

The Legendary Jug Bands

Memphis, Tennessee was ideally located to absorb bits of all the music and culture that flowed up and down the Mississippi river. New Orleans Jazz, Cajun from Southern Mississippi, Delta Blues, and every variation of folk and roots music from the rural South.

Memphis existed to deal with the cotton trade and distribution by river or train. Memphis sits at the corner of Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee on the Mississippi river. If it travelled by riverboat, it arrived in Memphis.



The early jug bands were made up of African American vaudeville and medicine show musicians, music for entertainment, street musicians without much money. The term 'Jug Band' comes from building a band around some jug players. The jugs could be earth-ware or glass — as long as you could

get a variety of tones, including rich low notes. There could be several jugs, played like brass instruments. The sounds that could be made gave the impression of sliding notes (like a trombone). A good player could get two octaves out of a good-sized jug.

The rhythm section could be made up of guitars and/or banjos. If real guitars or banjos were not affordable, sometimes guitars and mandolins were made from the necks of discarded guitars often fastened to large fruits. These fruits would be flattened for a sound hole on one side. Banjos could be fashioned from a discarded guitar neck fixed to a suitable sized metal plate. The percussion instruments might be a washboard, spoons, pots, or anything homemade from common household articles. A bass made from an upside-down

washtub with a broomstick and one string could be used as was later seen in the skiffle groups. Sometimes a stovepipe was used as a sound chamber or a kazoo fashioned from a comb & tissue paper. All this was to set the stage for vocals — often bawdy, funny or satirical; whatever got the best reaction from a crowd.

Jug Band

The music was upbeat with a strong backbeat. It was performed on street corners, Vaudeville stages, saloons, brothels or any event where comic relief made sense. It was supposed to be fun — the kind of music you just want to be able to play. It may be where the term 'Slap-Stick' originated. The 'Jug Bands' were not the only ones to incorporate all manner of homemade instruments. Bands like these were common throughout the South. The Jug Bands were built around the Jug players. If there was no Jug player, the bands had other descriptions, like skiffle bands, or juke bands (the later was used in the same sense of the origin of the term 'juke joint'). The type of music had a natural appeal — it was upbeat, fun, funny, danceable and often loosely connected with intrigue, sex, savvy and alcohol.

Skiffle, as a genre, had a fairly short life in the U.S. but went on to become quite influential in Britain during the 1950s.

The first published use of the term 'Skiffle' appears in 1925, in the form of a band name — Jimmy O'Bryant and his Chicago Skifflers. It started to be used to refer to records of country blues music. There was a compilation called 'Hometown Skiffle' in 1929, and 'Skiffle Blues' (1946) by Dan Burley & His Skiffle Boys. Ma Rainey (Dated: April 26th, 1886 – December



22nd, 1939) used the term 'Skiffle' to describe her repertoire to rural audiences. During World War II there wasn't much to support for light-hearted, frivolous music and the term faded and finally disappeared.

It is generally thought Jug Bands began in the South. Their music was a mixture of Memphis, ragtime and jazz music. The development of jug bands is closely related to the development of the blues.

Some Original Jug Bands

The first jug bands to record were the Louisville and Birmingham jug bands. They used the jug for its novelty; they played the popular dance band jazz tunes of the time

Whistler's Jug Band

As the jug band became common, Will Shade's Memphis Jug Band and Gus Cannon's Jug Stompers recorded....

- Stealin
- On the Road Again
- Minglewood Blues
- Walk Right In

... and many others. These tracks were very much in a Memphis blues style.

Other Memphis area bands included

- Jack Kelly and His South Memphis Jug Band
- Jed Davenport's Beale Street Jug Band
- Noah Lewis Jug Band.

Ma Rainey's Tub-Jug Band featured the first recordings of Tampa Red on slide guitar. He later formed his own Hokum Jug Band. Big Bill Broonzy and Memphis Minnie cut a few sides each backed up by

their own jug bands; Memphis Minnie also sang and played with The Memphis Jug Band.

1930s – The Depression Years

The depression and radio had a devastating impact on record sales, drastically reducing the output of jug band music. The last recordings by Cannon and The Memphis Jug Band were 1930 and 1934. Will Shade and Cannon were recorded later in 1956 by Sam Charters for Folkways Records. The use of the washboard and tub bass with its distinctive sounds lasted well into the 1940s. It remained an integral part of the 'Bluebird beat' in Chicago. Bukka White's 'Fixin' to Die' is driven by a syncopated washboard backup.

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In 1958, one of the first recordings of the folk era jug band revival was by The Orange Blossom Jug Five 'Skiffle in Stereo'. It was also the first recording by New York folksinger Dave Van Ronk, and featured Sam Charters, author of 'The Country Blues', and his wife Ann as well as Len Kunstadt, co-owner of the Spivey Records label. Van Ronk would revisit the genre in 1964 with the album 'Dave Van Ronk and the Ragtime Jug Stompers'. His ragtime guitar picking and choice of repertoire has since influenced many subsequent jug bands.



Another early recording group was Jolly Joe's Jug Band. released on his own Fonotone label as 78 rpm records. These were eventually assembled on an LP by the Piedmont label.

The first and only time a jug band scored a number 1 hit was with Gus Cannon's 'Walk Right In' recorded in 1963 by The Rooftop Singers. The song's success brought Cannon back into the Stax Records studios in Memphis for his last recording (at age 79) the



same year. The album, called 'Walk Right In', features Cannon on banjo and old friends Will Shade on jug and Milton Roby on washboard.

The national exposure of 'Walk Right In' contributed to the formation of several new jug bands — The Jim Kweskin Jug Band (Boston), featured the washtub bass and jug player Fritz Richmond, who later played jug on Warren Zevon's 'I'll Sleep When I'm Dead'. New York-based Even Dozen

Jug Band formed and featured Maria D'Amato, Joshua Rifkin, David Grisman, Stefan Grossman, John Sebastian and Steve Katz. Maria D'Amato switched to The Jim Kweskin Jug Band, later marrying guitarist Geoff Muldaur. In Austin Texas the 13th Floor Elevators formed as an electric jug band, featuring Tommy Hall as electric jug player. More jug bands appeared in the late 60s (in addition to the skiffle bands) including the Anglo-American Philharmonious Jug Band.

The characters from many of these bands then went on to form other bands. John Sebastian founded the pop music group The Lovin' Spoonful and later continued as a successful solo career. Country Joe and the Fish evolved from The Instant Action Jug Band. Mungo Jerry, who had morphed from an earlier blues group Good Earth, was in effect a jug band on their first live performances and recordings. Jesse Colin Young moved to the west coast and formed The Youngblood's, whose first hit was 'Grizzly Bear' was a jug band standard. Another group with jug band roots was the Grateful Dead. Jerry Garcia, Bob Weir, and Ron 'Pigpen' McKernan were in Mother

McCree's Uptown Jug Champions before forming The Warlocks – which evolved into Grateful Dead. A self-titled CD of Mother McCree's jug band music recorded in 1964 was released in 1999.

Pop-rock tributes to their jug band roots include 'Willie and the Poor Boys' by Creedence Clearwater Revival, and 'Jug Band Music' by The Lovin' Spoonful

In 1977, The children's Christmas special, 'Emmet Otter's Jug-Band Christmas' aired, based on a book written by Lillian Hoban and Russell Hoban, featuring a jug band composed of woodland-creature Muppets and a soundtrack composed by Paul Williams.



A documentary by Todd Kwait was about the history and influence of jug band music called Chasin' Gus's Ghost, first screened at the 2007 at the San Francisco Jug Band Festival.

So there we are, when we think of the jug bands, Will Shade, Son Brimmers and of course The Legendary Memphis band immediately comes to mind and so they should, but wow, there were and in fact are so many still carrying on the tradition.

The jug bands show us in graphic detail that the blues can be played on almost anything, from the most common instruments to the good ole sousaphone, to a comb and paper, long may it continue.

David R Howard

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