-rock, including “Willie and the Poor Boys” by Creedence Clearwater Revival; Sebastian’s “Younger Girl,” which used the melody of Gus Cannon’s “Prison Wall Blues;” and “Jug Band Music” by The Lovin’ Spoonful. The Lovin’ Spoonful also recorded songs from the classic jug band repertoire like “Blues In The Bottle,” “Sportin’ Life,” “My Gal,” “Fishin’ Blues,” and “Wild About My Lovin’.”

“Do You Believe In Magic,” a Top Ten hit, fondly pays tribute to the fun and impact of jug band music:

“If you believe in magic, don’t bother to choose
If it’s jug band music or rhythm and blues
Just go and listen, it’ll start with a smile
That won’t wipe off your face no matter how hard you try.”

Today there is an ever-growing interest in jug band music with bands around the globe, jug band festivals, and competitions. The infectious joy, swagger, sensitivity, and creativity of jug band music contributes to its long-lasting popularity in its own right, and continuing influence on popular music and culture.

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A 1897 photograph of an early New Orleans band led by Emile "Stalebread Charlie" Lacoume (second from the far left). Members of the group were Harry Gregson, Emile "Whiskey" Benrod, Willie "Cajun" Bussey, Frank "Monk" Bussey and a boy known only as "Warm Gravy." Another member who was known as "Chinee" and a singer known as "Family Haircut." This band performed in the streets of Storyville in the 1890's and early 1900's. From a book "Storyville, New Orleans" by Al Rose.



Cannon's Jug Stompers - Gus Cannon/jug & banjo, Ashley Thompson/guitar/vocals, Noah Lewis/harmonica - Memphis, TN



The Ballard Chefs - Earl McDonald/jug/leader - Louisville, KY



The Roanoke Jug Band - Roanoke, VA



The White Mule Jug Band