Comic Bands - Kazoo and Zobo

Gavin Holman – July 2019

A couple of years ago I was sent a picture of Professor Mugger-Swaggers Band from Batley. Though not a true brass band, it was interesting as an example of the “comic” bands which were active in the 1890s and 1900s, formed to entertain the public and raise money for charity.

These bands were sometimes created ad hoc for galas and festivals, and occasionally had a more long-term existence. Usually they consisted of kazoo-like instruments and drums, interspersed with home-made and “real” brass or woodwind instruments.

Zobo instruments, based on kazoo principles, were invented and developed in the USA in the early 1890s, rapidly becoming a new craze for a while – largely due to the ease of “playing” and relative low cost of the instruments. The instruments also spread across to the UK soon thereafter.
In the West Riding of Yorkshire these bands were known as Tommy Talker bands and had interesting names such as Nanny Goat Lancers, Underground Artillery Jazz Band, Royal Tramps, King Tut’s Lancers, Dr Hall’s Rough and Ready Band, Paddock Silver Piggin Band, Keighley Wiffum Waffum Wuffum Band and Morley Parrock Nook Anthem Band. The latter band was formed in 1900, its leader being Billy Commons, who dressed as a dancing donkey. These bands were active on and off until WW2 – a later example being the Edge Arpers of Thornhill Edge, Dewsbury, so-called because they were local Air Raid Precautions (ARP) workers.

![Comic band in Consett](image)

“Ordinary” bands were also involved in the comedy business from time to time. For certain events they would dress up (or down, in tramp clothes), sometimes blacking their faces, or adopting women’s clothing. The usual brass instruments were used in the performances, but these were occasionally augmented or replaced by zobo/kazoo equivalents.

Pictures of a number of examples of these bands are shown below.
Further information

The Rise of the Zobo Instruments
http://www.kwintetgoedkoper.nl/Zobo.htm

The Tommy Talker Bands of the West Riding
https://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/t_talker.htm

Association of American Kazoologists
http://kazoologist.org

- Wharton, R. and Clarke, A. - *The Crown Street Comic Band*
7th Airdrie Rifles Zobo Band, 1914

Comic band at Fleetwood, 1911
Alverthorpe Working Men's Club Comic Band

Chelmsford Poor Law Institution House Officers Jazz Band, 1920
Abercynon comic band during the miner’s strike of 1921

Comic band - Chapel en le Frith Gala
Bessies o’th’ Byre Band – Mickleton, 1915
Bessies o’ th’ Byre Band – Mickleton, 1915

Another, unknown, “Besses” parody band
McNamara Band – TGWU Convalescent Home, Littleport, 1935

Keighley Wiffum Waffum Wuffum Band
Thornhill Lees Working Men’s Club Comic Prize Band

Tregony Silent Band - they can’t play a note, they just go through the motions of playing while a gramophone record churns out their only tune "Colonel Bogey" - conductor uses a stick of rhubarb
Wounded Soldiers Comic Band – Harrogate, 1916

Unknown comic band, England, 1950's
Hazeldene Prize Jazz Band, Haslingden

Comic kazoo band, Bradford
Another British kazoo band

Ladies’ zobo band – UK
Ladies’ kazoo band – Lancashire

Ladies zobo band - England
Morley Parrock Nook Anthem Prize Band, c. 1906

Morley Parrock Nook Anthem Prize Band
Unknown comic band

Boys’ zobo band, USA
Metykatla girls’ zobo Band, Alaska

Unknown comic band, USA
Unknown comic band – USA

Unknown comic band – Kansas, USA, 1910
Unknown military band – with graffiti added

German zobo band
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