



The photograph above shows the National Youth Administration Rhythm Band in 1936 playing their kazoos in Sandwich, Illinois. Public domain photo from the FDR Presidential Library.

Alabama Vest's Famous Invention

Ask any bloke or sheila of any age, income bracket, choice of potato, sexual preference, or hat size walking down the street if they have played a kazoo, and I have a feeling the answer would be yes 99% of the time. Not only that, I bet most households have a kazoo stashed in the back of some forgotten drawer, along with the motel matchbook, key-less keychain, eyeglass repair kit and souvenir three foot pocket measuring tape. I have played the kazoo, and my band partner Lou has played the kazoo. In public! It would be odd if we hadn't played kazoos at some point, since we are such jug band fans and kazoos are so much a part of these orchestras. As a matter of fact, in our own 1966 jug band, our guitarist dubbed Lou "Louie Kazooie" for her bluesy kazoo solos. I remember jamming a kazoo in a harmonica rack alongside the harmonica so I could alternate between bad blues harp and bad kazooistry, playing bad guitar all the while.

Many of the old jug bands used kazoos and most of the newer ones do too. I probably heard my first jug band kazoo in the Jim Kweskin Jug Band of 1960's Boston that I've talked about before, and subsequently in listening to older groups like the Memphis area jug bands of earlier in the century. I think Goeff Muldaur, from the Kweskin band and now playing on his own, is one of the

best kazooists on record. His already unique voice quality and phrasing are perfectly suited to the instrument.

After all, the kazoo can only be as good as the voice making it work, because it really is only a distortion tool. It doesn't make a sound on its own. You can't just blow into it and make a note; you have to hum. It modifies the hum into a sort of rattling buzz -- but doesn't alter the pitch -- using a thin vibrating membrane. Instruments that do this are called "mirlitons." The word mirliton has had a number of meanings over the years but the first I could find referred to a gauzy material invented for a new style of women's hat in 1723. It may be that this material was eventually used as a membrane in kazoos. From there, the word came to mean anything flute-like in shape, including a pear-shaped vegetable used in Cajun cooking and a certain pipe-like pasta.

The kazoo does go back a long way historically, with similar vibrating-membrane instruments believed to have been used for "hundreds of years" in Africa, like so many of our folk instruments. From the web site of Kazoobie Kazoos:

It is believed that the kazoos closest relative is the African version of a mirliton: the horn-mirliton.... The tube was made out of the horn of a cow and the membrane consisted of the egg-shells of spiders.

Kazoobie Kazoos, incidentally, is a Florida outfit (www.kazoobie.com) from whom you can get a toy tractor kazoo, a Hummbucker Electric Kazoo, a non-playing chocolate kazoo, a bag of 25 plastic kazoos for \$14, or a sterling silver kazoo for \$148 (the price of a guitar, a coffee grinder, and ten packs of Twizzlers at Target).

The US history of the kazoo in the form known today, as various web sources describe, was invented in the 1800s by an African American with the wonderful name of Alabama Vest in Macon, Georgia. A German clockmaker in Macon (do you suppose he called his business Macon Clocks?) named Thaddeus Von Clegg began making kazoos -- which he called Cleggghorns -- to Vest's specifications in the 1840's. A traveling salesman, Emil Sorg, brought the idea to Buffalo NY tool and die maker

Michael McIntyre with the thought of manufacturing metal kazoos (I don't know what Von Clegg made them out of). Eventually McIntyre and metal forming plant owner Harry Richardson started the Original American Kazoo Company of Eden, NY which to this day makes kazoos just like they did in 1914 when they began. It's interesting to look through kazoo patents via Google's site (go to www.google.com/patents? and put "kazoo" in the search box). For example, there is a patent for a kazoo issued to Sorg (the traveling salesman) and Richardson (the metal plant owner) in 1919 (patent number 53,470).

Incidentally, in looking through all this information, I discovered something that most people in the music biz have probably known since they were twelve years old, namely, that there is a system related to the Dewey Decimal System that categorizes all musical instruments. It's called the Hornbostel-Sachs system, and was first published in 1914 (date sound familiar? Coincidence?). In this system, category 2 of the four main categories is "membranophones" of which our kazoos ("Tube or vessel-kazoos") are number 2.4.2 in the subgroup 2.4, "Singing membranes." Just thought you'd like to know.

Before signing off, I have to mention Barbara Stewart, chairperson of Kazoo America which among other projects has a campaign afoot to make the kazoo the national instrument. Stewart is author of the \$9.95 book *The Complete How To Kazoo*, which comes complete with a kazoo. Her web site is appropriately wacky in a very nice way; it mentions in passing that in Moscow in 1990 she set the Soviet women's pole vault record. She is also pushing for the fourth Thursday in January ("or whenever convenient to the kazooist") to be declared National Kazoo Day. Count me in.

Partial Googlography:

www.edenkazoo.com
www.kazoos.com
www.howtokazoo.com
www.wikipedia.org
dictionary.com
www.etymonline.com
www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/photos.html