



Arlo Leach and Jug Band Music

I keep running into people working hard for the furtherance of folk music, outside of — or often in conjunction with — actually playing the stuff. One such person, slogging nonstop to keep jug band music alive and respected, is my friend Arlo Leach.

Arlo Leach — songwriter, musician, recording engineer, programmer, web designer, music teacher, and passionate jug band enthusiast, among other things — was born in 1973 in Iowa, into a family which had run a music store in Des Moines for generations. Says Arlo:

“At the age of five, I performed in a tiny tuxedo on four different instruments in a local TV commercial for my grandparents’ music store... The instruments were violin, piano, probably trumpet, and soprano sax... Between my grandparents and my dad... I got an excellent education in basic music theory and performance, but I had to go out and discover folk music and roots music on my own.”

Arlo moved to Madison after graduating from Iowa's Grinnell College. I first met him when he came to a CD release party of ours in Madison in 1998. By this time, he had already engineered and issued Madison's first *enhanced* CD (a music CD which doubles as a data CD, containing lyrics and videos, etc) of his own songs. We talked briefly about various recording methods. Soon thereafter, he invited me to a gig of his own where he showed me how he recorded directly to a laptop. Arlo was extremely generous with his knowledge and time, and in the year 2000 Lou and I recorded our album **House Concert** using Arlo's method, which I described in *Whither Zither* for October 2000.

That same year, Arlo moved to Chicago. There, for six years, he was an instructor at the **Old Town School of Folk Music**, where he began teaching guitar but found that teaching jug band music

kept folks enthused. As Arlo says, *“I especially like jug band music as a teaching tool because it provides a very accessible and low-pressure framework for people to play in.”* The course, **Jug Band Ensemble**, is still being offered. The stage name for Arlo's class was the **Hump Night Thumpers** (*“hump night”* being slang for Wednesday night, the night the class would meet), which went on to win the **National Battle of the Jug Bands** in Minneapolis.

From Arlo's **Statement of Purpose**: *“First and foremost, I want to encourage creativity, individualism, and self-expression from all people.”* But along this path of promoting an acoustic-music-for-everyone, he began to realize that the jug band music genre did owe gratitude to a number of specific individuals, particularly a handful of folks in Memphis and other Southern cities back in the 20s and 30s. He began to make pilgrimages to important sites in their lives, and to graveyards where they were buried. To his sad surprise, most of these people had no grave markers, having died without the financial ability to pay for them.

So Arlo arranged benefit concerts in Chicago for various of these underlauded creative geniuses, starting with one for the late Will Shade, the brains and talent behind the legendary **Memphis Jug Band**. Shade, born in 1898, died in 1966 and was buried in an unmarked grave in a *“pauper's cemetery.”* The concert, billed as **The Will Shade Gravestone Benefit** and featuring contemporary jug bands, was a success. Enough money was raised to have a headstone made and installed and to send Leach and other musicians to Memphis for a dedication (and some jug band music) at the site.

Successful concerts for other such treasured musicians followed. Meanwhile, Arlo continued to teach at the **Old Town School** and to write and play in his jug band and on his own, and somewhere found the time to launch Chicago's annual **Battle of the Jug Bands**, which continues to this day. As Mark Guarino wrote in the Tribune for November 11 of 2009, *“If the recent jug band movement in Chicago can be summed up in a single person, it is Arlo Leach.”*

Eventually he was overcome with wanderingfoot, and moved to Portland, Oregon, where he lives with his wife Sally as of this writing. In Portland he has continued to spread the word about jug band music, not only forming his own jug band once again (the **How Long Jug Band**), plus an acoustic blues trio (**the Spodee-o's**), but creating and promoting annual **Jugapalooza** concerts in the Portland area, and hosting a monthly **Jug Band Jam**.

On top of all that, Arlo is a freelance programmer and web designer, and has used that expertise to develop jug-band-themed acoustic music apps. Lou and I sat over coffee at **Cafe Zoma** recently while Arlo, on a visit to Madison with his wife whose parents live nearby, ran these apps through their paces. He has created them for the iPhone, iPod Touch, and /or the iPad. They include a mouth harp (jaw harp) app which can be played with your lips; a jug app, an autoharp app, a washboard app, a kazoo app, and a bones app, not to mention a brilliant setlist app for musicians to use when assembling their list of songs for the night. (He even mused about the possibility of a virtual accordion app, worked by strapping an iPad to each hand.) All (but the accordion) are available online through Apple's App Store. The man is munificent and tireless; his most recent app has taken 2,000 hours of programming so far, and you don't get rich selling jug band apps.

Amazing how many ways a passion for art can be used to benefit this ol' world. And speaking of art, Arlo's recordings are many and fine, particularly the most recent *How Long Jug Band* CD. Sound clips and ordering info on Arlo's sites.

<http://www.arloleach.com/>
<http://www.arlotone.com/>
<http://www.howlongjugband.com/>
<http://www.jugapalooza.com/>
<https://www.oldtownschool.org/>

Arlo's pages have much more info about his projects and music. Also, many old and new jug bands -- including Arlo's -- have videos on YouTube. Start by searching there for “jug band”. Many thanks to my pal Arlo Leach for this episode.