



## Jug Bands: Mostly the Unnoticed Music of America

People in rural America before the beginning of the 20th century had to make do with what they had at hand concerning food, clothing and entertainment. Things were made at home or by a neighbor. Common items had multiple uses: a washtub could be turned upside down to become a rhythm instrument, and the common jug could be made to sound like a tuba. African Americans developed a homemade instrument called the banjo for musical sounds. Other homemade instruments could be guitars, fiddles or spoons. These were played for just crazy fun to produce a musical sound.

Before the turn of the 19th century, these homemade bands toured in vaudeville shows and traveling medicine shows. There were no terms like *jazz* or *blues* for the music of the jug bands. Then, as the nation turned into a more urban society and the radio developed its presence, the new term *jazz* came into common use.

The rural band sound known as gutbucket, washboard, jute and jug band were considered novelty sounds before the term *jazz* came into being. A more urban jug band called the skiffle band started to appear in music. This sound came into use in the 1920s, and the first recording with a label using the word *skiffle* was by Jimmy O'Bryant with the Chicago Skiffers in 1925. These jug bands were still being recorded into the 1940s and then were lost to the more urban sounds.

Jazz became the popular sound for the sophisticated urban audiences. The big bands of Glenn Miller, Artie Shaw, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Guy Lombardo and others replaced the jug-band sound. Spike Jones and his City Slickers carried on the tradition of using common everyday items for sounds—car horns, cowbells, whistles and anvils with a hammer for his satirical songs.

The jug band saw a revival in the United States in the late 1950s and the 1960s with many rock stars. The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band started as a jug band. The revival of jug bands moved to other nations. The skiffle bands turned up in England in the 1950s, with many of the rock stars first playing in them. John Lennon played in a group called the Quarrymen. Mick Jagger and Van Morrison began their careers with skiffle bands.

Most books written on jazz and blues seldom recognize the link between jug bands and jazz and blues. However, these musicians of Jazz, blues and rock did not just wake up one day and play their distinct sounds. They started playing in jug bands and then took that rural sound and turned it into an urban sound.

Just listen to the jug bands, and a smile will come to your face and you may see the links to other musical forms.

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