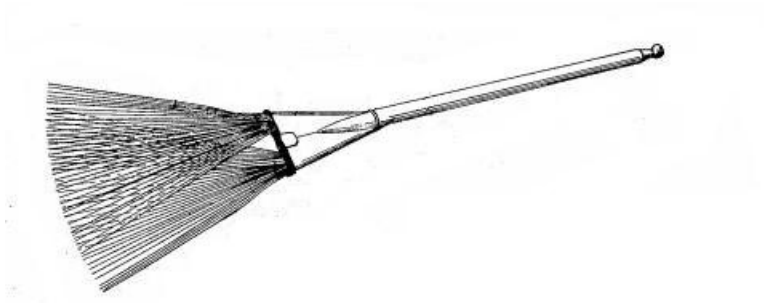


# Never Swat a Fly!

## the origins of brush playing in jazz



by **Gerry Paton**

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## Introduction

This article is an attempt to unravel some of the myths surrounding the origins of brush playing. We'll look at what the forerunners of brushes were, how and when they came into being and establish a timeframe for when their popularity grew, sweeping the world and drumheads alike. To avoid creating myths of my own I've concentrated on using first-hand accounts as source material—interviews with those who witnessed the events unfold—as well as published records of the time. The history presented here is far from complete, but hopefully it will stimulate debate and further research so that one day a more comprehensive picture emerges.

## Mr Sandman

A common belief about brushes is that they were originally 'fly-swatters'. As we shall soon see, a type of fly-swatter brush was indeed the precursor of the wire-brush that we use today. Our story however, begins with sand. In the early nineteen hundreds, sand-blocks were commonly used as a theatre effect, mainly to replicate 'surf and steam' sounds. Such accessories were referred to as 'traps' and some 'trap-drummers' started using sand-blocks for rhythmic accompaniment when, "*vamping first strains of ragtime numbers*". [1] This practice was recalled by New Orleans trombonist Preston Jackson:

*The softer the band played, the better Mutt [Carey] played. The drummer used sandpaper, there being no wire brushes at that time. You could hear every instrument. They seemed to blend better than the average band nowadays. Whenever the band became noisy, Mutt would look back and sideways and say, "Sh, sh," meaning get down softer. That didn't stop them from swinging. Some cats can't swing soft.* [2]

The general idea was for the drummer to replicate the sound and rhythms of a 'sand-dance', not only to accompany fellow musicians, but sometimes the dancers themselves. One drum manufacturer, Dodge, in their 1907 brochure, even marketed sand-blocks as a, "*Piano-forte Sand Jig imitation*" effect. So what exactly was the sand-dance? The basic principal involved dancers scraping the soles of their shoes on the floor to create rhythm. To make the brushing effects more audible, the floor would be covered with sand. [3] In vaudeville, professional dancers would sprinkle the sand themselves, from a can or similar receptacle as they moved about the stage. [4] The dance had similarities with the 'Slow Drag'. In New Orleans, in the less salubrious parts of the city, 'ladies of easy virtue' dropped by the dance halls after midnight and the music got slow, bluesy and 'draggy'. Buddy Bolden, "*who liked to hear the shuffling of feet as a background to his music*", would yell out to his orchestra:

*Way down, way down low [play quietly]  
So I can hear those whores  
Drag their feet across the floor [5]*

Bandleader Manuel Manetta remembered the dancers, "*packed like sardines in there, sound like sandpaper*". [6]

Although Preston Jackson's account tells us that there were occasions when the drummer was required to play quietly, and that sand-blocks were one option, the evolution from blocks to brushes—which require a very different playing technique—isn't immediately apparent. Still, he does highlight that during the early part of the twentieth century a practice existed—among some, at any rate—of using swish-type rhythms to accompany others on the bandstand. So in that sense, sand-blocks were the forerunner of the modern brush. At some point though, the trap-drummer did turn to the wire-brush; or rather, *“that truly American instrument the common or garden fly-swatter, with which he brushes delicate rasps, like etherealized sandpaper scraping, off the top of the snare drum”*. [7]

### **Straighten Up and Fly Right**

Patents for early 'fly-killers'—the first one granted in 1895—show brushes with wire bristles arranged in broad, flat fans, attached to the ends of long handles. Because mesh-paddle swatters are the norm nowadays, it may seem strange that brushes were ever used in the first place. However, if the marketing hype is to be believed, there was a genuine advantage to using the wire-brush:

*A fly can be killed on the table, wall or other place, without leaving any trace, as would be the result if killed with a paper rolled up.* [8]

Some of these wire-brush fly-swatters bear a remarkable resemblance to modern-day brushes and during the formative years of jazz, drummers began substituting them for sticks, when the occasion required. Eventually, fit-for-purpose drum-brushes emerged in the early-to-mid 1920s and although drum manufacturers marketed their products under different names—'Jazz Stick' in the case of Ludwig and Ludwig, for example—they continued to be referred to as fly-swatters, 'flywhisks' and 'swats' throughout the twenties. [9]

So who can we thank for first introducing the brushes?

### **The Great Pretender**

According to pianist Jelly Roll Morton, he introduced the fly swatter—*“they now call them brushes”*—when working in California:

*I, myself, by accident, discovered the swats on drums. Out in Los Angeles I had a drummer that hit his snares so loud that one night I gave him a couple of fly swatters for a gag. This drummer fell in with the joke and used them, but they worked so smooth he kept right on using them. So we have “the swats” today—a nice soft way to keep your rhythm going.* [10]

A notorious bragger, prone to self-aggrandisement, Morton shouldn't be taken too seriously. However, it's an odd claim for a non-drummer to make and his story rings true. Although unlikely that he was *solely* responsible for introducing brushes to the world, he may well have introduced them to the West Coast if nothing else. After arriving in 1917, Morton stayed out West for around six years. He was mostly active in Los Angeles for only the first two years of that period though, which gives us a rough timeline. [11]

Whether any school of brush-playing he spawned was at all influential, it is impossible to say. Chicago was the jazz capital at the time and not Los Angeles. Having said that, in one sense Jelly Roll Morton really did introduce brushes to the world. The sides that he cut with Baby Dodds in 1927 are, arguably, the first significant jazz recordings to feature brushes. [12]



A 1926 re-enactment of the moment when Jelly Roll Morton invented brush playing.

### You Turned the Tables On Me

Ralph Berton, in his combined personal memoir and biography of Bix Beiderbecke, offered a more obvious candidate for the person responsible for introducing brushes—his elder brother, the talented drummer and bandleader Vic Berton:

*His next business triumph occurred around 1921, when I was ten. At informal jazz sessions in musicians' homes, which often take place "after hours"—i.e., between 2 A.M. and 6 A.M.—the drummer would use, instead of snare drum and drumsticks, which would have awakened the neighborhood, an upended suitcase and a pair of whisk brooms, probably an idea borrowed from the old spasm bands. Vic dug the sound, and again devised a professional improvement: in our garage he hammered together, onto a pair of flat wooden sticks, two fan-shaped bundles of short thin steel wires, clamped together at their vertexes. He had just invented wire brushes. [13]*

We will return to the subject of whisk brooms, but for the moment let's focus on the rest of Ralph Berton's narrative. His claim could so easily be dismissed as the glib boastings of a proud, younger brother were it not for the fact that Vic Berton had already come up with a number of improvements to the drum kit and is widely acknowledged as the inventor of the 'low boy': the foot-operated predecessor of the modern hi-hat. [14] Vic had previously

shown at least one of his ideas to, “his favorite manufacturer of drums”; and, according to Ralph Berton, had given them a demonstration of his homemade brushes:

*For Vic had once more taken his little idea to his manufacturer friend, who again thought it was just dandy; in fact he took care to improve on Vic’s crude design by attaching the sheaf of wires to a metal tube, before taking out a patent and going into production. Today, fifty years later, wire brushes are taken for granted as an indispensable ingredient of the sound of jazz drums—many drummers use them exclusively—and again Vic Berton never made a nickel out of it, nor, as far as I know, even got official credit. [15]*

The ‘manufacturer friend’ Ralph refers to was probably Ludwig & Ludwig. The firm was also Chicago based and Vic Berton went on to endorse their tympani drums. [16] They brought out their Jazz Sticks—probably the first purpose-built drum-brush to come to market—within a year or so of Berton making his prototype brushes, but Ludwig’s product was in another league altogether. Jazz Sticks featured a, “*wire brush that folds into the handle*”. [17] In other words, the wires were retractable so they could be protected when not in use. Obviously Ludwig & Ludwig had done some extensive research and development. Or had they?

### **The Law Gonna Step On You**

When the Jazz Stick arrived on the scene an almost identical brush already existed, only it was being sold as a ‘telescopic fly-killer’. Possibly to avoid legal headaches, Ludwig & Ludwig quickly brought out a modified brush called the ‘Synco Jazz stick’—‘Synco’ being a then popular contraction of the word ‘syncopation’. It differed from the original in that the wires were extended using a metal plunger-rod with a rubber ball ‘mallet’ fitted to its end. Despite the changes, the similarities were still too much for one of the co-inventors of the telescopic fly-killer, Louis Allis, who took Ludwig to court for patent infringement in 1928—Louis Allis & Adolph R. Wiens’ version of the brush having been patented in 1913.

Although William F. Ludwig II, in his autobiography *The Making of a Drum Company*, gave a nod to Allis & Wiens as being the inventors of the modern drum-brush, Ludwig & Ludwig were a little more tight-lipped about this at the time of their court hearing. They needn’t have worried though. Crucially, Ludwig & Ludwig didn’t incorporate Allis & Wiens’ fan-spreading mechanism—a metal coil that helped separate the wires as they were extended—into their version of the brush. As this was the only unique feature of Allis & Wiens’ design—earlier patents for telescopic wire-brushes existed, albeit different in form and function—Allis didn’t have a leg to stand on and his claim was dismissed. [18]

Louis Allis wasn’t the only one surprised by the verdict as eyebrows were still being raised by patent lawyers some twenty years later. As Ellis Ridsdale observed in his 1949 publication, *Patent laws and legislation*:

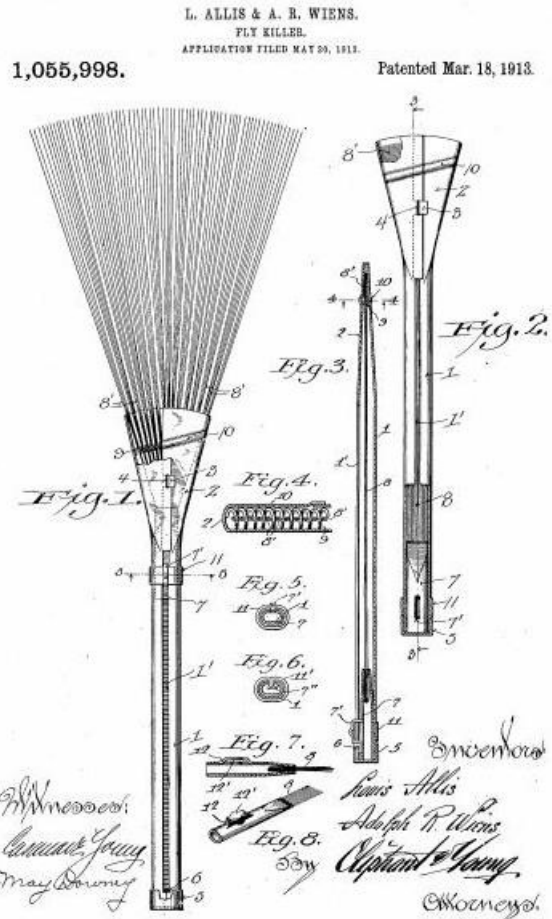
*Mechanical patents where a new use in a wholly non-analogous art involves no change in construction are rare. One out-standing example is the flyswatter patent involved in the case of Allis v. Ludwig & Ludwig.*

## You Showed Me the Way

Despite Ralph Berton's apparent bitterness on behalf of his brother, Vic Berton would have faced similar obstacles as Ludwig & Ludwig had he decided to commercially produce his 'invention'. Numerous patents for wire brushes already existed, so by cobbling together a pair of his own all he'd done, in effect, was reinvent the wheel. A trip to the hardware store to buy a pair of fly-swatters would have saved him a great deal of bother, and no doubt many drummers did just that after seeing Vic demonstrate his discovery. In the space between developing his homemade brushes and drum companies going into production with their own versions, wire-brushes gained in popularity among the drumming community. They would eventually become the de rigueur item of the dance-band drummer and by the time of the Allis v. Ludwig & Ludwig legal scuffle, even the former was marketing his fly-killer, predominantly, as a 'drum beater'. [19] Ralph Berton sums up the atmosphere:

*[Brushes] quickly became obligatory equipment for the jazz drummer, spreading like a prairie fire through the music business. For the unvarying hollow thud of the conventional drumstick—another heritage from the brass band—they substituted a crisp, agreeable swish that struck exactly the right note in the new, swinging, increasingly subtle jazz beat. [20]*

Was all this the result of one man though?



A 1912 instrument of mass-murder on the one hand, a 1928 instrument of mass-syncopation on the other.

## You Don't Learn That In School

Vic Berton may well have been the first man to scrape wire across drum-hide in the Chicago area. It's also possible that his pioneering efforts helped alert at least one local drum-manufacturer to the commercial potential of brushes. If that was the case, then Vic Berton deserves our full respect. However, there was already another school of wire-brush players firmly established at the time. Putting Jelly Roll Morton's possible influence aside for one moment, this other school happened to be on the East coast.

In *The Book of Jazz, from then till now*, critic and author Leonard Feather interviewed Dixieland musician Tony Sbarbaro for a chapter about drums. Sbarbaro arrived in New York with the Original Dixieland Jazz Band in late January, 1917. According to Feather, “he had never seen a pair of brushes before this time”. Sbarbaro’s band had spent the previous year in Chicago, so clearly brush-playing existed in New York before it did in Chicago. We can also deduce that there was no tradition of brush-playing in New Orleans prior to the date given because Sbarbaro was native to that city.

Surely though, it was the drummers of New Orleans—the ‘Cradle of Jazz’—who developed the technique of wire-brush playing? This isn’t borne out by the recollections of other New Orleans drummers who were around at the time. According to Baby Dodds, he only came across brushes when he moved to Chicago in the twenties:

*In 1923 I used very heavy sticks. One day Joe [Oliver] told me, “I want to try to get you to beat light,” and he brought me some wire brushes. It was a new thing and I was probably the first guy that ever worked with wire brushes in this part of the country.* [21]

Furthermore, Arthur ‘Zutty’ Singleton had this to say:

*The first pair of brushes I ever had were sent from Chicago by Manuel Perez to Louis ‘Old Man’ Cottrell [Cottrell], the drummer with Piron. I studied his work a lot during the early days. But Cottrell didn’t care about them and gave them to me, and those were the first wire brushes I ever saw in my life, around 1921. Before that, you had to get your soft effects just by controlling your touch with the sticks.* [22]

And Alfred Williams claimed that, “*The wire brushes came into use in the ’20s. I had ’em with Sam Morgan’s band*”. [23] Williams was with Morgan’s band between the years 1922 and 1925.

All this suggests that brush playing was absent from New Orleans until the early 1920s.

### **Junk Man**

So exactly how old is brush-playing? This is where things get a little murky. The academic Harold Ordway Rugg, writing in 1931, was under the impression that wire-brushes were first used by drummers during the time when jazz was introduced across the States:

*By 1915 jazz had moved north...Young leaders were experimenting with new combinations of instruments...Once these young band members got started there began a decade of experimentation with time beat, orchestration, and new ways of playing instruments. Experimenting leaders encouraged the individual players of their orchestras to invent new sounds and combinations of tones...The drummer learned to produce seductive time beats by brushing a fly-swatter across a snare drum.* [24]

This period of experimentation coincided with—and in some cases was a continuation of—a mid-decade trend for novelty. Commenting on New York’s early jazz scene, Wilder Hobson once wrote:

*Most of the “Jazz” bands which sought a popularity like that of the [Original] Dixieland [Jazz Band] copied merely the latter’s gags and novelty effects, made a syncopated din which had little or nothing to do with the jazz language as the Dixieland had learned it in New Orleans; these Northern combinations were for the most part old-style ragtime “nut” bands with added comedy features, an extra set of pots and pans for the drummer...[25]*

In an effort to stand out in a saturated marketplace, a good many bandleaders introduced gimmick into their acts during the tail-end of ragtime. The drummer was often the worst offender—a quick listen to the precursory 1914 novelty tune ‘My Hindoo Man’ by the *Van Eps Banjo Orchestra* will explain all—and it wasn’t uncommon to see the pots and pans that Hobson mentioned, positioned around the drum kit. It would be quite in keeping with the period for these ‘nut’ bands to have used fly-swatters and evidently they did—New York’s white, ragtime drummers were already using swats when the Original Dixieland Jazz Band arrived in town at the beginning of 1917 [26]. Just as Jelly Roll Morton had given a pair of fly-swatters to his drummer, “for a gag”, it seems that they were introduced for the same reason in New York.



A 1916 Ragtime band. It was customary in those days to set up a small hardware store to the side of the stage, in case diners wished to purchase a frying pan or spare fire-bell.

That the Dixieland copy-cat bands were using brushes mainly for novelty appears to be backed up by a 1922 tip published in the *Lyceum* magazine:

*Don’t ditch the old fly swatters. You can give them to your favorite jazz band drummer to use in depicting rain, sleet, steam engines, ostrich snores, eating soup, etc. [27]*



The trend for serious brush-playing had gathered momentum by the time the above tip appeared in print, but it does suggest that many early 'jazz band' drummers were using brushes as little more than a sound-effect. Those who'd worked in theatre pits or as sound-effects men in movie-houses, were possibly utilising techniques learned from playing a 'scratch box', or stovepipe. An old trick used to recreate steam-engine sounds was to drag a bundle of stiff, steel wires across a sheet of metal (often part of a wooden-box resonator) or section of metal stovepipe, the metal having been drilled or punched to create a 'cheese grater' surface. [28] In the early days of silent-cinema though, some drummers had already cottoned on to the idea of using fly-swatters with a snare drum to produce sound-effects, thereby making scratch boxes and similar devices redundant. In 1909, aged only 12, the future composer and critic Virgil Thomson secured his first professional engagement as a musician, in Kansas City:

*That same summer there opened near by the first film house to serve our neighbourhood. The price was five cents; the show, which repeated itself all evening, an hour long. The program, changed nightly, consisted of an "illustrated song," sung to piano accompaniment and colored slides, and two short films—a drama and a comedy. I must have gone every night. One evening just before opening time, someone came to the house asking if I would substitute for the regular pianist...Being unskilled in improvisation, I simply played pieces I knew while a trap drummer underlined the rhythm and added "effects" such as cowbells, horses' hooves, bass drum thuds, and cymbal crashes. His flyswatter, always at hand in summer, could be useful too for light drum taps. It was soon to become, in fact, under the name of "brush", standard drummers' equipment. [29]*

Whether these 'light drum taps' were for the purpose of providing rhythmic accompaniment or for creating sound effects—the 'pitter-patter' of rain, for example—is unclear, but Thomson's account tells us that fly-swatters were being used by at least one trap-drummer as early as 1909. How widespread their use was among the wider drumming community is another thing altogether of course. Eventually, wire brushes would become mainstream percussion accessories, but before drum companies got involved in their manufacture they were still somewhat of a rarity on the bandstand. One figure who did much to raise their profile during that transitional period was George Lawrence Stone. Reflecting on those days, Stone recalled that flyswatters were:

*...originally patented under the name "fly killer"...It was years later when some of us lit on the possibilities of this item being used to swat the drumhead. The first instance of such use might well have been a misguided dab at a fly lighting on a drumhead and the ensuing delighted surprise at the sound evoked. No one has come forward, however, to claim the honor of actually discovering the gadget's role in drumming. However, here in the East, it was I, George Lawrence Stone, who was truly the pioneer of the swat...I had discovered the calibre of the new sounds produced from merely wiping one brush across the drumhead while swatting down and around with the other, and for months I demonstrated this new and exciting method to all who would listen. However, the consensus of opinion of those who bothered to listen was that "Stone is beginning to lose his marbles". However, you can't keep a good idea down, and finally, through the years, jazz brushes have caught on to the extent that today's modern would feel lost without this now-so-important tool of his trade. [30]*

Stone offers no timeframe for when he discovered for himself the rhythmic potential of the flyswatter, but it must have been sometime after 1912 because he used the retractable Allis-Wiens type of swat in those days:

*The same wires were sheathed and unsheathed in the same cylindrical casing as of today, by a sliding metal button situated at about the center of the casing, and they sold, I believe, for one thin dime apiece. [31]*

Clearly, Stone wasn't the first person to have discovered the flyswatter's "role in drumming". Not if Virgil Thomson remembered them being used in 1909. However, he was—and arguably still is thanks to the continued popularity of his book *Stick Control*—a hugely influential figure in the world of drumming. For that reason his efforts to promote the use of brushes can't be ignored.

Early wire-brush players may well have drawn on ideas borrowed from theatre sound-effects techniques, but for some drummers inspiration came from an even older tradition of brush-playing. One that ran parallel at the time. Sterling Brown, in his 1946 essay *Stray Notes On Jazz*, lamented the passing of Dixieland into, "what has been aptly called the Whiteman era in jazz"—Whiteman being the dance-band leader Paul Whiteman who popularised a form of tepid, orchestrated jazz that gained momentum from 1920 onwards. In one section of his diatribe, contrasting the two styles, Brown complained that, "the beating of a tom-tom subsided to the rustling of a whisk broom over sand paper". And so it is to the whisk-broom that we look for the possible 'missing-link' between sand-blocks and the flyswatter.

### Shoe Shine Swing

Proclaiming the first drummer to ever use fly-swatters as the originator of brush-technique is no more absurd than saying that the first ever Fender-bass player invented four-string bass. Just as the double bass pre-existed the electric bass, a tradition of using whisk-brooms to create rhythm was around long before jazz drummers turned to the wire brush. The difference is, however, that the practice of using whisk-brooms didn't, in the main, develop on the bandstand.

In 1907, the writer and traveller Charles Henry White wrote a lengthy account of being brushed-down by a 'negro' barber in Charleston:

*...his work, like that of the artist, becomes the labor of love. He loses sight of its commercial possibilities in its technical resources. In his hands it [the whisk broom] is manipulated until it becomes a vehicle of expression and takes its place among the instruments of percussion...Your collar bone will be approached with a capriccioso movement that will soon shape itself into an allegro non troppo as he reaches your shoulders. In the variegated rhythms that follow in quick succession you unconsciously formulate well-remembered airs. As he reached for my ribs, for an instant he was agitato, and I thought I traced Schumann's delightful "I'll ne'er Complain"—only for a moment, for he had shifted to elaborate double syncopations. This time the tempo was unmistakable—"I Don't Care if Yo' Nevah Come Back"—but doubtless realizing the inappropriateness of the selection, he drifted gracefully*



*your back the most complicated tunes—beating time all the while with his foot, with a precision that would do honor to the leader of the orchestra of the Orleans theatre; but then the touch of the brush is so exceedingly light—it rebounds from your coat with the sprightly elasticity of India-rubber. How often does the double and triple and common time put you in mind of the castanets of the Castilian maid, and the rub-a-dub-dub of the drummer at tattoo or reville!* [33]

Over time, it wasn't only barbers in the south who were experienced in the art. In 1917, the future bandleader and bass-saxophonist Andy Kirk secured a, “*porter and shoeshinning job at Jay's Barbershop in Sterling [Colorado]*”. In his autobiography, Kirk had this to say about the experience:

*It was that showmanship in how you used the shining rag and brush. You'd draw the rag its whole length across the shoe, then pop the rag and draw it back the other way, all in rhythm. Every shoe shiner could think up his own patterns. You could even imitate the sound of train wheels rolling over the tracks. Then you'd brush off the customer's coat with a whisk broom, in rhythm, like a drummer swishing his wire brushes on the snare or cymbals.* [34]

This was common practice among shoeshine-boys and there's evidence to suggest that they even used the whisk-broom to drum out rhythms on their stands to attract customers and pass the time of day. [35]

### **Play That Barber Shop Chord**

The tradition of the barbershop as a centre of musical activity had its roots in Renaissance Europe. In Shakespeare's London, for example, the custom was for a cittern—a four-stringed, fretted instrument of the guitar family—to hang from the wall for customers to play at their leisure while waiting to be attended. When idle, barbers would, “*passé their time in life-delighting musique*”. [36] Fast-forward to St. Louis in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and at the barbershop you might, “*hear those boys singin' whilst they were waitin' to have their hair fixed...what they called barber shop fours*”, yet still, “*they'd have a guitar layin' around. Play it if you want to*”. [37]

Society became more genteel during the Age of Enlightenment and the earthy environment of the barbershop became less of an attraction for idlers. Subsequently, a shave or haircut was a much quieter affair by the early-nineteenth century. In the Americas, as in parts of continental Europe, the musical tradition continued however, and due to their increasing dominance of the barbering trade—by way of example, one barber quizzed about his profession in the 1850s claimed that there were no white barbers in Louisiana [38]—African-American barbers became custodians of the practice. It may seem incongruous that this state of affairs existed during the time of slavery, but as Henry A Kmen wrote in *Music in New Orleans, the Formative Years, 1791 - 1841*:

*...the city [New Orleans] was quite different from the better known pattern of plantation slavery. Many of the city slaves were skilled artisans of one kind or other who plied their trades and lived as though they were free, reporting periodically to their owners for the*

*purpose only of making a stipulated money payment from their earnings...In short, New Orleans was full of slaves who, for a part or most of their time, were not too distinguishable from their legally free brethren.*

In a similar manner slaves became barbers in other parts of the south, alongside many freed slaves (most famously the Mississippi diarist William T Johnson). And even before emancipation African American barbers, whether free men or runaways, introduced or helped to continue the tradition of music in barbershops throughout the north. After the Civil War the barbershop became a hub of the African American male community: a place to congregate, play music, sing and even dance. Many notable musicians received their first musical instruction in these informal ‘classrooms’—Sidney Bechet and W.C. Handy to name but two. [39] And the custom of providing a stringed instrument for customers to play meant that the barbershop had a strong association with the Blues, especially when the guitar became fashionable. Anyone who has watched the 1970s film documentary *Deep Blues* will recall Clarksdale barber Wade Walton accompanying a guitarist in his shop by sharpening his razor, in rhythm, on a leather strop. It’s easy to see, then, how another work-tool, the whisk-broom, was brought into play and it’s almost certain that the whisk was first used to accompany musicians in the environment of the barbershop.

### **Get Yourself a New Broom**

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the whisk-broom was firmly established “*among the instruments of percussion*”, thanks to our barber and ‘bootblack’ friends, and it had already worked its way into vaudeville. The husband-and-wife duo Fred Huber and Kitty Allyne were performing a black-face minstrel routine from 1889 onwards that included, “*Violin and Banjo accompaniment, bone and whisk-broom solos*”. [40] Everything except for the whisk-broom was a cliché of the black-face genre, the instruments reflecting those used by plantation slaves in former times. In an attempt to update these acts, ‘new’ items such as the whisk-broom were incorporated to introduce audiences to a more ‘urbane’ African-American stereotype.

As unsavoury as the black-face acts were, they reflect the beginnings of African-American influence on white musical-tastes. And artists like Huber & Allyne helped to establish the whisk-broom as a staple prop of vaudeville. In 1912, the young dancer Jack Donahue was performing a tap dance with a whisk broom on the New York stage. [41] The routine was picked up by later ‘vaude’ performers and was being taught as a set piece, at least by one dance-studio, in the mid-twentieth century. [42] The dance had by then evolved to incorporate more than one performer, their brooms wrapped with ‘emory-cloth’—presumably one brushed against the other to create rhythm. If one considers the many ‘hoofers’ who ran studios upon retiring from the stage, this use of sandpaper gives us some idea of how the early vaudeville performers were generating sounds with their whisks.

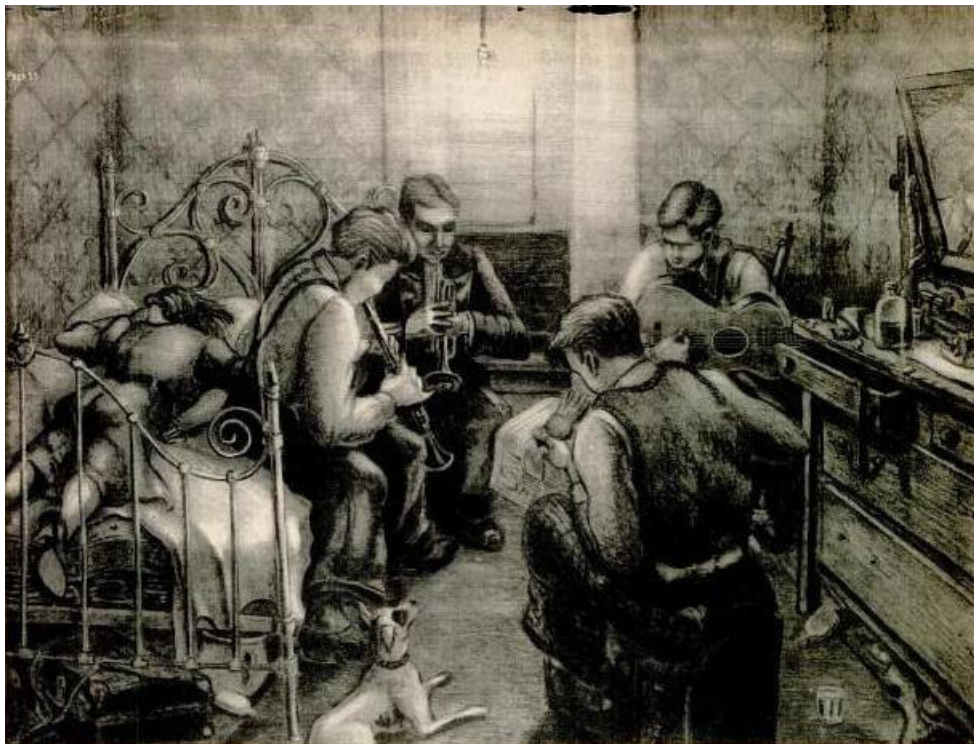
It’s likely, then, that the, “*rustling of a whisk broom over sand paper*”, as witnessed by Sterling Brown, came from this vaudeville tradition. And somewhere in the States there was a period when this method for producing swish bridged the gap between sand-blocks and wire-brushes. Possibly Washington DC as that was Brown’s stomping ground for much of his life. It’s also possible that the Whiteman Orchestra itself used the technique.

Their 1926 recording *Why Do You Roll Those Eyes* features a section where a banjo is accompanied by sand-blocks or, possibly, sandpaper and whisk.

Either way, it would be wrong to claim that any 'transitional phase' was universal; there is no evidence to suggest that this was ever the case. Although a fairly new thing, wire-brushes were relatively commonplace during the 'Whiteman era' that Sterling Brown was lambasting—at least in Chicago and New York. To any drummer already familiar with brushes, this use of whisk-broom and sandpaper must surely have seemed antiquated. The whisk-broom was far from being dead-in-the-water though.

### Suitcase Blues

By the early 1920s, the white, jazz drummers of Chicago were well acquainted with the rhythmic potential of whisk-brooms (note the plural). For a playing surface, they favoured the suitcase—both as a means of amplifying the whisks and as an improvised bass-drum to be kicked with one's heel. In the late twenties, and possibly in earlier times, drummers bound their suitcases with crinkled wrapping-paper. [43] This was done to create a more abrasive surface for louder swish. When no suitcase was available, an empty instrument-case borrowed from another musician would do. [44] All of this happened away from the public gaze, however. Probably due to their size, it seems that whisk brooms were too impractical to use with a snare drum and playing a suitcase onstage obviously didn't hold much appeal for the likes of Vic Berton and his contemporaries. Although the suitcase and



*Jam Session* (1930s) by George von Physter. The gentleman sitting on the suitcase brushes down his dusty newspaper while the musicians play. Having let the housework slip, the woman on the bed hides her face in shame.



whisks would eventually have its day in the limelight, the technique mostly remained a hidden art in jazz circles; for many years the preserve of the late-night jam session. In fact, whisks remained a familiar sight at jam sessions—and not just in Chicago—well into the 1940s: New York nightclub owner Reuben Harris was fond of jamming along with the pianists he booked using a pair of whisk brooms and a newspaper folded over a empty beer-crate. [45] By that time though, whisk-playing had pretty much had its day. Ultimately, it fell from favour as wire-brush technique developed: whisk-brooms were simply too cumbersome when playing the ‘tricky stuff’. [46]

All this raises the question of why whisks continued to be used at a time when wire-brushes were widely available. Arguably, musicians were simply using whatever implements came to hand at jam-sessions. Having said that, it wouldn’t take much to slip a pair of brushes into a inside-coat-pocket when leaving the door. One would think then, that whisks were louder than brushes or superior in some other way. From my own experiments though, there are no obvious advantages to using them: whisks are slightly quieter and provide a softer tone with whatever improvised playing surface is to hand. [47] In fact, it was mostly amateurs and non-drummers who continued to play whisk-brooms at jam sessions [48]. This in part explains their continued popularity, but some professional drummers also favoured their use.

As hinted at earlier, there was a trend from 1929 onwards, lasting a good few years, for using the suitcase and whisks onstage, mostly for novelty value. The two main protagonists of this setup were Frank ‘Josh’ Billings of *The Mound City Blue Blowers* and later Virgil Scoggins (sometimes written as ‘Scroggins’) of *The Spirits of Rhythm*. Although the leader of the Blowers, Red McKenzie, had misgivings, once incorporated into their line-up, Billings and his suitcase were an overnight success. According to Eddie Condon, banjo player with the Blue Blowers:

*At parties everyone wanted to play the suitcase, and sooner or later everyone did...among the suitcase players were [theatrical producer] Earl Carrol, [actress] Gloria Swanson, and [actor] Billy Leeds. [49]*

It is tempting to think that McKenzie’s dealings with the Spirits of Rhythm—he managed the outfit for a time—was what prompted Scoggins’ use of the suitcase, but Scoggins was a suitcase drummer long before the likes of Josh Billings and other McKenzie alumni (see my article about Billings). Scoggins was a dancer and when on the road, at night in his room, he’d rehearse steps using his hands on his suitcase, because his feet made too much noise. Pleased with the sound, he bought some whisks and became a suitcase drummer. [50]

But how about before the jazz age? Was the suitcase and whisk ever used by ‘spasm bands’, as mooted by Ralph Berton?

### **Hokum Stomp**

A 1945 publication had this to say about the spasm bands of New Orleans:

*Spasm bands, composed of small Negro boys using makeshift instruments, who tap-dance*

and 'put it on' for pedestrians, are often seen in the streets of the Vieux Carré. They run behind strollers and, catching up, immediately go into violent twistings and contortions, accompanied by pleas of 'Gimme a penny, Mister! Gimme a nickel, Mister!' Some do their dances without any musical accompaniment at all, and some of the dances are definitely individual. [51]

Although in New Orleans the members of spasm bands were mostly children, all over the south poorer adults also resorted to making home-made instruments to create music. Depending on what household items they used, these groups were known as 'tub', 'washboard' or 'jug' bands. Other names included 'hokum', 'skiffle' and 'jook' bands. They played a mixture of ragtime and blues and it wasn't uncommon to encounter such a ragtag bunch of musicians playing in a saloon (the word 'jook' coming from 'jook-joint'). It was in this environment that the precociously young ragtime-pianist John "Knocky" Parker began his professional career.

In a 1973 interview for JEMF quarterly, John Parker was specifically quizzed about, "*the process of white and black musical interaction in the Southwest*". He was in a unique position to talk about the subject as he'd been a white boy—quite literally: he was only eight at the time—playing alongside older, African-American musicians in the saloons of Dallas from 1926 onwards. When asked about the instruments used by his band-mates, Parker replied that they, "*had more home-made and more worn-out instruments*". On the subject of percussion, he recalled that they would use brushes and whisk brooms on, "*suitcases of all kinds and different sizes. They would take a suitcase to be a drum*". [52]

The 1926 date precludes the possibility that these Dallas musicians were jumping on the Billings-Scroggins bandwagon, which had yet to happen. It is also important to remember that they weren't playing battered and homemade instruments for novelty—showing affluent audiences at society functions how 'down-home' they could get—but out of necessity. Pianist Sammy Price was part of the Dallas music scene during the 1920s. Reflecting on his childhood in Texas, Price had this to say:

*...just about the only instruments that Blacks had any access to, could get their hands on or make, were percussion instruments: an occasional drum, tambourines, the triangle. And then there was the harmonica, and sometimes someone had a guitar, but that's about it...black folk couldn't get their hands on any instruments, and those that did played church music...Jazz and blues were played by outlaws in dives and at juke joints, '49 camps and picnics. [53]*



**An early form of the interactive video-game *Rock Band*. Note the unusual game-controllers.**

How far back these Dallas musicians were using whisks with suitcases is academic. The practice must have been common across the south. Due to its use by barbers and shoeshine boys, the whisk broom was such a familiar part of the everyday musical landscape that many folk wouldn't have thought twice about



picking up a pair to provide some rhythmic accompaniment. And suitcases were certainly used for percussion in the south outside of Dallas. Around the time that Vic Berton was making the transition from whisks to wire brushes, the guitar player Danny Barker (then a mere boy) was forming his first Spasm band, 'The Boozan Kings', in his home town of New Orleans. He drafted in five friends, one of whom was "Charles Blaine on suitcase". [54] Blaine played alongside a regular drummer and one wonders if his suitcase acted as bass drum to the other band member's 'side drum' (snare).

As to how drumming with whisks transferred to the young, white jazz musicians of Chicago, suitcases were common enough among musicians and economic migrants from the south—any one of whom could have taken the practice north during the period of the 'Great Migration' (the years just either side of, and including, WWI). After gigs Vic Berton would sit in with jazz bands, some of them from the south. It's not unreasonable to assume that he jammed with musicians from those bands, in private, after-hours. The baton (albeit with bristles attached to one end) could, therefore, have been passed to him in this manner. Another possibility is that Berton, or one of his inner circle, witnessed street musicians from the south playing the suitcase. Although the following event, recounted by drummer Louie Bellson, happened in New York and at a much later date, it demonstrates one possible way in which the whole suitcase-drumming trend could have started in Chicago:

*Drummers today think they need all this state-of-the-art equipment, but I remember playing at the Apollo a couple of times in the early '40s, and there was this guy who used to be on the corner. I think his name was Rhythm Willie, and he played harmonica and accompanied himself with some old, beat-up brushes and a homemade pair of sticks on a battered suitcase. And this guy could make that suitcase sound better than a set of drums. There was always a big crowd around him, and he would just be swinging. [55]*

A third possibility—one that shouldn't be overlooked—is that the idea for using the suitcase came about independently from musicians using them in the south. Perhaps the Chicago drummers had looked for a way to amplify whisks during jam sessions and a suitcase was the obvious choice. The initial influence for using the whisk broom would still have come from southerners, however. Most likely from shoeshine boys. That the practice of brushing-down customers in rhythm existed in Chicago during the jazz age is certain. Clarinetist Albert Nicholas worked with Joe Oliver's band at a place called the Plantation in 1925. Reminiscing about the club, he recalled:

*The shoe shine boy, I mean the washroom attendant, who would brush you down, he was a jive king. When he'd take the whisk broom he'd brush you in rhythm and hit behind your pockets and jingle that change you know. [56]*

### **Will the Circle Be Unbroken**

In recent years, the manufacturer *Rosendahl Copenhagen* brought out a fly-swatter. Its sleek, stainless-steel handle ends in a narrow-fan of long, black, polyester wires. The words 'aesthetically pleasing' don't even begin to describe this beauty. The marketing hype is similar to that used a century ago, in that the fly isn't crushed when hit by this

brush, merely ‘stunned’. Inevitably, this designer fly-swatter comes with a designer price-tag attached to it and some comments posted on review sites have been along the lines of, “*Save your money and buy a cheap pair of drum-brushes instead*”. Oh, the irony! How fitting, then, that as the centenary of the introduction of the Allis & Wiens fly-swatter approaches, I find myself staring at a 21<sup>st</sup> century fly-swatter wondering about its potential as a drum-beater. It seems that we’ve come full-circle.



It's a fly-swatter Jim...

The history of the brushes isn't straightforward. Despite competition from alternatives such as sand-blocks and whisk brooms, drummers eventually converged on the wire-brush as a means to provide subtler accompaniment when required. In different parts of the States, different evolutionary paths were taken to get to that point. Ultimately though, it was the involvement of the drum companies that united these seemingly isolated schools of brush-players that had popped up during, and after, WWI. On the back of a growing trend, Ludwig & Ludwig, and others, began manufacturing their own wire-brushes in the early-to-mid 1920s; and the full force of their marketing campaigns really did create the prairie fire Ralph Berton spoke of. Although Vic Berton may not have been solely responsible for starting that fire, his brother Ralph was correct when he said that we take brushes for granted these days.

So, the next time you're sitting at your kit and reach for the fly-swatters—because that's basically what they are—take a moment to reflect on their long history. Spare a thought for the barbers of New Orleans who brushed down customers in rhythm with their whisks; the suitcase drummers of Dallas and Chicago who adopted the technique for their own means; Vic Berton, who was so inspired by the sound of whisks that he made a pair of

wire-brushes to try out on his kit; Ludwig & Ludwig who brought out the 'Jazz Stick', based on the Allis & Wiens Fly-Killer; the evangelical George Lawrence Stone and New York's Dixieland drummers, all of whom used fly-swatters when there was no other available option. Above all though, remember the many musicians who have played a part in the development of brush-technique over the decades, and those who continue to do so. Without them, the wire-brush would have remained an implement for killing flies and nothing more.

If you have enjoyed this article then please support brushbeat by buying a copy of my book, *The Richmond Assault: a short history of barber-musicians and their role in the development of brush-playing*. Either search for the title at [completelynovel.com](http://completelynovel.com) or use the following link:

<https://completelynovel.com/search?query=the+richmond+assault&commit=Go>

### References and Notes

1. *'The Selection of Accessories', Jacobs' Orchestra Monthly*, Sept 1911. Reprinted in *Jazz in Print (1856-1929): an anthology of selected early readings in jazz history*, edited by Karl Koenig (2002 Pendragon Press, page 85).

Also see Danny Barker's *A Life in Music* (Page 35), which mentions the use of sandpaper by Spasm Bands in New Orleans.

2. *Hear me talkin' to ya: the story of jazz by the men who made it*, edited by Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, first published 1955 (1962 Penguin edition, page 52).

3. Willie Smith, recalling the dance halls and theatres of his childhood in Newark, said of one place, *'they would put ordinary sand on the floor to dance on. You could really hear and feel the rhythm when the dancers shuffled around in a nice pair of patent-leather shoes. There was one guy, called Rastus, who wore wooden shoes while "sandin"; he was really something. He was a sort of a champion and everybody stopped to watch him dance'*: *Music On My Mind* by Willie 'the lion' Smith, first published 1964 (London 1966 edition, page 24).

4. For a more vaudevillian performance of the sand dance, see the following Fred Astaire routines:

*I Wanna Be A Dancin' Man*, from the film *The Belle of New York* (1952); *No Strings (I'm Fancy Free)*, from the film *Top Hat* (1935).

Also of note is the sand dance of Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson in the 1943 film, *Stormy Weather*.

5. *Jazzmen* edited by Frederic Ramsey Jr. and Charles Edward Smith, first published 1939 (London 1958 edition, page 13).

6. *Louis Armstrong's New Orleans* by Thomas Brothers, 2006 (page 151).
7. *The American Mercury*, April 1926. Reprinted in *Jazz in Print (1856-1929): an anthology of selected early readings in jazz history*, edited by Karl Koenig (2002 Pendragon Press, page 470).
8. Advertisement for Bigelow Fly Killer Brush (the original wire-brush fly-swatter): *Hardware Dealers' Magazine*, Volume 25, 1906 (page 312).
9. One journalist in the early 1920s, comparing Dixie-style bands with the newly emerging dance-bands, described the drummer of the "old jazz band" as:

*"the [real] genius of the crowd; with feet, hands, elbows, lips and larynx called into play, a baby rattle of silver bells attached to his head, dropping a pair of sticks and picking up a flywhisk in the interval between two eighth notes."*

*Putting the Music into the Jazz* by Helen Bullitt Lowry, *The New York Times Book Review & Magazine*, Dec 29 1922. Reprinted in *Jazz in Print (1856-1929): an anthology of selected early readings in jazz history*, edited by Karl Koenig (2002 Pendragon Press, page 216).

Also note Jelly Roll Morton's references to 'swats' and 'fly-swatter'. Many other examples exist.

10. *Mister Jelly Roll: the fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton*, by Alan Lomax, first published 1950 (1991 edition, page 64). The claim was first made by Morton in a letter to *Downbeat Magazine*, September 1938, Vol. 5, No. 9 (page 4): "I produced the fly swatter (they now call them brushes)".
11. Morton also spent time in California in 1907, but by his own admission "played very little piano", so it's unlikely that he was referring to this period. His main spell in Los Angeles was during the war. Sometime after the Armistice his business failed and he moved to Arizona, then San Francisco by the summer of 1919. Although he returned to L.A. in 1921, the city served more as a home-base for his seemingly endless wanderings around the West Coast: *Mister Jelly Roll: the fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton*, by Alan Lomax, first published 1950 (1991 edition, pages 130 and 165); *Dead Man Blues: Jelly Roll Morton Way Out West* by Philip Pastras (page 88).
12. *The Jelly Roll Morton Trio*, recorded June 10, 1927, Chicago, Illinois:

*Wolverine Blues*

(Benjamin Spikes/John Spikes/Jelly Roll Morton), Victor 21064-A

*Mr. Jelly Lord*

(Jelly Roll Morton), Victor 21064-B.

*Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers*, recorded June 10, 1927, Chicago, Illinois:

*Beale Street Blues*  
(W.C. Handy), Victor 20948-A

*The Pearls*  
(Jelly Roll Morton) Victor 20948-B

13. *Remembering Bix: a memoir of the jazz age* by Ralph Berton, first published 1974 (2000 edition, page 100).
14. *Remembering Bix: a memoir of the jazz age* by Ralph Berton (2000 edition, pages 101-103); *The Making of a Drum Company: the autobiography of William F. Ludwig II* by William Frederick Ludwig, 2001, (page 105).
- 15 & 16. *Remembering Bix: a memoir of the jazz age* by Ralph Berton (2000 edition, pages 101 and 106).
17. 1922 *Ludwig & Ludwig* advertisement, courtesy of [vintagedrumguide.com](http://vintagedrumguide.com)
- 18 & 19. *The Federal Reporter*, Volume 24 (page 706).

United States Court of Claims, District of Columbia. Court of Appeals—Law—1928. No. 5259.

The *Allis v Ludwig & Ludwig* hearing was held on March 6, 1928. The court remarked:

*“It is at least interesting, if not here important, to note the appellee’s device, as in the main also appellant’s, is marketed not for the purpose of killing flies, but for use as a drum beater.”*

20. *Remembering Bix: a memoir of the jazz age* by Ralph Berton (2000 edition, pages 100-101).
21. *The Baby Dodds Story* as told to Larry Gara (page 38).
22. *The Book of Jazz, from then till now: a guide to the entire field* by Leonard G. Feather, 1965 (page 125).
23. *New Orleans jazz: the end of the beginning* by Barry Martyn (pages 36 and 39).
24. *A History of American Government and Culture: America’s march toward democracy* by Harold Ordway Rugg, 1931 (page 542).
25. *Jazzmen* edited by Frederic Ramsey Jr. and Charles Edward Smith, first published 1939 (1958 edition, page 213-214).
26. Leonard Feather commented that, *“The date of origin of the brushes is in doubt, though white musicians certainly used them during World War I.”* Presumably, Tony Sbarbaro was the source of this information and Feather meant the period

of American entry into World War I (which coincided with the Original Dixieland Jazz Band's tenure at Reisenweber's restaurant, New York): *The Book of Jazz, from then till now: a guide to the entire field* by Leonard G. Feather, 1965 (page 125).

27. *The Lyceum magazine* Volume 32, 1922 (page 40).
28. A version of the stovepipe resonator was manufactured by Yerkes. An illustration in their 1910 catalogue shows it being demonstrated by one of three effects men, all standing behind a movie-theatre screen displaying a projection of a steam train. The F. E. Dodge Company offered a commercial version of the scratch-box in their 1907 catalogue. Information courtesy of [vintagedrumguide.com](http://vintagedrumguide.com)

As well as train sound-effects, these crude devices were also used to imitate musketry fire and 'automobile' noises: *Theatre & Stage* edited by Harold Downs, Volume 2 1934 (page 667); *List of publications*, Issues 61-100, 1922 (pages 52-53); *Radio sound effects: who did it, and how, in the era of live broadcasting* By Robert L. Mott, 2005 (page 10).

29. *Virgil Thomson* by Virgil Thomson, 1985 edition (page 20).
- 30 & 31. *Modern Drummer*, September 1985.
32. *Charleston* by Charles Henry White, *Harper's Magazine*, Volume 115, 1907 (page 858).
33. *The Daily Picayune* June 1, 1839. An abridged version of this quote was published in *Music in New Orleans, the Formative Years, 1791 - 1841* by Henry A Kmen, 1966 (page 237).
34. *Twenty years on wheels* by Andy Kirk, 1989 (page 37).
35. A 1917 *Cosmopolitan* story described one of its characters—"the black, muscular, bullet-headed, grinning Pinkie Potter"—beating out "an intricate ragtime tattoo on his bootblack's stand with his long whisk-broom." Although the account is fictional, it's entirely plausible that this was common practice among 'bootblacks'; *Cosmopolitan*, Volume 64, 1917 (page 66).
36. *The Trimming of Thomas Nashe*, 1597. Taken from the article 'Music in England in the Olden Time', *The Musical world*, Volume 15 1841. Original source of information for the article was William Chappell's contribution to *Collection of Ancient English Melodies* (1840).

See also *Old English Popular Music, Volume 1* by William Chappell, first published 1838-40 (2009 edition, pages 65-66), which gives numerous references from classic English literature on the subject of barbershops and music.

37. St Louis Jimmy's testimony taken from *Conversation With the Blues* by Paul Oliver, first published 1965 (1997 edition page 107). In the same publication also

- see the comments about Walton Wade's shop, as well as Charles Love's account of "country guitar players" in New Orleans barber shops (1997 edition, prologue and page 83).
38. *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* by Frederick Law Olmsted, 1856 (page 635).
  39. As a boy, Bechet tried out various instruments in Armand Piron's barbershop and, supposedly, could get a tune from all of them first time. Although clearly exaggerated, the story does indicate that instruments were at the disposal of customers in southern barbershops: *Mister Jelly Roll* by Alan Lomax, first published 1950 (1991 edition, page 94).
 

W.C. Handy figured out how to play the cornet by staring through the window of his local barbershop. The shop was being used as a impromptu classroom to teach a small band of children and the blackboard displayed the scale fingerings that Handy required: *Father of the blues: an autobiography of W. C. Handy* by William Christopher Handy, first published 1941 (1944 edition page 16).
  40. London Theatre, New York, program dated October 28, 1889. Reprinted in *Vaudeville: From the Honky-tonks to the Palace* by Joe Laurie, 1953 (page 226).
  41. *Tap Dancing America: a cultural history* by Constance Valis Hill, 2010 (page 56).
  42. *Dancemagazine* Volume 26, 1952 (pages 47 & 106).
  43. Suitcase drummers Frank 'Josh' Billings and Virgil Scroggins bound their suitcases with 'wrinkled' wrapping paper: *We Called It Music* by Eddie Condon, first published 1948 (1962 edition page 126); *Jazzmen* edited by Frederic Ramsey Jr. and Charles Edward Smith, first published 1939 (London 1958 edition page 250).
  44. The Mound City Blue Blowers hired Gordon Means as a temporary replacement for 'Josh' Billings when they toured Florida. Clarinetist Drew Page recalled that Means used whisk-brooms with Eph Kelly's tenor case during a jam session his band had with Means, Eddie Condon & Red McKenzie: *We Called it Music* by Eddie Condon, first published 1948 (1962 edition page 127); *Drew's Blues: A Sideman's Life with the Big Bands* by Drew Page, 1980 (page 49).
  45. *Living with jazz* by Dan Morgenstern, 2004 (page 305).
 

Reuben Harris can be heard padding away with his whisks on the Art Tatum album *God is in the House*.
  46. By the early 1940s Josh Billings and one of his replacements in the Blowers, Slim Kurtzmann, had given up playing the suitcase professionally. Likewise with Virgil Scroggins, who became an undertaker in Philadelphia. Occasional recordings featuring whisks occur in the 40s and 50s, but nothing like to the extent that they did in the 1930s: *We Called it Music* by Eddie Condon, first published 1948 (1962 edition page 170); *The Spirits: 100 Proof* by Otis Ferguson, *The New*

*Republic*, Volume 104, 1941 (page 143), also reprinted in *The Otis Ferguson reader*, Volume 24, Issues 1-2, 1982 (page 118).

The next generation seem to have been oblivious to suitcase drumming. In 1951, six jazz musicians were invited to a supper party at Chadwick Hansen's house in Minneapolis. A jam session took place and a reporter was on hand to chronicle the events. Five of the musicians were all veterans of the 1920s Chicago jazz scene; the sixth, however, was a drummer called Buddy Smith who was younger—he'd started playing drums during the early years of Swing. When pianist Art Hodes started to play at the piano, he asked for some drum accompaniment. With no drum kit available, Smith was presented with a pair of whisk brooms and a beer crate with bathroom towel scotch-taped to the surface. Smith, uncertain what to do, replied, "Well, I've never played on anything like this." He persevered and a private recording of the event, featuring Smith on brooms, was released many years later as part of the CD *Parlor Social* by Art Hodes: *What's Happened to Jazz, Best articles: most memorable articles of the year* by Rudolf Franz Flesch 1953 (page 160 onwards), reprinted from *Mademoiselle*, 1952; *The Penguin guide to jazz on CD*, 2002 (page 725).

Interestingly, there was a suitcase revival in the UK during the 1950s Skiffle craze, courtesy of Trad Jazz trombonist Chris Barber. His trumpet player, Ken Colyer, had a weak lip so in order to allow him a rest, Barber "devised a little four piece band within his band to perform as a novelty respite while Ken's lips recovered." This outfit featured washtub bass, guitar and suitcase played with whisks: *Rockin' in Time: a social history of Rock-and-Roll* by David P. Szatmary, 2003 (page 107).

In Barber's case, it seems that he got the idea of using the suitcase from an article he'd read about African-American rent parties. However, whisk-playing may have been brought over to the UK earlier, during the swing era, via interaction between British and American musicians. Recalling his time spent on tour with the Geraldo Orchestra—one of the top British dance bands of the 1940s—saxophonist Billy Amstell commented on the 'bandroom' jam sessions that took place:

"Popular singer Johnny Green took over on drums and proved to be the best 'suitcase drummer' we had ever heard."

Although no specific mention of whisks is made, Amstell's comments suggest that their use might have been known to drummers in the UK: *Don't fuss, Mr Ambrose: memoirs of a life spent in popular music* by Billy Amstell, 1986 (page 70).

47. Pro-mark manufacture a pair of rutes called 'broomsticks' that are made from broom straw. The bands binding the straws can be rolled back so that the sticks function as brushes. According to one online review by Mark Pusey at [mikedolbear.co.uk](http://mikedolbear.co.uk), they're louder than conventional wire-brushes when used in this way. This is not my experience with whisk brooms however. Probably because of their size, the energy of a stroke is dissipated over a greater surface area and therefore quieter.



48. The idea for *The Benny Goodman Trio* came about in 1935, following a jam session between Goodman, Teddy Wilson and a test pilot called Carl Bellinger, whose ‘unrealized ambition was to be a jazz drummer.’ During the jam Bellinger ‘started to give some simple time on a chair with a couple of whisk brooms’: *Teddy Wilson talks jazz* by Teddy Wilson, 1996 (page 39).

Notable whisk players not primarily known for drumming include clarinetist Barney Bigard—who used a suitcase and whisks to back Django Rheinhard during a French recording session in 1939—and singer John Mills jr. of the Mills Brothers. In 1936, while recuperating at home from a bout of pneumonia, Mills, “was able to sit up in bed and beat on a suitcase with a whiskbroom as he kept time with his brothers’ singing”: *Saturday Review*, Volume 40, 1957 (page 38); *The New Yorker*, Volume 76, Issues 17-28, 2000 (page 100); *The Eternal Mills Brothers* by Louie Robinson, *Ebony* Sep 1970 (page 68).

49. *We Called It Music* by Eddie Condon, first published 1948 (1962 edition pages 126 and 131).
50. *Teddy Bunn Today*, *Jazz Journal*, Volume 29 No. 10, 1976 (page 12).
51. *Gumbo ya-ya: a collection of Louisiana folk tales*, by Lyle Saxon, Edward Dreyer, Robert Tallant. First published 1945 (1987 edition, page 48).
52. JEMF quarterly, Volume 10, 1974 (page 24).
53. *What Do They Want?: a jazz autobiography* by Sammy Price, 1989 (page 7).
54. *A Life in Music* by Danny Barker, 1988 (Page 35-36).
55. *The Drummer’s Time: conversations with the great drummers of jazz* by Rick Mattingly, 1998 (page 10).
56. *The Second Line*, Spring, 1978, Vol. XXX, pages 3—10. Article courtesy of [doctorjazz.co.uk](http://doctorjazz.co.uk)

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