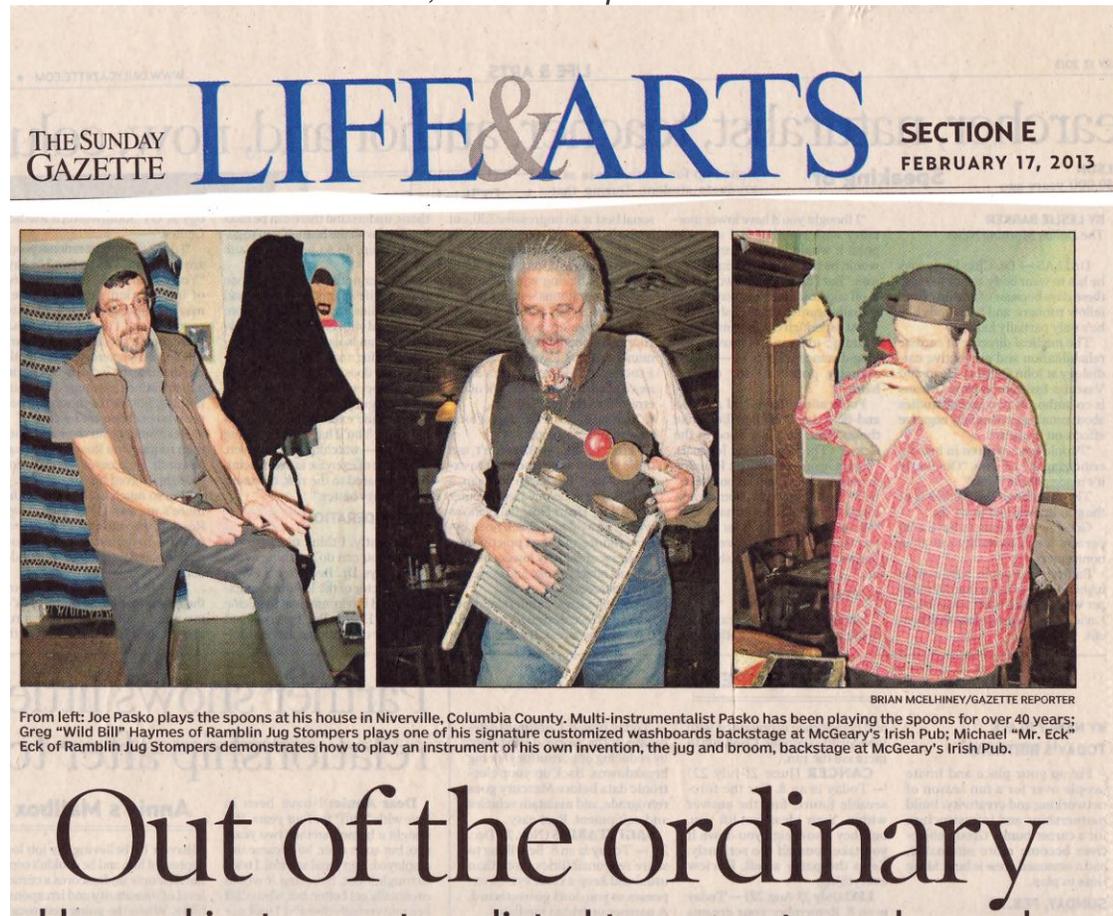


## Out of the ordinary

Daily Gazette, The (Schenectady, NY) - Sunday, February 17, 2013

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When Greg "Wild Bill" Haymes of Ramblin Jug Stompers goes shopping for instruments, he isn't usually going to a music store.

Haymes calls himself a "utility infielder" in Ramblin Jug Stompers, responsible for many of the unusual sounds that don't come from the typical stringed instruments in acoustic bands. At the band's shows, he's armed with washboards, mouth harps, nose flutes and an assortment of other toys -- literally -- that he packs into a large trunk.

"I do my shopping in Toys "R" Us and hardware stores," Haymes said, setting up before one of the Jug Stompers' weekly Monday night gigs at McGeary's Irish Pub. "When we pull into a town, the guitar geeks [say] . . . 'Oh, let's go to the music store; let's see what they got.' I'm like, 'Well . . . no.' I'm going to the antique stores, see if they've got washboards. I don't shop where these guys shop, which is kind of fun."

Spoons and found objects

Haymes isn't alone in the Capital Region when it comes to finding unusual instruments

to play. **Joseph Pasko**, a longtime player of the spoons, ukulele, accordion, bass and other instruments, and the percussionist with local folk group **Three Quarter North**, has spent the last three-plus years building percussion kits out of found objects -- including circular saw blades, tin cans, pots, PVC piping and even a toilet flange.



At left, Pasko sits with pieces of his homemade percussion kits — including pots, pans, drums and cymbals, PVC piping and a novelty skull— in his living room in Niverville. Pasko plays these at gigs with local folk group Three Quarter North. At right, Eck and Haymes demonstrate their playing technique on the humanatone, or nose flute, backstage at McGear's Irish Pub.

Over the years, **Pasko** has played bass in several area bands, including Chefs of the Future with Jug Stomper Michael "Mr. Eck" Eck, and the Urban Holiness Society with Caroline "MotherJudge" Isachsen. But he continued to build up his chops on the spoons, which led him to explore other percussion instruments. He learned to play spoons from his father at age 10 (he's now 51).

"The spoons was kind of like -- that was my sidebar," **Pasko** said from his home in Niverville.

"I got really good at it, went down to shows and got to really appreciate what you can do with a simple percussion instrument. I also got to appreciate the fact that it doesn't have to come from a music store to be a real instrument -- that's kind of a sore point with me. Sometimes I go to a bluegrass jam session with my spoons or a washboard, and I'm pretty good at it, and yet people look at me with condescending smirks or whatever -- like, 'You know, it's not a real instrument; it's not an official instrument because it didn't come from a music store. And I kind of [think], you know nothing about folk music if that's your attitude."

While **Pasko's** homemade kits do contain cymbals and a few drums purchased at music stores, more often he scours hardware stores and flea markets for unusual objects to make noise with. "I was actually going around to flea markets with a drum stick hitting pots and pans," **Pasko** said.

He has established a specific aesthetic when it comes to his homemade percussion instruments. All of his pieces, whether they're actual drums or a skull made of epoxy resin that he purchased at a Halloween store, are mounted on cymbal stands using professional percussion bonding hardware.

"My idea is to treat everything with equal stature -- I'm not going to denigrate something

because it doesn't come from a music store," **Pasko** said. "I'm not creating playable junk art; I'm not just nailing tin cans to an old two-by-four."

### Zinc king inspiration

Haymes, a veteran of the local music scene best known for his work in Blotto and his years of writing about the local music scene in the Times Union and the website Nippertown, developed an interest in odd instruments in middle school, after seeing the Jim Kweskin Jug Band on TV. Soon after that, he purchased his first washboard, a Zinc King -- which inspired the name of his first band, The Zing Kings Jug Band.

"I had a guitar, a really bad, really cheap guitar, [and I was] taking some guitar lessons - - I remember 'Ticket to Ride' was the first song I learned on guitar," Haymes said. "And I wasn't really drawn to it; I wasn't really working hard at it. . . . But I thought it was cool, and it was Beatles time, and I wanted to be in a band like everybody else that was that age. And then I saw the Jim Kweskin Jug Band and I went, 'Wow, that is so cool.' They were playing, you know, guitar and banjo and harmonica and jug and washtub bass and kazoo, just like a kitchen band, and I loved it."

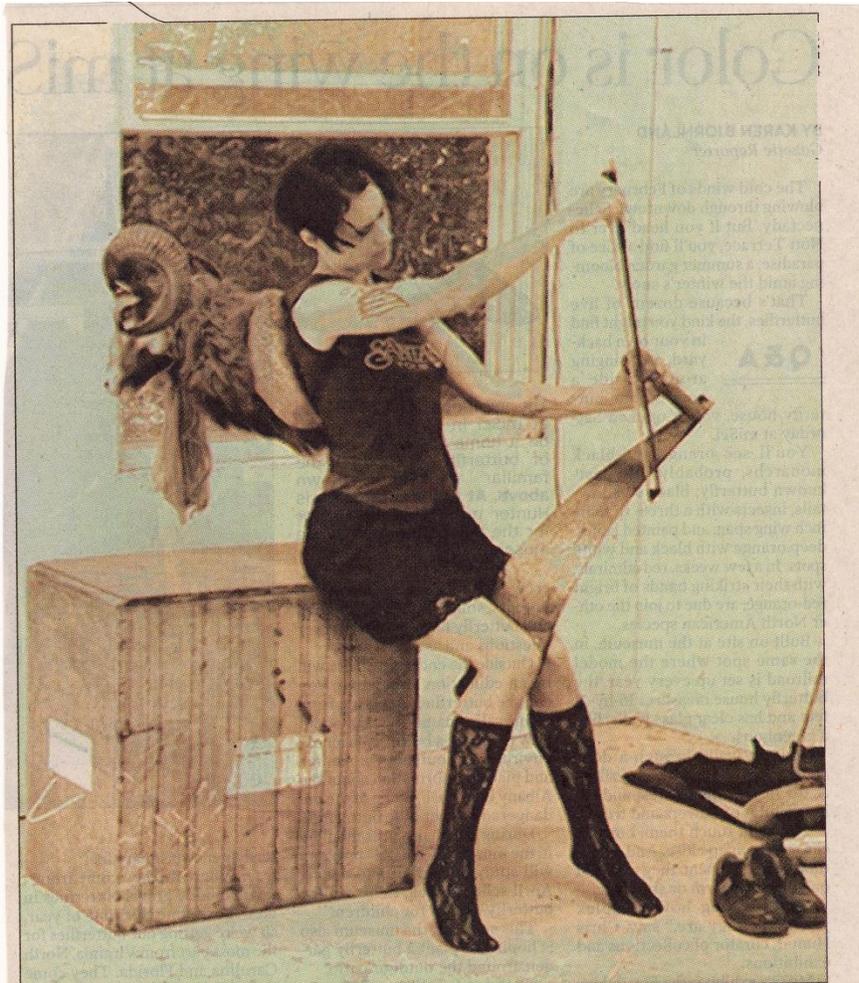
Eck is the Jug Stompers' other "utility infielder," covering the band's namesake instrument and other odds and ends. Inspired by Haymes, he has also invented a few instruments, most notably the jug and broom, which the band uses on numerous songs. It's featured on the group's debut album, 2009's "Hobo Nickel." The instrument is played with the mouth, like a regular jug, with a broom used to sweep out a rhythm on the jug at the same time.

"I was at a junk shop in Ravena -- this was when the jug band was first around," Eck said. "I was actually buying jugs trying to find a good sounding jug. . . . But they had this [crappy] little whisk broom there. And I just literally went like" (he starts brushing jug with broom rhythmically). "And I thought, oh, that's totally smokin'. And so we've actually got this on the record and everything. A lot of times live it's hard to mic it enough, that it's more of a visual, but on the record it's actually a pretty cool little [sound]-- and we do a whole bit where there's a quiet snare drum, stuff like that."

### Playing with the nose

Offbeat percussion instruments aren't the only oddities to be found in musical groups. Both Eck and Haymes play the nose flute, or humanatone -- a small, whistle-like instrument played, not surprisingly, by blowing into it with the nose, rather than the mouth. Haymes first picked up the instrument in his second band, The Star-Spangled Washboard Band, and it has carried over into the Jug Stompers.

"So it may or may not be, but I call it the only instrument known to man that is played not by blowing through your mouth, but by blowing through your nose," Haymes said. "I started playing this in the Washboard Band, and I think the only song I ever played it on was 'Hello, Hello,' an old '60s song by Sopwith Camel. When Jug Stompers came



Hudson visual artist and musician Ryder Cooley plays the singing saw using a bow. She has been playing the instrument for about 10 years.

around, we decided we would revive that song, and I had to find a new humanatone."

### Saw and bow

In recent years, the singing saw has been making more and more appearances in folk based indie music, thanks to such groups as Neutral Milk Hotel. Dan Pardee of Sgt. Dunbar and the Hobo Banned has been playing the saw with that band for about six years now, inspired by Julian Koster of Neutral Milk Hotel.

The saw is played with a bow, the same used for such stringed instruments as violin and cello, and creates an ethereal, floating

sound similar to a theremin. There are saws made specifically for playing music that are thinner than most hand saws. Pardee uses a Strativarius Sandvik, which is made in Sweden.

"I grew up playing piano, keyboards -- I just never wanted to be that guy onstage with an electric keyboard, especially in an acoustic band. I think it's lame, to be honest," Pardee said. "So that was actually the first instrument that I played in Sgt. Dunbar, was just the accordion, and then years later I bought the saw."

For Pardee, playing the saw is all about feel, as it's hard to get specific notes from the instrument. The pitch is changed by bending the saw into an "S"-shaped curve.

"I'd never played a string instrument before, so playing it with a bow, I don't know -- I'm assuming I'm not holding it right or anything," Pardee said. "It's the most 'feel' instrument that there is, except maybe [for the] theremin. [It's] just ethereal glue. I treat it, when I'm playing it, as more of a vocal instrument really -- I'm trying to find harmonies with the

lead vocal line basically."

Sad and spooky sound

Hudson singer-songwriter and artist Ryder Cooley has been playing singing saw for about 10 years now. She plays the instrument with a bow, but occasionally also uses mallets to create a more rhythmic sound when accompanying other musicians.

"It can make a very kind of sad and spooky sound -- I like that; I'm drawn to sort of dark, spooky sounds," Cooley said. "And I write a lot of sort of sad songs, so it's a very kind of emotional-sounding instrument. And really, if you play it melodically, it really sounds like a voice, almost like an opera singer."

Cooley said playing the saw is an intuitive experience.

"If people want me to play something really specific, . . . I guess you could write it out, but what I would do is more just kind of work on a part that's by ear, and memorize it by ear," Cooley said. "That doesn't mean I don't practice -- I do practice and I do make parts on the saw, but . . . it's not usually a thing that gets sort of written out."

Sometimes an instrument that doesn't seem unusual in some settings can take on a different voice when used in an unexpected genre. Saratoga Springs hard rockers Skeletons in the Piano utilize violin in their traditional two guitars-bass-drums lineup. Violinist Jeff Ayers is no stranger to mixing his instrument in with hard rock and metal -- a classically trained player, he's been doing it since the late '90s, first with progressive metal band Lore.

"I really wanted to be in a band . . . but I didn't play anything that was normally in metal material," Ayers said. "Actually, I was really into the local metal scene, like Session 8, and Tool from the national stuff, so I decided to try to go that route and I thought violin really fit. I struck out on my own -- I didn't have any reference. I tried it out and I ended up recording three albums with [Lore]. I had a lot of fun with that band, and it changed my playing a lot."

Outside the box

In Skeletons in the Piano, Ayers helps to create the band's signature ethereal sound, often playing off vocal lines to create lead parts.

"I had to really think of my instrument as a voice, and I kind of worked on learning to play it that way," Ayers said. "I draw a little from the classical side as well. Violin is the soprano of an orchestra, in the high register, so I kind of drew from that. To this day with Skeletons, when I write parts, I write them going off of Eli's [Hargrave, Skeletons in the Piano's vocalist and guitarist] vocals, or other vocals I feel should be there -- like background vocals, almost what a lead guitarist does something."

For musicians like **Pasko** , unusual instruments are a way to break out of the same old expected thing.

"I'd encourage other musicians to think outside the box," **Pasko** said. "Don't think the music store is your only source of equipment."

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***Edition:*** Schenectady/Albany; Final

***Section:*** E

***Page:*** E1

***Column:*** MUSIC

***Record Number:*** 14472AE826E440C8

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