One of the most distinctive sounds in the rich variety of American folk music is the sound of the jug band, the small country "breakdown" bands that developed in the 1920's into a colorful and exciting aspect of both the country blues and classic jazz. Although in the present revival of jug band music there has been a great deal of confusion as to what a jug band should sound like there was little of this confusion in the years when the jug bands were beginning to record.

The characteristic sound of the jug band was the sound of the jug, low and hollow, as it sounded above the high pitch of the violin, the harmonica, or even the clarinet and saxophone. There were other social reasons for the use of the jug - it was cheaply available and easy to carry around, as well as being similar to earlier African blown instruments - but it was the sound of the jug that set the bands apart. There was no use of instruments like the wash tub bass, which were part of the blues rather than jug band music. The tub bass, an Afro-African derivation of the African earth bow, is only a substitute for the more expensive and fragile string bass, without the distinctive tone of the jug.

The distinctiveness of the jug gave a special quality to the music as well, and there developed with the bands a large body of music suited to the jug bands. Usually it was country dance music and breakdowns, some of it related to the songs of the old minstrel theatre, but the greatest of the bands, like the Memphis Jug Band or Cannon's Jug Stompers could play intensely moving blues as well. There were actually two jug band styles that grew up together in the twenties, just as there were two styles in the blues. In the cities there was another jug band tradition that mingled with the classic jazz styles of the twenties; the greatest of the city jug bands Clifford Hayes's Dixieland Jug Band.

As with the blues, it was the city jug bands that recorded first. Clifford Hayes, who came from Louisville, Kentucky, recorded as early as 1923 or 1924 with his Old Southern Jug Band, a group that included a jug, a violin, tenor banjo, 6-string banjo, and muted cornet. When Will Shade, a young guitar player working along Beale Street in Memphis, decided to put a jug band together it was because he wanted to get a band like the Hayes' Jug Band. His band was at all times like the Louisville group, but American folk music is the richer for it. His "Memphis Jug Band" was one of the most successful of the country jug bands, and stayed together for a number of years, not only as a recording group, but as a novelty band for dances in the country areas near Memphis. It was the success of the Memphis Jug Band that led Ralph Peer, the most important of the early American folk collectors, to ask Will if there weren't more bands in Memphis. Will told him to get in touch with Gus Cannon, a medicine show banjo player and entertainer, and with Cannon's Jug Stompers the country jug band reached some of its highest musical levels.

The jug bands have almost entirely disappeared from the South, although until recently there were still occasional skiffle groups entertaining tourists that used a jug or a piece of pipe for novelty numbers. There are ugly social memories that are part of the life that produced jug band music and for many younger Negroes the music itself still has some of this stigma. From time to time there have been efforts made to revive the jug bands by city folk singers, in California in the late 1940's and in New York and Boston in the early 1960's, but they have been somewhat less than successful as a musical expression. Some of the early jug band music was casual and seemingly unconcerned with anything very serious, but the city singers somehow have managed to confuse this with the atmosphere of the vaudeville show and the dixieland band. In an important sense, however, the jug bands and their music will always be part of the American musical scene. They flowered at a moment when American folk music was being recorded, when country music and city music of every kind was being released by nearly every record company. On the early recordings there is still the sound of the jug band, with all of its swagger, all of its sensitivity, and, in a sense, all of its musical grandeur.
This group is, of course, the JooSt of Band, under a different name. The tune, as with When Gus Band 7. Struttin' The Blues by Clifford's Louis­­ville Jug Band. Clifford Hayes, violin; Cal Smith, tenor banjo; Earl McDonald, jug; unknown six-string banjo and cornet. 1924.

This is probably the earliest jug band recording, and it is appropriate that it was a recording by Clifford Hayes and the group that was to become the Dixieland Jug Blowers. Here is a jug band with much of the rhythmic drive of an early jazz group, even including a dimly recorded cornet. The Jug solo by Earl McDonald is particularly skilled, and already the young Cal Smith, on tenor guitar, demonstrates some of the brilliance that was to make him an important transitional figure in the development of modern jazz guitar. He was a nephew of Hayes', and remained with him for the rest of his long recording career.


Big Joe Williams remembered recording with a jug band in Birmingham about this time, and some of the men in this group may be the ones he has mentioned working with. Bogue Ben Covington was playing guitar and Jay Bird Coleman, the great blues harmonica player from Bessemer, Alabama, was one of the other musicians. It was a medicine show band working through the countryside in northern Mississippi and Alabama. Bill Wilson is another version of John Henry, even though his name has been changed, and in an early verse he is described as "... a wagon drivin' man."


King David's Jug Band is one of the shadow country groups who were recorded and forgotten; their names lost somewhere in a company file. The message, however, is not shadowy, but is in the best country tradition of rough "breakdown" dances. The jug, in this case, may be a piece of pipe, and it is interesting to notice that it is being used as a lead instrument. The singer, who also seems to be playing the jug, alternates choruses between the instrument and the voice.


When Gus Cannon recorded with his Jug Stompers for the last sessions he was working again with his old medicine show partner Rosie Woods, and Mule Get Up In The Alley was one of their favorites. Gus still remembers most of the words, and if he's in the mood he plays it on his banjo when someone drops by his small house on the outskirts of Memphis.

Band 7. Struttin' The Blues by Clifford's Louisville Jug Band. Clifford Hayes, violin; Cal Smith, tenor banjo; Earl McDonald, jug; unknown 6-string banjo and cornet. 1924.

This group is, of course, the Old Southern Jug Band, under a different name. The tune, as with most of their recordings, was one of Hayes' compositions.

Band 1, 2, and 3. Overseas Stomp, Whitewater Station, and She Done Sold It Out by the Memphis Jug Band. The personnel varies, but Will Weldon plays guitar on the first two selections, along with Jab Jones, Jug and vocal; Ben Ramey, kazoo; Vol Stevens, guitar; and Will Shade, harmonica. On the third selection Charlie Burse is playing tenor guitar, Robert Burse, voice, and Will Shade, harmonica and vocal. 1927, 1928, and 1934.

The Memphis Jug Band is perhaps the best known of the country jug bands, and their guitar will turn up in junk shops everywhere in the South, usually so enthusiastically played and replayed that it is impossible to hear much more than a din scratching over the surface noise. The band was led by Will Shade, and in its later years by Will and Charlie Burse together. It was a hazard group, but there was an exuberant enthusiasm in most of the recordings, and they even were able to perform moving slow blues like the well known "K. C. Blues" which was included in the Folkways' American Folk Music Anthology and the "Stelin', Stelin'" that was included in the RBF "The Country Blues" anthology. The group was casually organized when Will decided that he wanted to have a band "... like the boys in Louisville," the Clifford Hayes band. He was able to hold a group together for a number of years, as well as compose or arrange almost any number of songs and blues for a recording session; so the band is the most extensively recorded of any of the early jug bands. Often the songs were nondescript, like the She Done Sold It Out, but there were occasional moments like Overseas Stomp, when their material was richly humorous. The song begins as a tribute to Lindbergh's flight, but takes a number of turns by the time Jab Jones has finished singing it.

Band 4, 5, 6, and 7. Florida Blues, Banjoreno, Carpet Alley, and House Rent Rag by the Dixie Land Jug Blowers. Clifford Hayes, violin or alto saxophone; Cal Smith, tenor banjo or tenor guitar; Earl McDonald, jug; Henry Miles, violin; Hess Grundy, trombone; Dan Briscoe, piano; unknown six string banjo, unknown electrum banjo on Banjoreno, unknown second jug. The clarinetist on Carpet Alley and House Rent Rag is Johnny Dodds. Recorded in Chicago December 10, 1926 (bands 4 and 5) and December 11, 1926 (bands 5 and 6.)

The Dixieland Jug Blowers were the greatest of the city jug bands, and in their music can be heard a brilliant fusion of the rough country jug music with the most highly developed jazz of the middle twenties. The band was able to move from one mood to another without hesitation, and their recordings are of a high level of excellence. Florida Blues is remarkable for the fine jug solos of Earl McDonald, who is perhaps the finest jug player ever to record, and on Banjoreno, a tour­­de-force for tenor, electrum, and six string banjos, it is Cal Smith who drives the band. Carpet Alley is an impressive orchestral blues for which the greatest jazz clarinetist of the 1920's, the New Orleans musician Johnny Dodds, has been added; and at the same session House Rent Rag was recorded, with its "sermon" on the shortening of women's skirts and women's hair. All four performances were recorded in two winter days in Chicago in 1926, but they manage to demonstrate not only the fullness of the jug band's range, but also the tonal richness which the jug can give to a band.
Clifford Hayes kept his band together for many years, recording as Clifford Hayes Louisville Stompers when the jug bands had lost their popularity. It was in these later recordings in which Cal Smith, playing tenor guitar, was to develop a highly influential jazz style on pieces like Blue Guitar Stomp and Tenor Guitar Fiend. The band stayed together until Hayes' death early in the 1940's, and during the war the piano player and the trombone player, Dan Briscoe and Hess Grundy, were still playing for debutante parties and society dances. The Dixieland Jug Blowers, or - more properly - the various jug band groups led by Clifford Hayes, have left a deep imprint not only in the music of the jug bands, but in American popular music itself.

DIXIELAND JUG BLOWERS, LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY, 1927.
Personnel of this early rhythm band still remains to be identified.

photo courtesy RCA Victor Records