

## Facing the music: The origins of a repertoire ... and how a modest musical sideline turned into a showbusiness career

By R.W. Bacon ©2011

**(I.) Introduction.** In the last decade of our performance career, friends and followers of *The Goodtime Ragtime Vaudeville Revival* (and our other theatrical offering, *Mr. Slim & L.J. - Classic Comedy Juggling*) were more likely to remember the dazzling and precision club juggling or the daring acro-juggling stunts on the unicycle, rola-bola, or rolling globe, than our repertoire of snappy jazz, ragtime, and comedy songs played on conventional and unusual instruments. The “wow factor” of the juggling and physical comedy tended to overshadow the music, especially in shorter performances. In a theatre or after-dinner show of one-hour-plus, the music would get its proper showcase, but in a 25-30-minute outdoor fair/festival show, the real crowd-pleaser was invariably the juggling.

So when it became time recently to “face the music,” I felt there were many friends, followers, and fellow musicians who might be interested in not only the process of the collections project, but also the origins of the repertoire – a repertoire that more recent friends may have figured was buried in the attic with mementos of our days on the road.

The following pages first detail the musical song inventory project. Then your musical guide will reach into the halls of memory in an attempt to make sense of the origins and evolution of this repertoire. (After all, someone who in 2011 still sings songs like “Where Did Robinson Crusoe Go With Friday On Saturday Night?” should be a case for

some kind of study.) Along the way, you will see photos of the musical instruments L.J. & I employed to make musical merriment for the masses across the U.S. for 25 years.

**(II.) The collections project.** In late 2010, during a period in-between museum projects, I seized the time to undertake a much-needed collections project of my own. I decided it was time to “face the music”: i.e. the large repertoire of ragtime, early jazz, vaudeville, and comedy songs that was a major component of the now-retired theatrical show, *The Goodtime Ragtime Vaudeville Revival*. Along with my wife, L.J. Newton, we regaled audiences with hundreds of tunes cycled in-and-out of the show, belting them out to accompaniment of vintage tenor banjos, guitars, ukuleles, harmonicas, kazoos, musical saw, and novelty percussion. In 1983 we recorded an LP album (remember those vinyl records?), *A Panorama of Musical Americana*, which included 33 songs.

Since the early 1970s, records of this expanding repertoire have been kept in a motley collection of binders, notebooks, and folders of loose sheet music and lyric sheets. Frankly, the sheer number of songs makes this repertoire difficult to manage. A quicker, more efficient reference to the music and lyrics was called for. The time arrived to apply some museum-standard collections work to the musical repertoire.

The project was approached methodically, indexing songs, composers, and dates from my own binders & folders, sheet music & books, vintage vinyl LPs, and CDs from the 1980s forward. The result are digitized and

hard-copy “collections records” in three sections: (1) ragtime, jazz, vaudeville, and popular songs (organized chronologically); (2) blues (organized by the many rural and urban genres); and (3) old-time string band (organized by genre). Each section is indexed alphabetically. In all, the easy-to-use binder enumerates nearly 1200 songs: 631 red hot jazz, ragtime, vaudeville, and popular songs, mostly from 1900-1940; 309 blues-related songs in various sub-genres from jubilant jug band blues to amplified, harmonica-driven Chicago blues; 191 foot-stomping old-time string band tunes; and 35 originals.

The process was like taking a trip to various old stomping grounds (literally!) and strolling through the old neighborhoods. I renewed acquaintance with many old songs that were like “best friends” early in our performance career, but years ago slipped off the active set lists. Like loyal friends, songs like “If the River Was Whiskey,” “I’m a Vulture for Horticulture,” “You Can’t Get Enough of That Stuff,” or “I Like Bananas Because They Have No Bones” never let us down on stage.

Going forward, even though the show is officially retired, the old-school, hard-copy binder will be useful as a practice aid to keep the musical “chops” up to standard for the *Vaudeville Retrospective* illustrated lecture program, as it will enable efficient access to the music, lyrics, and performance notes across the entire 1200-song repertoire.

So that is a neat summary of the collections project. But upon completion, there were more reflections on not only the songs, but also the audience members, friends, and enthusiasts through the years who attended our shows and showed interest in our varied musical selections, our

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### Facing the music: The origins of a repertoire

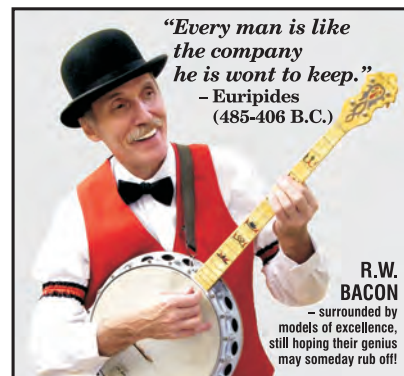
- I. Introduction
- II. The Collections Project
- III. Musical Influences ...  
Leading to the First Public Performances
- IV. Then What Happened?
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- VI. L.J. Newton, the Variety Arts, ‘Uptown,’ & ‘A Panorama of Musical Americana’
- VII. Time Marches On
- VIII. A Photo Gallery of Musical Instruments

#### Sidebar articles:

- Selections From the Repertoire
- A Few Words About Musical Aptitude
- Observations on Musical Literacy ... Etc.



### Facing the music ... in stellar company!



### *Facing the music: A gallery of instruments ... ... and selected songs from the repertoire*

The following are 233 audience favorites chosen from the recently-cataloged 1200-song repertoire.

**Selections from the early-mid 1970s repertoire:**

Animal Fair  
Cincinnati Blues  
Diving Duck Blues  
Don't Your Plums Look Mellow  
Highway 49  
Hump In My Back  
I Got a 99-Pound Woman (R.W.B.)  
I'm a Professional Nut (R.W.B.)  
Jug Band Music  
Make Me Down a Pallet On Your Floor  
Nobody Knows (R.W.B.)  
Please See That My Grave is Kept Clean  
Police Dog Blues  
Rukus Juice & Chitlin  
She Left Me a Mule to Ride  
She Moves Me  
Sittin' On Top of the World  
Stretchin' Them Things  
Tell Me Mama  
Warm It Up to Me  
Where Do the Aging Hippies Go (R.W.B.)

**A selection of late 1970s additions: (blues etc.)**

Big Boss Man  
Bugle Call Rag  
Corrina Corrina  
She's Been Diggin' My Potatoes  
I'm Bettin' On You  
I Was Afraid of That  
Loan Me Your Heart  
Mama Don't Allow  
My Bucket's Got a Hole In It  
Too Many Hands in the Persimmon Pie  
Sellin' That Stuff  
Sophisticated Mama  
Stop Usin' Me  
Your Biscuits Are Tall Enough For Me

**A selection of late 1970s additions (string band, etc.)**

Ain't No Use 'o' Me Workin' So Hard  
Blues in the Bottle  
Can I Sleep In Your Barn Tonight Mister  
Careless Love  
Cindy  
Crawdled Song  
Dance All Night  
With a Bottle In Your Hand  
Father's Whiskers

Flop-Eared Mule  
Goodbye Booze  
Hesitation Blues  
Hopalong Peter  
Hungry Hash House  
I've Been All Around This World  
Midnight Special  
Milwaukee Blues  
Mountain Dew  
Movin' Day  
My Mama She Scolds Me for Flirtin'  
The Phone Ain't Ringin' and I Ain't Singin' (R.W.B.)  
Stop That Knockin' On the Henhouse Door  
Stop That Woman From Ticklin' Me Under My Chin  
Thanks A Lot (R.W.B.)  
There Ain't No Bugs On Me  
Way Down the Old Plank Road  
Who Broke the Lock on the Henhouse Door?

**A selection of late 1970s additions: (jazz, pop, comedy, etc.)**

Ain't Misbehavin'  
Alcoholic Blues  
All of Me  
A-Razz-a-Ma-Tazz  
Avalon  
Button Up Your Overcoat  
Crazy Words, Crazy Tune  
Darktown Strutter's Ball  
The Day I Read a Book  
Five-Foot-Two  
Hand Me Down My Walkin' Cane  
I Got Rhythm  
I'm a Vulture for Horticulture  
I'm Looking Over a Four-Leaf Clover  
I'm Sittin' On Top of the World  
Margie  
Toot-Toot-Tootsie  
Trouble In Mind  
The State of Arkansas  
Sunny Side of the Street  
Sweet Lorraine  
Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah

**A selection of early 1980s additions: (jazz, ragtime, comedy, vaudeville)**

Alabama Jubilee  
Big Bad Bill Is Sweet William Now  
Birth of the Blues  
Can Broadway Do Without Me?  
Coney Island Washboard

Fast Movin' Night Train  
Floatin' Down to Cotton Town  
Hard-Hearted Hannah  
Hello Ma Baby  
I Get the Blues When It Rains  
I Guess I'll Get the Papers and Go Home  
I Had But Fifty Cents  
I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate  
I Wish I Was in Peoria  
I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter  
The Ragtime Life  
Red Hot Mama  
The Sheik of Araby  
Sweet Georgia Brown  
Take Me to the Land of Jazz

**A selection of late 1980s additions: (jazz, ragtime, comedy, vaudeville)**

Because, Just Because  
Huggin' and Chalkin' My Gal  
I Like Bananas  
Because They Have No Bones  
I Love to Go Swimmin' With Women  
I Love to Whistle  
I've Got a Feelin' I'm Fallin'  
Lydia the Tattooed Lady  
Milk 'Em in the Evenin' Blues  
My Gal is Good for Nothing But Love  
My Walking Stick  
Rhythm in My Nursery Rhymes  
Singin' in the Bathtub  
Spring Cleaning  
Thanks a Million  
Tiger Rag  
The Vegetable Song  
When Erastus Plays His Old Kazoo  
Where Did Robinson Crusoe Go With Friday on Saturday Night?  
You're My Dish

**A selection of 1990s additions: (jazz, ragtime, comedy, vaudeville)**

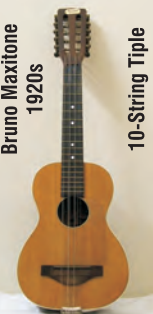
Doin' the Grizzly Bear  
Frim Fram Sauce  
I've Got Everything  
Ja-Da  
On the Beach at Waikiki  
Paddlin' Madeline Home  
Wait Till the Sun Shines Nellie  
When You Wore a Tulip  
Save the Bones for Henry Jones, 'Cause Henry Don't Eat No Meat  
Somebody Stole My Gal  
There'll Be Some Changes Made



Open-Back Five-String Banjo



1920s Banjo Uke



Bruno Maxitone 1920s 10-String Tiple



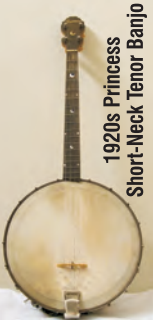
Roy Smeck Design 1963 Archtop F-Hole Tenor Guitar



Mussehl & Westphal Musical Saw



Eddie Connors 1950 Vega "Arthur Godfrey" Baritone Ukulele



1920s Princess Short-Neck Tenor Banjo



Roy Smeck Soprano Ukulele



1920s President Tenor Banjo



Dobro Steel-Body Resonator Guitar



### Facing the music ...

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instruments, and our upbeat razz'm'tazz style. We were always glad to chat after a show, and we regularly fielded questions and comments like the following: "Where did you ever find that song?", "You grew up with Elvis, the Beatles, and the Stones – How did you get into *this* stuff?", "Did you build all these instruments?", or "I didn't think anybody played those tunes anymore!"

The following pages attempt to answer four decades of "frequently asked questions" about the origins of the repertoire, the multifarious musical influences, our instruments (both conventional stringed instruments and novelty percussion), and the evolution of our performance.

**(III.) Musical influences.** Everyone has their own story of intersection with popular culture and music growing up, and here's the beginning of mine: Music and song were all around me, all the time, from the earliest days.

- **The family.** My father, W. H. Bacon (1922-2001), was, among many other things, a Big Band era singer in the mode of droning baritone Vaughn Monroe. He was always singing around the house "to keep his pipes tuned." ("Smoke Gets In Your Eyes," "Racing With the Moon," etc.) My maternal grandmother, Edith (King) Weeks (1900-1983), was a formally-trained pianist, singer, and music director whose earliest work was playing accompaniment for movies in the



Above is 82nd Street in Jackson Heights, Queens, N.Y. in the late 1940s ... just about the time I first arrived on the scene.

silent film era. She played her classical "three Bs" for practice, but she could play all the popular tunes of the Roaring '20s. ("If You Knew Susie," "Baby Face," etc.) As a toddler I played on the floor among stacks of her colorful sheet music, while she baked her cakes and pies. So between those two people alone, even as a little tyke I was steeped in the jazz, ragtime, novelty, and popular song from the first half of the 20th century. A tremor halted my grandmother's playing in the mid-1960s, but my father remained a singing, talking, and walking encyclopedia of song lyrics all through his years.

Beyond the music that filled home and family life, there was a potpourri of external influences:

- **The radio.** In the early 1950s, living in a small apartment in Jackson Heights, Queens, N.Y., as my Dad began his long career in commercial aviation, our family had a radio years before we got our first TV. He had been a radio officer in the Navy before and during WWII, and on merchant ships after the war, so radio technology was a big part of his life – he built our radios. As a pre-schooler, I remember the altar-like presence of the radio on the kitchen table, playing all day in a time when, in New York City at least, jazz still mixed with pop on the AM airwaves. One could enjoy the vocal artistry of Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan standing out among the insipid pop tunes of the day. This was before the first of my two sisters was born in 1956, so my Mom could afford the liberty to sing and tap dance along to the music while she was working in the kitchen. In the summer, with the windows open, or sitting on "da stoop," I was fascinated by the music that I could hear coming from an apartment across the alley – it was the Latin jazz I would later recognize as from Perez Prado and Tito Puente.

- **The record player.** As a pre-schooler I had a record-player – the kind with speaker actually on the arm that held the stylus. I had a stack of nursery rhyme records, but my favorite record was Arthur Godfrey singing "Bulldog On the Bank." I think "Animal Fair" was on the flip side of this 1952 recording, a song I later used in performance. And of course I wore out my copy of "Davy Crockett,

King of the Wild Frontier" (1954).

I played my father's demo records of "There, I've Said It Again" (1944) and "Dance Ballerina, Dance" (1947) until they were worn flat. I sure wish I had them to listen to now.

- **The television.** About 1954 my family got its first TV (... shortly after our first telephone!), and I was able to see and hear all the ancient favorites like Sophie Tucker (1886-1966), Eddie Cantor (1892-1964), and Jimmy Durante (1893-1980) on the variety programs hosted by Ed Sullivan (1901-1974) and Milton Berle (1908-2002). While sitting on the couch next to my Dad, who was also a nightclub sleight-of-hand artist, I would absorb his critique or praise of the various acts. Two performers I recall from this period who regularly dredged up the old songs were Arthur Godfrey (1903-1983) (with his ukulele) and Robert Q. Lewis (1920-1991).

- **Jackson Heights, Queens, N.Y.** Through most all of the 1950s, my pre-school and elementary school years, I was living within blocks of so many later musical influences. My Dad told me then that our section of Queens was popular with musicians, theatre folks, and airline employees of nearby LaGuardia Airport, but that didn't matter much to a five-year-old when we took our long walks. (Not everybody owned or needed a car in those days!) I went to kindergarten with Ella Fitzgerald's son, but it was only years later that I learned about Louis Armstrong, Bill Kenny (Ink Spots), Jimmy Rushing, Cannonball Adderley, Clark Terry, Tony Bennett, and others living in close radius in Corona, East Elmhurst, and Astoria. (Today tourists can take a jazz tour of Queens, which includes a stop at the Louis Armstrong house museum on 107th St.) Guitar legend Les Paul (1915-2009) lived two blocks away above the corner meat market on Northern Boulevard that my mother and I walked by all the time, and with his wife, Mary Ford (1924-1977), recorded their famous version of "How High the Moon" there in 1953.

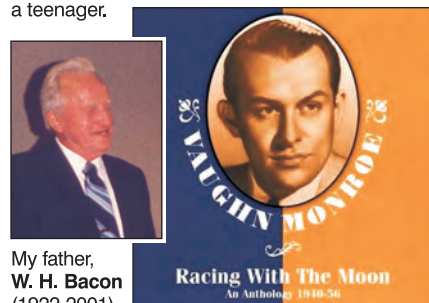
- **Summers on the mountaintop.** In the 1950s and early 1960s I spent summers helping out at my paternal grandmother's lodging house and my grandfather's limousine service in the small mountaintop town of Tannersville, N.Y., in the northern High Peaks area of the Catskills. Although remnants of the town's Victorian-era hotel heyday remained, in the 1950s Tannersville was bustling with Armenian-American resorts and clubs. To this day I am still under the spell of the hard-driving, exotic Armenian "kef" and belly-dance music that I heard every summer night as a boy.

The Tannersville clubs were the summer venues for the same top-notch Armenian, Turkish, and Greek musicians that played the rest of the year at the ethnic clubs on 8th

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My grandmother, Edith (King) Weeks (1900-1983), had a huge collection of colorful sheet music. She began playing for the silent movies as a teenager.



My father, W. H. Bacon (1922-2001), and his vocal role model, Vaughn Monroe (1911-1973), "The Voice With Hair On Its Chest."

### Facing the music ...

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Avenue in New York City – including the great Marko Melkon (1895-1963). (A few years ago I bought a baglama saz at a flea market and set about to learn to play this music ... in the semi-tone scales ... in 9/8 time.)

During these 1950s summers I also listened to my grandfather's 1930s console radio – he was a country music fan, and up on the mountain he could pull in WWVA from Wheeling, West Virginia. This was my first real exposure to bluegrass, commercial country music, and artists like Hank Williams, Hank Snow, Ernest Tubb, and Little Jimmy Dickens (... and others who I would later work with on "The Corn Dog Circuit").

• **My own radio.** By the late 1950s my family was living on Long Island, N.Y., about 40 miles from New York City. For Christmas one year I received my own transistor radio! It was probably about 4" x 6", so I could take it everywhere. In New York, the airwaves presented an embarrassment of riches. I

listened to the top-40 stations with the strongest signal, of course, but also was drawn to the smaller R&B and Doo-Wop stations from the city. As for 1950s rock'n'roll, while I was very much aware of Elvis Presley and the rockabilly crowd, in that genre I gravitated more towards Chuck Berry. Like so many musicians of my generation who grew up in the 1950s on the rock'n'roll of Big Joe Turner, Bill Haley, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, and so many others, my brain was so pummelled by the blues form that it probably became integrated into my musical DNA at a young age. Maybe that's why I recoiled painfully from the treacly offerings of 1950s pop music like "How Much is That Doggie in the Window" by Patti Page, or anything by Pat Boone.

• **The 1960s.** It has been said that "If you remember the '60s, you weren't really there." I am amused by the quotation, but I do remember the 1960s (... most years, anyway), and I was there – hanging with my friends, playing sports, forging a career as a journalist, being a part of social/political change, going to college – and ... listening to the radio! In 1962 the family moved to the Boston area to accommodate my father's aviation career, and I toted my transistor radio, listening to the top-of-the-pops on the Boston AM stations. In the ensuing years in high school I followed the whole Beatles/ Rolling Stones development along with the rest of my generation. I also found Boston's R&B station, WILD (wild gospel ... and Howlin's Wolf!), and on WBZ, tuned into Dick Summer's folk music show on Sunday nights (Phil Ochs, Bob Dylan, etc.). I recall that the first-and-only record I ever bought in high school was by Ray Charles (a 7" 45-rpm of "Georgia On My Mind," with "Hit the Road Jack" on the flip side).

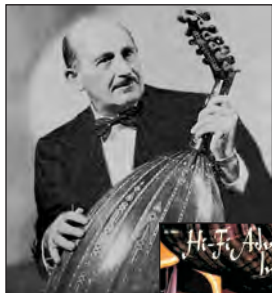
When I was about 14 years old, the school administered an aptitude test to everyone. My lowest scores were in music and art. This didn't faze me one bit at the time, but it has

since provoked chuckles when I consider that I went on to make a career as a musician and performing artist.

• **College years: Syracuse University.** In 1967 I packed off to Syracuse University, absolutely sure of what I was going to do with my life. When I was 15-years-old I began paid work as a journalist, and now I had earned a spot at one of the finest journalism schools. I would continue to work as a reporter, editor, publication designer, and in graphic production for a decade before making the break to full-time showbusiness. Yet the journalist's creed, curiosity, and commitment to public understanding were permanently embossed early on, and have influenced every endeavor since.

Musically, my experience at Syracuse was influenced by proximity to the Black neighborhoods around the campus. My two next-door dorm-mates were African-Americans on the basketball team, and the dorm was awash with the '60s Motown Sound day and

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**Marko Melkon** (1895-1963) was a master of the oud (the Armenian fretless lute), and was also a charismatic entertainer.



Marko Melkon played in the Tannersville, N.Y. belly dance clubs during the summer. At right is the cover of his 1958 album.



Above is the **Madison Street** neighborhood in Syracuse where I lived off-campus c. 1970-71 – a mixed, low-rent area two blocks from the Regent Theatre, the Soul Food Kitchen, and the ravages of the 1967 race riots. Inset, in contrast, is SU's iconic **Hall of Languages**, about a half-mile walk up onto "the hill."

### A few words about musical aptitude

Growing up, I liked music, but I never believed I had any special aptitude for it. I plunked out melodies on my grandmother's piano. I tooted along with the rest of the 3rd-grade class in recorder lessons – until I could no longer keep up with the fancy fingering on "Loch Lomond." I never had a guitar or played in a 50s or 60s rock band. I had a plastic trumpet once, but it broke. In school and college, the only things I "played" with gusto were baseball and football. I didn't begin playing stringed instruments until my early 20s. And I was terrible. I could hardly stand listening to myself. But by that time I was driven by my own developing interest.

What I did discover along the way is that I have two musical assets that enabled me to become a musician: (1) a "good ear" that enables me to sing and play in-tune and on-pitch, and (2) a swinging sense of rhythm – unfathomable to millions of my Anglo-Saxon brethren, but an essential life-force in blues and jazz. For some reason I "feel the spirit" of this music, though it is difficult, if not impossible, to explain to a non-musician. (As Louis Armstrong famously replied to the question "What is jazz?": "Man, if you gotta ask, you'll never know.")

So whatever facility I have acquired is through (1) trusting my "ear," (2) "feeling the spirit," (3) following up with music theory studies, (4) practicing arduously to make my fingers go where-and-when they are supposed to go, and (4) selecting very carefully songs for

public presentation that are within my instrumental and vocal limitations – and then rehearsing them obsessively.

Half a lifetime later, on occasion I am flattered by those who would call my tenor banjo or guitar-playing "expert" or "masterful." Such compliments are graciously accepted, but I know otherwise. With years of preparation and practice, L.J. and I were proud to present a musical repertoire that was polished, thoroughly professional, tight, clean, crisp, upbeat, and entertaining. But it was never stratospherically virtuosic.

Therefore reader, if, like me, you are not a musical "natural," go ahead and follow your musical interest anyway. With enough desire, you'll make incremental breakthroughs and have fun along the way. And who knows where that fun may take you! ■

– R.W. Bacon



### Facing the music ...

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night. Also, among our various escapades together, we made the off-campus rounds of the “down home” watering holes that played R&B artists like Bobby “Blue” Bland, Junior Parker, Solomon Burke, and others on the juke box. I may have even heard Jimmy Reed or Little Milton for the first time at one of those places. These were artists invisible to most of my contemporaries, whose stereo turntables were stacked with the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and the rest. One good friend took a non-credit course in the evolution of Mississippi Delta Blues, and in his enthusiasm, implored me to listen to the music. The relationship of this music to that of Eric Clapton and Cream, John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Canned Heat, etc., was obvious at once. Supplementing this musical exposure was my subscription to *Downbeat* magazine, the chronicle of the jazz world since 1934.

At Syracuse there were blues bands in the clubs, oldies bands at the outdoor festivals, rock concerts in the field house, and folk performers in the basement coffeehouse. I soaked them all up, from the big-names to the no-names. As for recordings, well, I didn't own a stereo, and owned just one LP – by Wilson Pickett. (A few years later, playing catch-up, I bought “best-of” albums by Cream, Hendrix, the Doors, Savoy Brown, Bob Dylan, other favorites of the day ... and finally my own David Bromberg and Ry Cooder albums.)

During the summer while working as a newspaper journalist – shadowing George Wallace's 1968 presidential campaign, writing too many obituaries of Vietnam casualties, and reporting on escaped livestock cavorting on highways – I also had assignments to cover jazz performances at Lennie's-On-The-Turnpike (Lennie Sogoloff's legendary jazz mecca in Peabody, Mass.) and Castle Hill (Ipswich, Mass.). Pilgrimages to the Newport Jazz Festival and the Newport Folk Festival in 1969 further expanded my musical horizons. (Woodstock? While visiting a friend in Middletown, N.Y., we got within 15 miles, contemplated the congestion and crush of humanity – and turned around!)

Living off-campus in Syracuse on the fringe of “the hood” and covering the city's criminal court cases as a newspaper reporter enhanced my education. After hours, I soaked up the musical interests of my housemates: One whispered folk songs over his delicate 12-string guitar. One spun bluegrass and acoustic music on his turntable. The old man among us – at 33 – sung excerpts of Wagner operas in *basso profundo*. Another listened to Joni Mitchell and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Neighbors included a dancer with the local ballet company, her husband, an oboist with the Syracuse Symphony, and a young doctor/psychiatrist-in-training who introduced me to

At right is the R&B & blues band, **Bad Medicine**, based in Syracuse 1968-1975. At far right is my first blues guru, **Greg Johnson**.



the psychedelic string band, the Holy Modal Rounders. Constant was the background music of the era, from the Airplane to Zappa.

After college I had the good fortune to meet co-worker Greg Johnson, the bass player for Bad Medicine, the preeminent purveyor of amplified Chicago Blues in central New York. (Greg was also a bluegrass bassist and co-founder of the Down City Ramblers, whose first banjo player was teenage Tony Trischka, a Syracuse native who would go on to become a 5-string banjo icon.) Thanks to Greg I became a Muddy Waters fanatic, with the aim of emulating Muddy's great harmonica accompanists like Little Walter Jacobs, Big Walter Horton, and Junior Wells. Since at this time I was also editing music reviews at a second job with a small weekly, the journalist in me was telling me that I should read everything I could get my hands on about the origins and evolution of this music, so this was the beginning of the musical and theatrical research that has continued to the present.

At one point I wrote a few songs that another friend wanted to try out for his fledgling rock band. He arranged weekly practice time with his bandmates on Sunday mornings in a cavernous appliance store in downtown Syracuse. So the first audience for my songwriting creations was a row of washing machines. Despite proven facility with the language, I wrote sophomoric songs well into my post-graduate years.

In Syracuse I also dabbled in avant garde sounds for a time. I rescued an old piano plate from the curb after my slumlord cleaned out the tomb-like basement of the dilapidated Victorian. I polished it up, hauled it to my next apartment, and played it like a giant zither. When I moved to Boston, I left it behind for the next musical searcher. (This was likely for the piano of Blanche Weaver Baxter (1856-1947), a notable Broadway actress who retired to Syracuse and lived out her life in the Madison Street house when it was in its better days.)

• **A period of study & practice.** After moving to the Boston area in 1972, I began playing a spare guitar given to me by longtime friend and jazz guitarist, Dennis Comeau, and learning to how to play the harmonica in a rack at the same time. Blues only, of course. The decision to face my own perceived musical ineptitude must have been a drive for self-expression. I had attained a certain facility on the harmonica, and figured that I just might be able to play basic rhythm accompaniment to a harmonica and vocal lead. It was worth a try. Dennis showed me a few things to get started, and I borrowed appropriate self-teaching books from the library. I became one of the denizens of the Boston-area clubs that regularly hosted the aging legends of the blues (Joe's Place in Cambridge, Paul's Mall & the Jazz Workshop in Boston, and Sandy Berman's Jazz Revival in Beverly, Mass.). I made a point to arrive as early as possible, so I could quite literally learn “at the knee” of Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Big Walter Horton, Roosevelt Sykes, Junior Wells & Buddy Guy, James Cotton, Albert King, Freddie King, and so many others. Those greats that I could not see in person were pursued and studied through their recordings. I haunted the used record stores, especially Skip Kohonen's Record Exchange in Salem, Mass., snapping up as much musical raw material in various genres as I could afford.

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**How blue can you get?:** A photo montage of some of the primary influences on the blues repertoire.







**MEMPHIS JUG BAND**  
Will Shade (1898-1966)  
Charlie Burse (1901-1965)

Above, the upbeat sound of Will Shade and the Memphis Jug Band in the 1930s was a style of blues I could present convincingly.

### Facing the music ...

*continued from previous page*

The public library was only a few blocks from our apartment in Salem in those years, and I took advantage of the large holdings of blues/jazz books and recordings. I took an adult-education course in music theory in Boston. A co-worker at the time was a classical music enthusiast who took me under his wing and advised me about essential recordings – this amounted to a veritable survey of the history of Western music. I listened to all the most informed blues and jazz DJs on Boston’s radio dial (Ron Della Chiesa, Tony Cennamo, Ray Smith, Mae Cramer, and others). And I played the guitar-and-harmonica blues at every spare moment. It was fun, and I held out hope that I might reach a point when I could stand to listen to myself. Yet at this time there was absolutely no conscious desire, goal, or fantasy to play in public.

• **Jug band blues.** In my studies of the blues, as much as I was absorbed by the musical form, I was also bothered by the



**Jesse Fuller** (1890-1975) was the direct inspiration for building a one-man jug band. Shown above are his hi-hat cymbal and foot-operated string-bass. Not shown is his foot-operated washboard.

incongruity of young middle-class white guys like myself growling out mournful lyrics like Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “Whoooaah, can a matchbox hold my clothes?” Maybe John Hammond or the Allman Brothers could pull it off, but it did not feel quite right to me. Also, my journalist’s skepticism (i.e. my bullshit detector) was irritated by the pretentious tone of some blues scholars who ascribed the exalted nobility of high art to the semi-literate squalls of proud, capable, but simple juke-joint entertainers. (In my view they did not need to be artificially inflated – their emotive impact speaks for itself.) In short, the good-time jug band blues players like Will Shade, Gus Cannon, Big Joe Williams, Bo Carter, Tampa Red, the Mississippi Sheiks, and Jesse Fuller came to be more to my liking. Furthermore, I felt more comfortable singing the songs, as they were more representative of my own temperament. There was no need for the phony growling, moaning, or posing.

• **Jesse Fuller: The inspiration for the one-man band rig.** The peppy jug band blues of Jesse Fuller (1890-1975) spoke to me loud-and-clear. Jesse Fuller played 12-string guitar, harmonica and kazoo in a rack, and with his feet, a high-hat cymbal, a washboard, and a pedal-operated string bass. And he was a warm and charming singer. “This is my kind of blues,” I thought: high-energy, wild, physical, upbeat, and uptempo. “My feet are pumping up-and-down when I play this music anyway,” I thought. “Why not go ahead and put some pedals under them?!” So I set about to design and build some improvised percussion from a washboard, springs, pulleys, hinges, rope, and a clattering box of kitchen stuff bought at a thrift store. I bought a kazoo and stuck it in the harmonica rack. I hooked a jug onto my guitar strap so I could play a bass line along with the guitar. The result? No one should be permitted to have so much fun ... or to make so much racket. I was tickling my own funnybone nearly to the point of delirium. It was at this time that I first considered that this crazy combination of musical and visual excitement might give the same kind of lift to others.

• **The first public performances.** One summer I decided to use some vacation time from work for a musical and sociological experiment. My purpose was to observe how contemporary folks on the public streets in the 1970s recession responded to a brand of acoustic music that was commonplace on the streetcorners of many cities in the 1920s and in the Depression years of the 1930s. My one-man jug band blues – still primitive but progressing steadily – was rooted in the same 4/4 time and blues form as contemporary popular rock music. I wanted to bypass the corporate music middlemen, take the music directly to the people, without dependence on the electric company, and gauge the response. I prepared meticulously, not only the music,



Above, the first-ever promo photo for “Scrub-Board Slim, the perambulating one-man jug band.” (1974)

but also the between-song verbal patter. In short, response was overwhelmingly positive from the very first day.

My week of vacation hauling my guitar and one-man jug band to downtown Salem for lunchtime street-shows proved additive. After vacation, I tried summer weeknights, and then weekends at Salem Willows Park. The feedback (and the cash-flow) was so encouraging, I set out for “the big-time” crowds at Boston Common, where I kept busy on weekends through the fall.

By the end of that first season I began to understand what my father often intoned about performing, that it was “a noble profession.” I experienced first-hand how the force of human energy and bright music could lift spirits beyond my own, and transform the entire ambiance of a public space.

### (IV.) Then what happened?

**The early repertoire.** Those readers who were there for the earliest performances know that the repertoire in the early 1970s was blues, blues, and more blues. Wild, uptempo Memphis-style jug band tunes on resonator

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Above is one of the first incarnations of the one-man-band rig – a design that would be continually refined.



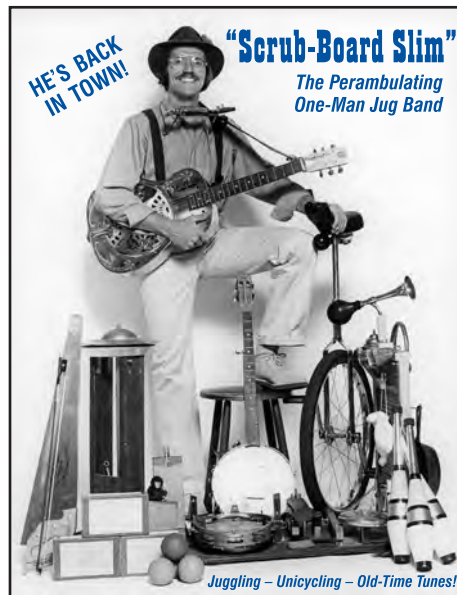
### Facing the music ...

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guitar, vocal, blazing harmonica solo, and foot-operated percussion (ex.: Gus Cannon's "Madison Street Rag," Big Joe Williams' "Don't Your Plums Look Mellow," etc.) were leavened with classic Mississippi Delta Blues played bottleneck style, using a glass cigar tube instead of a store-bought slide (ex.: Muddy Waters' "She Moves Me"). Further spicing the mix were a handful of Texas blues (ex.: Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Please See That My Grave is Kept Clean") and Piedmont Blues (ex.: Blind Blake's "Police Dog Blues"). Vocally, a leather-lunged capacity to project these tunes was more important than mellifluous tones. My guitar technique advanced in a big way when a young audience member on a park bench in Salem, Mass., took an interest in what I was doing, and after-hours in months to come showed me some new fingerpicking patterns. (This fellow so willing to share guitar tips was Steve "Wah" Kerans, only about 20-years-old, but already playing professionally and getting his music career under way.)

I encouraged active participation in my street shows and festival performances. After a few tunes and working the crowd for awhile, I would pass out spare kazoo's, spoons, and small percussion instruments to both kids and adults. This proved to be a crowd-pleasing show-closer. (I always reserved the jug for the loudest, most rambunctious kid in the audience. After three minutes huffing into the jug, the kid would be exhausted.)

The most fulfilling aspect of the first season performing in Salem and Boston was seeing thousands of workaday frowns on the streets turn into smiling faces. Being out in the public led to many contacts and offers of *paid* engagements. I was flabbergasted – but it gave me even more incentive to craft a smooth presentation to give the optimum context to my clattering, raucous jug band blues. I suppose the timing was right: The whole country was ramping up a few years before the 1976 Bicentennial, and everything



Above is one of the first "Scrub-Board Slim" promo photos that included the juggling and unicycle props (c. 1977). Soon the limiting "scrub-board" descriptive would be dropped in favor of "Mr. Slim."

"traditional" and "historical" was cool – even if it was only traditional jug band music. At a festival late in my first season, a craft vendor dubbed me "Scrub-Board Slim" and talked-it-up to his friends. The alliterative moniker stuck. My first business card: "Scrub-Board Slim, the Perambulating One-Man Jug Band."

**Polishing a public presentation.** Within a year the demand for paid engagements – on working weekdays, even – was such that I decided to line up an entire summer/fall season of fair and festival bookings, resign my job in June (coinciding with the complete repayment of my college loans!), and carry on my grand experiment, figuring I would enjoy this one-time shot at an adventure I never could have predicted. When the bookings ran dry at the end of the season, I would simply take my decade of experience and education and pick up where I left off in the working world. But in short, the bookings never ran out, and the rest is history – a rewarding 35-year career as a performing artist. I will spare the workaholic details of growing a business. As a writer, editor, designer, and speaker, I was fortunate to have these skills to apply to promotion and marketing.

As for the musical repertoire, once a commitment was made to proceed from "sociological/observational experiment" to the music/entertainment/performing arts field, the song repertoire was adjusted for individual markets. At first the plan was to concentrate on the hundreds of fairs and festivals in New England and New York. In many cases the fair/festival setting enabled the familiar street performance dynamic to work for me.

That dynamic certainly worked for me in Boston and Cambridge (and later in other East Coast cities), as I was getting quite a bit of

publicity as part of the first wave of street performers in the mid-1970s. I had joined forces with Stephen Baird, Ruthanna Welch, and Paul Cole (Sgt. Pepperoni's One-Man Band) as the Boston Street Singers Cooperative, advocating for unrestricted street performance. In August of 1976 I was hired as entertainment for opening day for Boston's redeveloped Faneuil Hall Marketplace (Quincy Market), which immediately became the choice busking venue in Boston. The high-visibility Quincy Market dates supplemented paid engagements until 1981, when our heavily-booked touring show schedule made it impossible to continue. (Also, the old-school theatrical agents we worked for frowned on busking!)

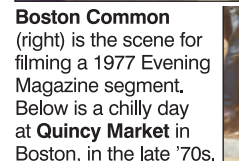
In addition to fairs and festivals, I responded to many inquiries about educational programs in schools. I worked up a school assembly presentation that was augmented with classroom visits and up-close demonstrations.

**For the fair/festival market,** I decided to add a raft of wild old-time string band tunes from the likes of Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers and Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers, songs like "Can I Sleep in Your Barn Tonight, Mister;" and "Stop That Knockin' On the Henhouse Door." Recordings of appearances on 1970s TV shows indicate that I was playing these tunes at inhuman tempos – driving occasional partner "Fiddlin' Betsy" Rose to the firewall at nearly 200

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**Taking it to the streets in the 1970s.** At left is an early incarnation of the one-man jug band at Salem Market Days in Salem, Mass.



**Boston Common** (right) is the scene for filming a 1977 Evening Magazine segment. Below is a chilly day at Quincy Market in Boston, in the late '70s.



**For school programs,** one theme was advocating creative do-it-yourself homemade music with improvised instruments.



### Facing the music ...

*continued from previous page*

beats-per-minute. (The audience was paramount. I aimed to please, and I gave every song everything I could give.) This music represented a kind of Anglo-Saxon parallel to the jug band blues of the 1920s-30s. The 5-string banjo was an essential addition to the presentation. I learned the “phony frailing” in C-tuning from Pete Seeger’s banjo instruction book, and adapted a three-finger picking style in G-tuning from my own guitar work.

**For the school presentations,** I set aside the Prohibition songs and double-entendre hokum blues, and instead expanded to a big-picture look at the broad range of traditional and folk songs. Fun with home-made music was a theme that ran through the program. For classroom demonstrations I added the jaw harp, spoons, and rhythm bones.

**The Old-Time Music Institute.** At every show in these early years I placed in front of the performance space a dispenser of 8.5"x14" flyers. These flyers, with the heading “The Scrub-Board Slim Old-Time Music Institute,” included an annotated bibliography; a selected discography of jug band, jazz, and string band music; suggestions for making home-made instruments; specialized lesson information; and, of course, contact and booking details. (If this seems prehistoric, remember this was over two decades before Internet marketing.) Over the first few years these flyers led to many bookings, banjo students, and guest appearances on radio shows giving commentary and spinning my own records.

**Speaking of traditional and folk:** Another market that we would work in for years to come was the college coffeehouse/pub circuit. This was jump-started after being engaged for the prestigious Philadelphia Folk Festival in 1977 & 1978 (Egad! It was nerve-racking when first performing in the company of giants like Pete Seeger, Michael Cooney, Steve Goodman, Stan Rogers, Roy Bookbinder, etc.). At these and later festivals and conferences we were fortunate to enjoy the company of hundreds of fellow musicians in every style, and share and absorb plenty at the same time. It was the repertoire, instrumentation, and physical energy that made us stand out from the crowd, not the musical virtuosity or poetic songwriting. At subsequent NACA college showcase events, especially if on the bill with a half-dozen more introspective singer-songwriters, we would really wake up the crowd. We actually felt sorry for some of the musicians we admired who had to perform in our wake.

**Music ... on TV!** Before the days of cable TV and 900 channels, even medium-sized cities had their own TV stations and magazine-format shows. In the early years it seemed like I was playing wild jug band music on all of them. I also clattered along in

multiple episodes of “The American Trail,” a nationally-syndicated show sponsored by Agway Farm Products. On WGBH, the PBS station in Boston, all my gear was dragged into the studios a number of times for appearances on the live-audience, nightclub-set show, Club 44. A feature segment on Evening Magazine (1977), produced by WBZ in Boston, complete with my music and an interview by Robin Young, was used as filler all over the country on NBC stations for years. For PBS, the popular children’s television program, Zoom (1972-1978), recruited me to lead a parade of dancing youngsters for a promo clip. Since it was instrumental only, I chose the Tampa Red/Georgia Tom Dorsey hokum blues composition, “She’s Been Sellin’ That Stuff,” with a red-hot harmonica lead over the resonator guitar. The title, lyrics, or subject matter were never revealed until now, but the executives must have liked the song. The promo clip ran through years of reruns, and I was engaged as entertainment for the VIP event held by PBS at the top of New York’s World Trade Center. Another stimulating project in the 1970s was writing and

recording the soundtrack for a short film on the “Hoosier Poet,” James Whitcomb Riley, and his poem, “The Raggedy Man.”

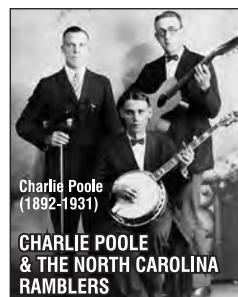
**(V.) The show repertoire expands & evolves.** After working solo for a few seasons and nurturing the business, three developments had a profound impact on the evolution of the musical repertoire and on our future career in the performing arts: (1) The demand for a general audience stage show, (2) The musical leap into the 4-string world of the tenor banjo, and (3) The immersion in the world of variety ... and the discovery of an uncommon aptitude for juggling, acrobatics, and physical comedy.

**(1) The demand for stage shows.** With every appearance, I made more and more contacts, and calls came in seeking my show for conventions, meetings, organizations, clubs, and after-dinner shows everywhere from hotels to church basements. (At this time the old-school Boston agents started sniffing around, figuring they might as well get a piece of the action, too.) The general audience stage show freed me from the narrow focus of the school presentations, yet demanded more substance than a fair or festival show. I expanded the repertoire to offer tunes in a wider variety of genres. I thought it would be good for self-preservation to be an artistic “moving target.”

**(2) The 4-string repertoire.** A friend and former housemate in Syracuse, Bob Young (1943-2009), visited from New York, and gifted me with an instrument he had no use for – a baritone ukulele, just like Arthur Godfrey’s! This gift opened to me the entire new world of the 4-string repertoire. When I buried myself in compendious jazz fakebooks (with tabulature), I was flooded with memories of all the 1920s tunes I used to hear my grandmother play as a kid. Almost immediately I added songs to the show like “Crazy Words, Crazy Tune,” “Toot-Toot-Tootsie,” “Avalon,” “All of Me,” “Sunny Side of the Street,” and many more. I was energized by 4-string jazz. It was instantly more stimulating and challenging to me than the “three chords and a cloud of dust” approach to the still-beloved wild jug band and string band tunes. I sought out more books and recordings to meet this interest.

The jazz and pop songs of the 1920s-30s also demanded real melodious singing. Unfortunately I did not inherit my father’s deep baritone, and, in my 20s, my voice had a “Jim Henson” quality – in other words, when vocally lazy, I had a tendency to sound like Kermit the Frog, or Ernie of Sesame Street. This forced me to harness and nurture my vocal instrument to build on its strengths and work around its weaknesses. (I’m glad to report that the voice is at its best-ever timbre today, at age 60-plus, and for the chosen repertoire, it remains positively ... adequate.)

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**Can I sleep in your barn tonight, mister?** Above is a photo montage showing just a few influences upon the early old-time string band repertoire.



### Facing the music ...

*continued from previous page*

The 4-string musical arsenal expanded to include tenor banjo, tenor guitar, 10-string tiple, baritone uke, banjo-uke, and soprano uke. (A frequent audience member, Dennis Broadbent, a sharp-eyed antiques dealer, alerted me to several of these vintage instruments that are cherished today and still in use.) The tenor banjo, especially, has proven powerfully evocative of the atmosphere of vaudeville and the “Roaring ’20s.”

(3) **Juggling and the variety arts.** When I was asked to perform at a club in Salem Willows, Mass., I first thought it was a pub. But it turned out to be a club of amateur and professional clowns, magicians, jugglers, tap dancers, barrel-jumping ice-skaters, and balancing acts hosted by veteran juggler and unicyclist Otto Persson (1937-1994). Otto and the people of this club drew both L.J. and myself into the fascinating world of variety entertainment. Musical highlights from this period include learning to play the musical saw from Laura Pevear (1913-2003), and working with comic and ex-pro boxer Joe Carey (1927-2007) as “The Nosey Boys” (with Joe on harmonica and me on soprano recorder ... played through our nostrils). From humble beginnings at this club, I would discover and develop the juggling, acrobatic, physical comedy, and eccentric dance skills to a level that would eventually supersede the music. Perhaps juggling and acrobatics are not for everyone, but as a longtime serious athlete, for me they represented an ultimate



Above are “Mr. Slim & L.J.” in a 1980 promotional photo, performing on tenor banjo, trombone kazoo, and funnyfiddle.

mind-body challenge that calls upon all of one’s power, speed, finesse, and concentration.

Working as a musician gave ample time to devote to the intense physical practice of juggling and unicycling. It was as if 10 years of practice crammed into the first two years. When the first juggling pieces were inserted into the show as a trial, it was clear that there was a need to integrate the juggling, balancing, unicycle, physical comedy, and the music into a logically flowing presentation. After brainstorming and research, vaudeville seemed to be the best common denominator.

In subsequent fair and festival shows, I adopted the character of a high-energy, multi-talented, vaudeville/medicine show rustic, which was warmly received. In these years I was performing 450-550 shows per year, and getting plenty of TV and print publicity. My one-man-band was the subject of one sculpture (by John Richards) and at least two songs. And the booking agents were calling.

(VI.) **L.J. Newton.** Also in the 1970s the fabulous juggling talent of my wife and partner, L.J. Newton, established its own place in our budding two-person show. Now retired from performing after 25 years with *Mr. Slim’s Goodtime Ragtime Vaudeville Revival* and *Mr. Slim & L.J. - Classic Comedy Juggling*, L.J. may be best known in the circus/variety world for her speedy precision club-juggling woven into our comic one-upmanship. But many readers, as well as audiences in thousands of our shows across the U.S., will recall the musical and visual merriment she added on washboard, brushbox, and funnyfiddle. She also played the washtub bass on our jug-band blues tunes. Also a Syracuse University grad, L.J. would assume the role of hands-on “artistic director” for our theatrical shows, creating and managing wardrobe, props, and backdrops.

But while she was a fellow aficionado of the music from the beginning, by her own admission she was not a natural musician. We brainstormed how to integrate her into the music, and decided we would begin with the washtub bass. When this proved successful after much rehearsal and several shows, I

proceeded to build the funnyfiddle, a kind of “washboard-on-a-stick” percussion instrument. We worked up specific percussion breaks for a number of jazz tunes with definite “stops.” There was no improvisation or loose “jam” quality to the music – the songs had to be played *exactly* the same way every time. However, we practiced until the on-stage delivery was so polished that the songs came across as free-and-easy creations of the moment. The same approach was applied to the washboard and brushbox: I designed and built the instruments, we selected songs that would best showcase them, then arranged the percussion breaks ... and then practice, practice, practice. This approach served us well and delighted audiences for 25 years.

**Moving “uptown”.** In the ensuing decades *Mr. Slim’s Goodtime Ragtime Vaudeville Revival* moved steadily “uptown” in image to fit the better venues and more accurately reflect the context of the material we presented. We still worked the “Corn Dog Circuit,” performing on outdoor stages for the largest fair booking organizations in the country, but thanks to solid relationships with many dozens (hundreds?) of theatrical agents and producers in varied markets, we were also presenting feature-length shows in a steady stream of theatres, resorts, hotels, and conventions far and wide. We toured with theatrical revues and worked with all-star circuses. We worked in the finest theatres and on the most rickety outdoor stages. We covered hundreds of thousands of miles, hauling a truckload of props and sound equipment for our self-contained shows, and wore out several vans. (Our son traveled on the road with us as a young boy, and performed selected dates with us for family audiences until the show was retired in 1999.) For college bookings, we were

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Above is a 1980 promo photo of “Mr. Slim & L.J. - Classic Comedy Juggling,” the variety act that would eventually outclass the music.

**Flaming torches on the circus rola-bola.** At left is an example of the crowd-pleasing “wow factor” in the show that would put the music on “the back burner” – until its 2008 re-emergence in the illustrated lecture program for museums, *A Vaudeville Retrospective*.



Above, **Mr. Slim & L.J.** perform a harmonica-and-spoons medley, with L.J.’s dancing limberjack adding visual and percussive effects. (c. 1980)

### Facing the music ...

*continued from previous page*

represented exclusively by Douglas Associates, known for its lineup of celebrity speakers, political heavyweights, string quartets, and operatic recitalists. (With our washboards, kazoo, unicycles, and rubber pigs, we were the most lowbrow act on their roster.)

**The people who made it possible, rewarding, and fun.** Along the way, invaluable to us were the many outstanding performers we encountered – role models for excellence in so many specialties in music and the variety arts. Listing all the legends we worked with and learned from would be too long, and might come across to some as self-indulgent name-dropping, so I won't do it here. But a certain group of musicians must be singled out, as our association and friendship with them over 10 years of engagements (1979-1988) at the Edaville Railroad park and museum (S. Carver, Mass.) amounted to a lengthy, musically-rich post-graduate program in 1920s-30s hot jazz. To name a few of these longtime standard-bearers of the genre: Stu Gunn (tuba), Bob Connors (trombone), Jimmy Mazzy (tenor banjo & vocals), and Bob Leary (tenor banjo, guitar, & vocals). (These intrepid, courageous musicians also stood firm – never once running for cover – while playing sparkling accompaniment in risky proximity to my mile-a-minute unicycle act, amidst flying clubs and precariously-teetering champagne bottles.)

**A Panorama of Musical Americana.** In 1983 we recorded our LP album, *A Panorama of Musical Americana* at Richard Tiegen's Plum Studio in Haverhill, Mass. For years we sold the vinyl album and cassettes in conjunction with our shows throughout the U.S. (So far I have yet to see a copy come up on EBay or at a used record store!) Supportive



*A Panorama of Musical Americana* was recorded in early 1983 at Richard Tiegen's Plum Studio in Haverhill, Mass., a state-of-the-art facility he built in the basement of the Haverhill Music Centre.

of our work through the years – and the pianist on the record – was good friend, Boston show pianist, and Haverhill Music Centre proprietor, Bob Killely (... who because of union concerns at the time, was listed on our liner notes as "Robert K. Malarkey.")

**Maturity (!).** During these years the show repertoire reached its maturity – featuring almost exclusively 1920s-30s jazz/pop standards and vaudeville comedy songs that rotated in-and-out of the show through the next few decades. Well-represented in the show were songs associated with the likes of Fats Waller, Cliff Edwards (Ukulele Ike), The Hoosier Hot Shots, Jimmy Durante, Sophie Tucker, Ethel Waters, The Spirits of Rhythm, Clancy Hayes, Cab Calloway, and their contemporaries.

In the mid-1990s, as "musicologist-without-portfolio," I resumed where I left off

*continued on next page*

## A Panorama of Musical Americana

### Side 1

- **I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate** (1919) (resonator guitar, harmonica, kazoo, one-man-band, washtub bass)
- **I'm Certainly Living the Ragtime Life** (1900)
- **Hello Ma Baby** (1899)
- **Bill Bailey** (1902)
- Rufus Rastus Johnson Brown (1905)
- Alabama Jubilee (1915) (medley; tenor banjo, washboard, & vocal)
- **I Had But Fifty Cents** (1885) (tiple & vocal)
- **O Danny Boy** (1913) (musical saw)
- **A Shanty in Old Shanty Town** (1932) (banjo-uke, vocal, & whistling)
- **She Lived Down By the Firehouse** (1931) (tenor banjo, washboard, & vocal)
- **My Little Grass Shack** (1933) (baritone uke & vocal)
- **She Moves Me** (1951) (bottleneck style resonator guitar & vocal)
- **San Francisco Bay Blues** (1953) (tenor guitar, harmonica, brushbox, & vocal)

### Side 2

- **Coney Island Washboard** (1926) (resonator guitar, harmonica, kazoo, one-man-band, funnyfiddle)
- **Sweet Georgia Brown** (1925)
- **Red Hot Mama** (1924)
- **O Lady Be Good** (1924)
- **Toot-Toot-Tootsie** (1922)
- **Five-Foot-Two** (1925) (medley; tenor banjo, washboard, & vocal)
- **Hard-Hearted Hannah** (1924) (tenor guitar, harmonica, brushbox, & vocal)
- **A Porter's Love Song to a Chambermaid** (1934) (tiple & vocal)
- **Hop High Ladies** (traditional)
- **Arkansas Traveler** (traditional) (jaw harp medley)
- **The Old Gray Mare** (traditional)
- **Oh Susannah** (1848) (harmonica & spoons medley)
- **The Banjo Is the Instrument For Me** (c. 1895)
- **Crawdad Song** (traditional)
- **Old Rattler** (1947)
- **Melinda** (1950) (medley; 5-string banjo & vocal)
- **Cowboy Blues** (1948) (tenor guitar, harmonica, & vocal)
- **Only the Blues** (1929) (baritone uke, vocal, & whistling)
- **Floatin' Down to Cotton Town** (1919)
- **Waiting for the Robert E. Lee** (1912) (medley; tenor banjo, washboard, & vocal)



**There's no business like show business.** At left is a photo montage showing just a few of the primary influences upon the repertoire of early ragtime, jazz, popular, and vaudeville, and comedy songs.

Virgil Scoggins, at the center with the Spirits of Rhythm, was the inspiration for L.J.'s brushbox. Scoggins is shown playing a suitcase with two whisk brooms – akin to a drummer playing a snare drum with brushes instead of drumsticks.



## Facing the music ...

*continued from previous page*

in my classical music studies 20 years before. This serious immersion included building a "Murphy Piano," an electronic keyboard that folds down from the wall, and attempting the piano miniatures of Bela Bartok, Jean Sibelius, and Alan Hovhaness. (I also attempted the late 1930s boogie-woogie style of Meade Lux Lewis and Pete Johnson. The remote possibility of my public performance on the piano is likely at least 50 years away.)

When L.J. retired from the stage in late 1999 after many thousands of performances, the music was put on "the back burner." I continued to present a one-man show, *Mr. Slim's One-Man Vaudeville Variety Extravaganza*, that included hot jazz and comedy songs, but from 2000 forward I worked primarily as *Mr. Slim - Comic & Acrobatic Juggling*. This solo work was for revues, circuses, resorts, and corporate events with the juggling, rola-bola, unicycle, and rolling globe acts. In 2008, with the debut of the illustrated lecture program for museums, *A Vaudeville Retrospective*, the music once again assumed its place of prominence. Through my characterization of "The Last Living Vaudevillian," I am hopeful that this music will continue to charm audiences of the future – and bring forth even more smiling faces – until my last note is played.

**(VII.) Time marches on**, and your musical host continues to keep pace. The excruciatingly complete details of our varied performing arts career, and of the obsession that drove the ascent of our juggling and acrobatic skills, are beyond the scope of this article. But at least the previous pages explain the humble beginnings and evolution of our excursion through a fascinating musical world. ■



**The fans send in the photos.** Audience members at outdoor events often gifted us with their snapshots. At top left, Mr. Slim & L.J. take a breather. Above, at Edaville R.R., we are on stage at the "brick oven theatre." At right is Mr. Slim in Saratoga, N.Y., just moments before a downpour. Below, L.J. plays the brushbox. Below left, L.J. is "in the zone" with one of our banjo & washboard tunes.



## — Next pages: Section VIII. - A Photo Gallery of Musical Instruments —

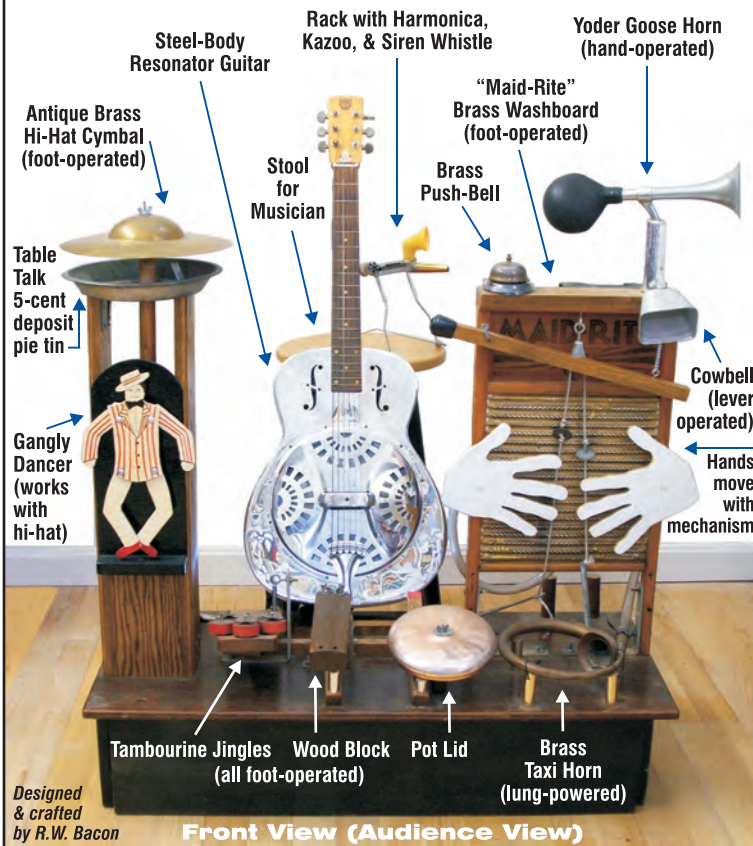


**Mr. Slim's Goodtime Ragtime Vaudeville Revival.** At left is the most widely-circulated photo of our show throughout the 1990s. Above are two photos from 2009, illustrating some of the musical repertoire presented in the illustrated lecture/performance for museums, *A Vaudeville Retrospective*. The eerie, otherworldly sound of the **musical saw** makes it a perennial audience favorite. The **banjo-uke** packs a powerful punch for its small size, and is a favorite for rendering the brassy uptempo jazz/pop/vaudeville tunes of the 1920s.



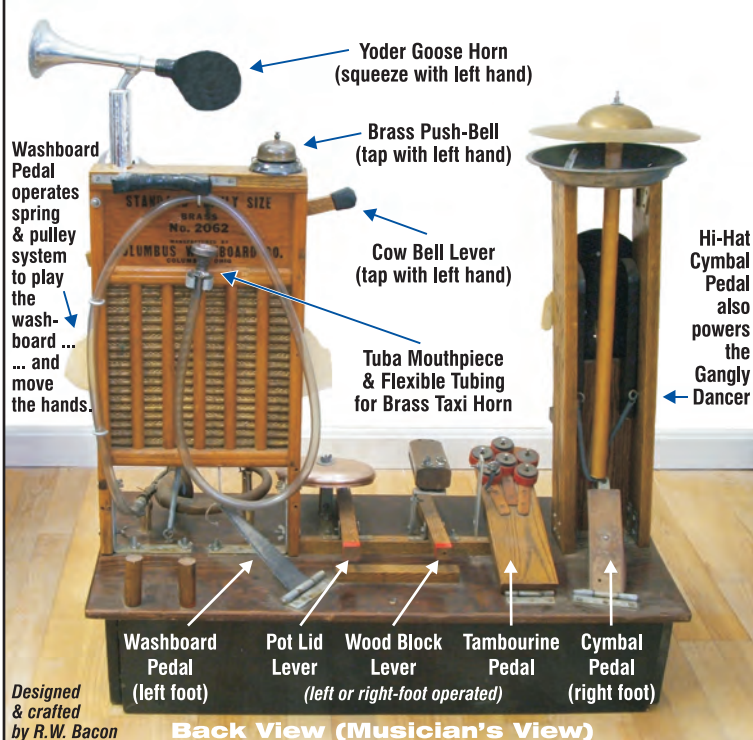
### Mr. Slim's One-Man-Band Rig – 1970s-2007

R.W. BACON



### Mr. Slim's One-Man-Band Rig – 1970s-2007

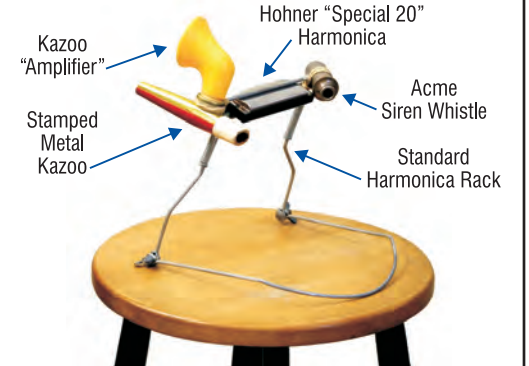
R.W. BACON



At left is a front-view photo of **Mr. Slim's one-man-band rig** (i.e. audience view). Below left is the musician's view. With the guitar in open-G tuning, the left hand can break free briefly to tap the bell or lever, or squeeze the horn. At right is the **harmonica rack** used in tandem with the one-man band.

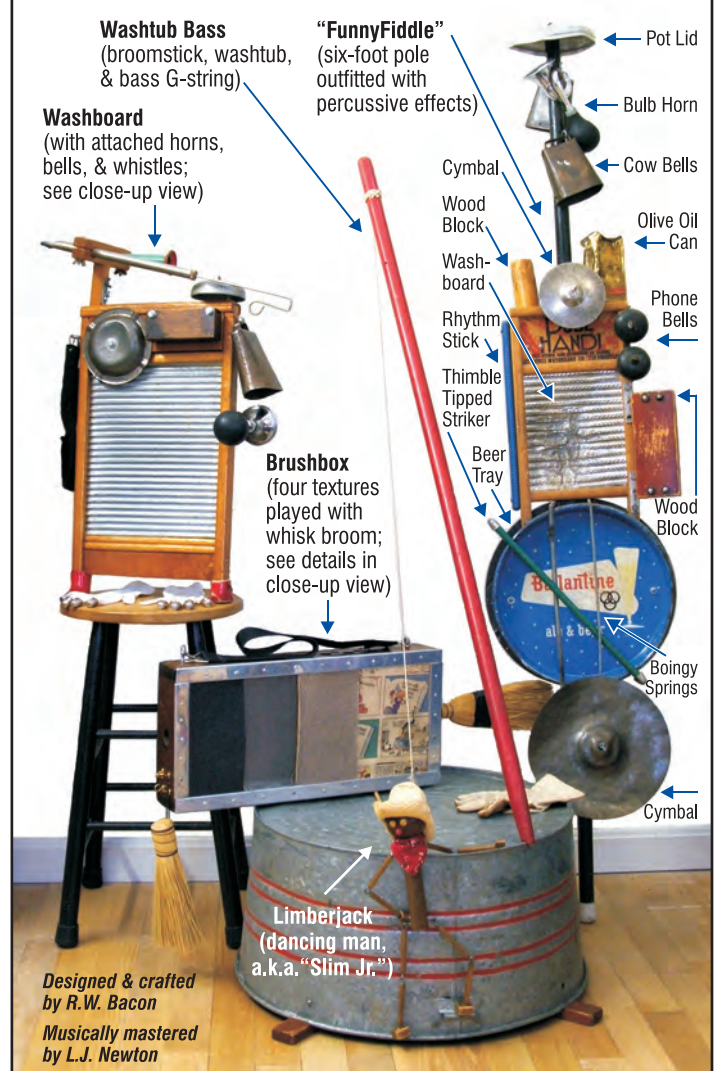
### Mr. Slim's Harmonica Rack

R.W. BACON



### L.J.'s Percussion & Bass – 1970s-2000

L.J. NEWTON

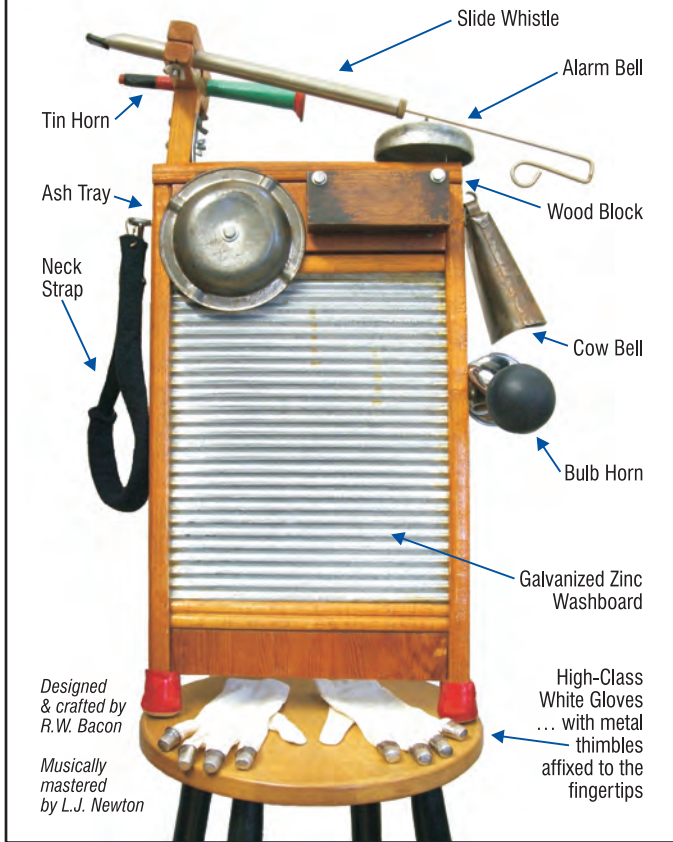


Above is a composite photo of **L.J.'s percussion & bass**. The **washboard**, at left, is played with thimble-tipped gloves. The **funnyfiddle**, at right, is played with a thimble-tipped striker. The **brushbox**, at center, is played with different-textured brushes. The **washtub bass**, sometimes known as a bull-fiddle, is played with leather-fingered gloves. The **limberjack** is held stationary while bouncing his "dancing floor" beneath him. (Close-up photos on the next page.)



### L.J.'s Washboard 1970s-2000

L.J. NEWTON



At top left is a detailed view of **L.J.'s washboard**, showing all the attachments. Below left is a view of **L.J.'s brushbox**, showing the different textures available.

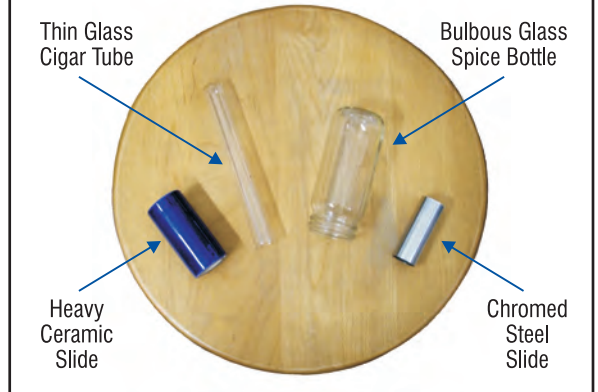
At top right are a selection of **guitar slides** used to play the glissando bottleneck style on the steel-body resonator guitar.

At center right are **Mr. Slim's spoons, bones, and jaw harps**. The silver-plated soup spoons give a full, rounded tone, while the bones give a sharper clicking sound.

At bottom right is **Mr. Slim's wind section**: harmonicas, kazoo, ocarina, & slide-whistle. The show used metal kazoos only, straight from Maurice Spectoroff's Eden, N.Y. factory, with an amplifier bell, and the last of his organic diaphragms – for the optimal sonic buzz!

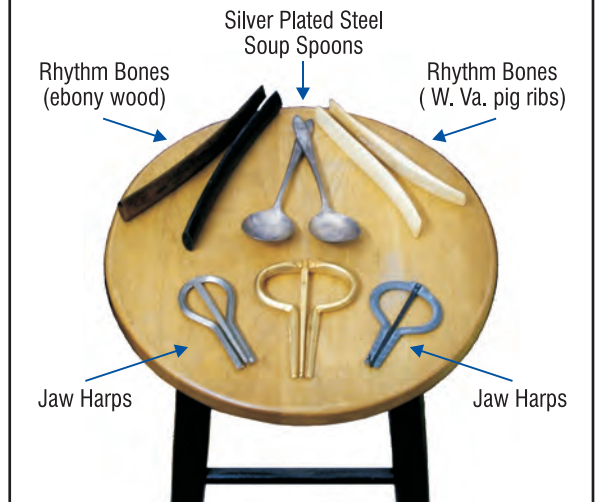
### Mr. Slim's Guitar Slides

R.W. BACON



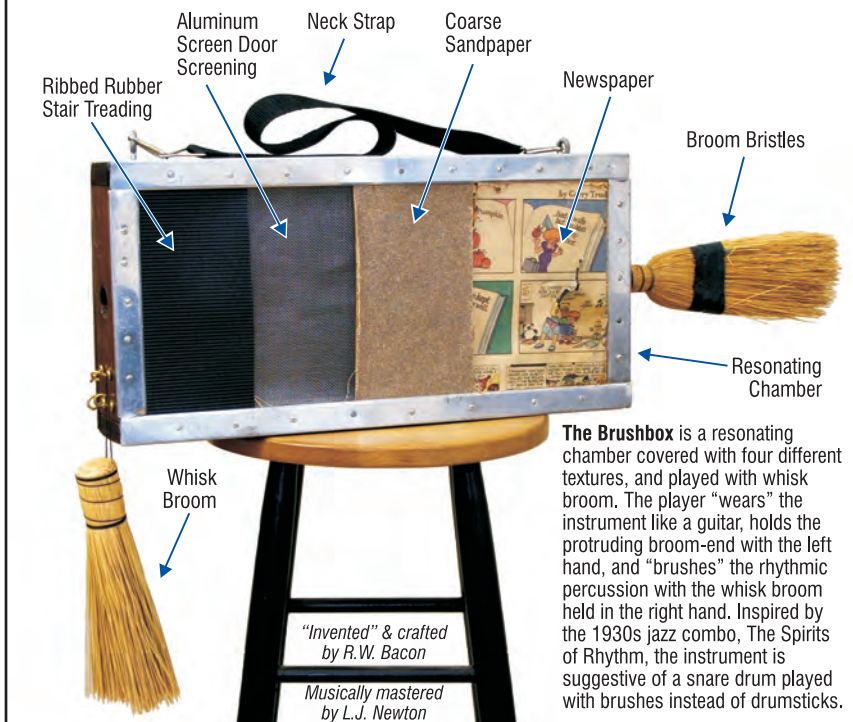
### Mr. Slim's Spoons, Bones, Etc.

R.W. BACON



### L.J.'s Brushbox 1970s-2000

L.J. NEWTON



The **Brushbox** is a resonating chamber covered with four different textures, and played with whisk broom. The player "wears" the instrument like a guitar, holds the protruding broom-end with the left hand, and "brushes" the rhythmic percussion with the whisk broom held in the right hand. Inspired by the 1930s jazz combo, The Spirits of Rhythm, the instrument is suggestive of a snare drum played with brushes instead of drumsticks.

### Mr. Slim's Wind Section

R.W. BACON



### *Some observations on musical literacy and other topics ...*

**No more nostalgia, please.** When I began playing publicly in the early 1970s, there was actually some nostalgia appeal to the old-time jazz and jug band music. For example, a 60-year-old in the audience (i.e. born in 1915) would have recalled the 1920s hot jazz tunes from their youth. Even some 35-40-year-olds (i.e. born in 1935-40) were nostalgic for the music of the folk/blues/jug band revival era of their college years. This nostalgia appeal never interested me, but I went along with it, glad to have the audience approval. As for me, I was just smitten by the high energy and immediacy of the music. It has always been a joy to play in the here-and-now present. I loved looking out at a packed crowd of smiling faces, people of all ages and backgrounds, with every single individual tapping a foot to the music. I figured that I had the winning and lasting combination of a music that was accessible to all.

But time marches on. Those folks who grew up with the music of the 1920s are mostly gone now. Even the folk/blues revival generation has moved into their 70s. Today, it is a fact that there are fewer individuals in the audience pool for whom the early hot jazz has any relevance. Thank goodness that there is the relatively new category of "Roots Music" that lends some hip legitimacy to still-active purveyors of 1920s jazz, blues, jug band, and string band music!

**A crisis of musical literacy?** As long ago as the 1990s I began to notice that more and more younger standees in our fair and festival audiences were standing completely flat-footed, instead of toe-tapping along with most folks in the audience. It appeared that they did not quite know what to make of the music. It was as if they were trying to get a handle on a foreign language. Constant change is a part of life we all learn to accept, but I had always regarded the basic 4/4 time signature as part of our common colloquial musical vernacular in Western music. I figured it would remain common across styles and generations. But I no longer think that way. In my view, since the 1990s the cluttered percussion slathered over various styles of thundering pop music has desensitized millions across a generation of listeners. Perhaps I am missing the point, and I should make sure to keep an open mind. Perhaps instead of representing a numbing musical regression, the free-form synthesized percussive effects and bass-heavy rap music really *are* taking us to a higher level of artistic freedom.

Wherever "the people's music" is headed, I can't help but note that despite the world's music, from folk songs to symphonies, digitized and available at the click of a mouse; despite an iPod wired around everyone's noggin; despite all the virtual "rock star" video games; despite MIDI capability on everyone's desktop;

despite satellite radio; despite \$39 electronic keyboards; it appears we are less musically literate than a century ago. A century ago, broadcast radio and inexpensive phonograph records were still more than a decade away, and music in the home was a "do-it-yourself" activity. At least somebody in the family would know how to play the piano or plunk a guitar, ukulele, or banjo. People actually knew their way around the sharps and flats of sheet music. Regular people actually used their hands and their brains to play and enjoy music. Today we like to think we know everything, that we are more advanced than all who came before. After all, we can find everything ever worth knowing on Wikipedia. But musically, I think we're getting dumber.

But does this drop off in musical literacy matter? Progress, i.e. all of our services and conveniences, has eliminated the need for "regular folks" to know how to do things like slaughter a pig, split wood, or even crank a pencil sharpener. Why learn to play an instrument when we can push a button? But in my view I believe passive button-pushers are missing out on the active mind-body stimulation that stretches our brains. Playing music not only can put us in touch with the great minds of the ages, but it also puts us in touch with ourselves. This mind-body stimulation is present in sports, art, and craft activities as well as music, and all are challenging, collaborative, and rewarding. So I say, pick up an instrument, make some real music, advocate for music in the schools, and make your statement for musical literacy!

(Admittedly the above opinions come from a juggler – sometimes defined as "one who finds the most difficult way to do the unnecessary.")



**Life isn't fair!** In the mid-1980s, while on tour with a large theatrical stage show, L.J. and I were strolling the streets of a medium-sized city early one afternoon, getting some air before we were due at the theatre to prepare for the evening performance. In the distance we heard the sounds of music and a cheering crowd, so we followed our ears to find out what was provoking such enthusiastic response. We walked a few blocks, then looked down a brick pedestrian mall and saw in the distance an outdoor stage with substantial sound system surrounded by a large crowd. We kept walking to get a closer look at who and what was whipping the audience into a frenzy of whoops and hollers. When we finally reached the perimeter of the animated crowd, we were underwhelmed. It was a lip-syncing contest.

We just looked at each other. We couldn't have heard each other anyway. I could not help but silently self-assess: Here we were, knocking ourselves out day-and-night, year-after-year, in real-time with the juggling and acrobatics; working constantly to master more musical instruments than we could carry; ... and here in the big city of \_\_\_\_\_, Joe Blow the pretender gets a standing ovation by just posing and lip-syncing. And badly at that. Observing such affronts and enduring such indignities test an artist's perseverance and commitment. Needless to say, we carried on that night, gave the audience everything we had, earned our honest applause, and moved happily down the road to the next outpost of higher civilization.

**Hooray for technology!** It is old news that the Internet has revolutionized the business for artists outside the pop music mainstream. Therefore today, mature artists who have spent decades pursuing musical projects unrewarded by the almighty buck can reach their fans more easily than ever. Two individuals that come to mind are Geoff Muldaur and Loudon Wainwright III. In 2003, Geoff Muldaur and his "Futuristic Ensemble" released the CD, *Private Astronomy*, that reprised the compositions of legendary 1920s jazz trumpeter Bix Beiderbecke (1903-1931). More recently, in 2009, he assembled a fabulous group of musicians he dubbed "The Texas Sheiks," to record a tribute to the 1930s music of the Mississippi Sheiks. Also in 2009, Loudon Wainwright III recorded the two-CD "Charlie Poole Project," the musical tribute to Charlie Poole (1892-1931) and the North Carolina Ramblers. The cream rises to the top, and these albums received awards and critical acclaim. I am pleased to point out that the awards and acclaim are for the same songs we were tickling our audiences with for 500 shows-a-year three decades ago. In those days we happily admitted our music was way *behind* the times, but is it possible that we were *ahead* of our time? In the 1970s-1980s our music would have been shunted into a corner in the non-commercial folk, blues, or dixieland categories. Today our music would hold its own proudly in the respected adult category of "Roots" music! It is too bad we retired the show ten years before our music finally became "cool"!

**History lives!** In the 1970s, when we were in demand presenting school programs, I recall remarking to L.J. that regardless of changing tastes in entertainment, our repertoire would always retain its historical and cultural value. Given my observations about musical literacy and audience expectations, thank goodness that has proven correct. Today, the same songs once presented as lowbrow entertainment are presented in the illustrated lecture program for museums, *A Vaudeville Retrospective*. It's reassuring to know that even though jazz and ragtime are no longer the top-of-the-pops, their historical merit may secure a place for musicians like me – in a cushy museum display case!

– R.W. Bacon ©2011