

The Tuba Skinny

Once upon a time I had it in mind to write a song inspired by the Christmas standard, **Little Drummer Boy**, and to call it **Little Tuba Girl**. I love tubas; I even love the name *tuba*. I think I'll start calling my guitar a *boxa*. And BTW, I thought that years ago the government of Wisconsin chose the tuba as the Official State Instrument, but in Googling about this, I find otherwise. The Wisconsin State Instrument has yet to be chosen, as of March 2014, though the accordion and the tuba are running neck and neck, or should I say horn and bellows. Wisconsin's State Dance is the Polka so it only seems reasonable that one of these peculiar instruments eventually will be chosen, as they are both fairly common in the oompa-style polka bands of Wisconsin.

Many people probably don't consider the tuba a folk instrument. There are those who don't consider the accordion a folk instrument either. Which is odd, because most everyone would consider the Polka a folk genre of music and dance. Though I think it's interesting that polka bands are usually not included in standard folk festivals, from our experience. As with blues and bluegrass, this sub genre of folk usually holds its own blow-outs and hoedowns and dustups.



My music partner Lou and I have had the opportunity to have tubists join in our similarly unpopular music. Tom Martin-Ericson, folk DJ for many years with Wisconsin Public Radio's Simply Folk,

plays tuba, and has joined us various times over the years (*photo at bottom left of Tom and Lou in 2010*). John Stevens, world famous UW-Wisconsin tubist, arranger, professor, and tuba music composer, arranged our Wisconsin songs for a brass quintet and was the featured tubist for our resulting concerts and recording, released way back in 1988. And there have been others.

My own experience playing the tuba has yet to occur, though for a while in the mid-sixties I played the jug (*photo at left, me with jug, 1965*) in our jug band. People may argue that tubas are not folk instruments, but the jug is unarguably the folkliest of folk tubas.



Anyway, what I'm leading up to in such a roundabout way is this. So I was Googling for **Little Tuba Girl**, which I never found, to my relief. These days I always Google when I get a song idea, to make sure it hasn't been written already. One of the hits I got was a band called **Tuba Skinny** (*photo at right*). I had to have a gander at a band with a name like that, so headed over to YouTube. There I found my current top favorite band.

Tuba Skinny is a New Orleans street-style traditional jazz band, though they also travel the world to perform. There are over a hundred YouTube videos of them at various venues -- often on the streets of New Orleans -- and in various incarnations over the past five years or so.

Their music is based on the blues and jazz of the 20s and 30s, with songs from the likes of JellyRoll Morton, Victoria Spivey, and Merline Johnson, with a good number of traditional and a few original songs thrown in.

Instrumentation varies somewhat but usually is something like the instrumentation on their latest CD (one of five), **Pyramid Strut**: Todd Burdick, tuba; Erika Lewis, vocals & bass drum; Shaye Cohn, coronet & fiddle; Barnabus Jones, trombone; Jon Doyle, clarinet; Westen Borghesi, tenor banjo; and Robin Rapuzzi, washboard.

The washboard, and the choice of material, gives the group a jug-band component which I absolutely love. There are certainly other New Orleans street bands with similar makeups, but Tuba Skinny is the absolute best I have ever heard. Please have a look and listen. Go to YouTube and search for Tuba Skinny; they are phenomenal.



In thinking about why I like this band, aside from their being hypnotically good at what they do, it's partly because I like polyphony in music. Wikipedia describes polyphony as "...a texture consisting of two or more simultaneous lines of independent melody, as opposed to music with just one voice or music with one dominant melodic voice accompanied by chords."

This describes the kind of guitar playing I like to listen to, and try to play: a finger-picking style where there is a distinct bass voice, a melody voice, and maybe some incidental harmony voices thrown in. This in contrast to a strumming style, where the chord is the important unit, and not the interweaving "independent melody" lines. I'm not a fanatic in my feelings about this, so there are plenty of exceptions. But I am drawn more readily to polyphonic stuff.

Why? Well, as someone who has a hunch that the brain works largely by analogy, one of my guesses is that listening to and playing this kind of music shows the brain how to align its many overlapping thoughts and processes into a coherent whole, without blurring its individual yammering voices. And I'm the poster boy for overlapping incoherent yammerings of the brain. As my mind's cornet is writing this sentence, my inner tuba is oomping for dinner.

*Photos: Tom and Lou, by Steve Agard.
 Me and Jug, by Roy Noffke.
 Tuba Skinny, by
 guntherhang.com*