

The Tennessee Mafia Jug Band

Five Guys and a Scrubboard, with Roots Like Wisdom Teeth

From the pastoral hills, hollers, shopping malls and interstate highways of Goodlettsville Tennessee, home of Bill Monroe, Bashful Brother Oswald, Stringbean, Grandpa Jones, Keith Whitley and some living country music performers, comes the most entertaining “blast from the past” since Lester Moran and the Cadillac Cowboys. They’re the Tennessee Mafia Jug Band– five guys and a scrubboard, with roots like wisdom teeth.

The Tennessee Mafia Jug Band have shamelessly stolen a feature of the old Roy Acuff Show– a bit known as “Pap & the Jug Band“. There’s only so many graveyard numbers or raunchy love songs that even the most rabid country audience can sit through without some kind of relief. This frolicking fivesome brightens up the stage with rib-tickling old time tunes. Even better, they have an utter lack of self-consciousness (and some might say any sense of decorum). The Tennessee Mafia Jug Band not only know the music, they wear the costumes, tell corny jokes and even do slapstick gags that throw a cable-tv-numbed audience into hysterics. Grown women have lost control of internal organs when the Jug Band entertains ... tears a’ runnin’ down both legs!!

“**Lonesome**” **Lester Armistead** is a shy and retiring retired printer now raising grandchildren on his farm in the Luton’s District of middle Tennessee. He rarely speaks above a whisper until he uncorks his jug, gets a whiff of greasepaint and footlights, and releases his Force Five tenor voice in song. Lester and his late brother Jack performed extensively in Tennessee’s Davidson County environs as a country duet years ago. They grew up around the Acuff’s Smoky Mt. Boys, as their dad co-owned a bait store with Acuff’s fiddler Howdy Forrester. Lester learned to sing from Bashful Brother Oswald– on this all music scholars agree. When Lester sings, Oswald lives. Lester blows a jug that Os played on the Opry as long ago as 1939. Lester also picks a mean banjo. Mostly, Lester likes to laugh. When Marty Stuart asks, “Lester, how’s your jug?”, the invariable answer is “ ‘bout half...”.

As Roy Rogers was to the Sons of the Pioneers, so **Leroy Troy - “The Tennessee Slicker”** is to the Tennessee Mafia Jug Band. Leroy has the “star power”, having performed his astounding old time banjo act since the 1980’s at the Knoxville World’s Fair, in the cast of “Hee Haw”, on many recordings, on the high seas, at concerts and festivals all over this country and lately even in Ireland. He’s a past Champion and Grand Marshal from Uncle Dave Macon Days in Murfreesboro Tennessee. Leroy gives all credit to old time Opry stars the Bailes Brothers, who taught him show business. Leroy sings the lead on old tunes like Charmin’ Betsy, and besides banjo he also plays an elaborately outfitted scrubboard, after the fashion of long-ago Opry star Robert Lunn who played the scrubboard in Acuff’s show. Leroy has the Three T’s, tone, taste and timing. Not every wannabee knows the proper time to put in the duck call vs. the bicycle bell. Leroy’s grin and eyes are hypnotic - he connects with an audience. Just try to look away. Actually, don’t do that, he’ll point you out to the rest of the audience and ask what’s wrong with you.

Bass fiddle man **David “Ferg” Ferguson** is the world-weary member of the Jug Band. He’s seen it all, three times, and you can read it in the lines on his unkindly old face. He plays a mean bass fiddle and sings powerful country songs in his deep baritone. He’s spent much of his life as an engineer in Nashville recording studio helping to capture some of the greatest country music ever cut. It’s this experience that leads Ferg to mutter sarcastic comments constantly in the background while the rest of the boys are trying to entertain. There’s no end to his talent, and some wonder if there is any beginning. Warnings: Do not try to make a picture of Ferg kissing your baby, don’t wear your best “going out”

clothes around him when he's drinking, don't introduce yourself as a member of any law enforcement organization, and don't try to impress your date by introducing her to Ferg. It's OK to lend Ferg your "back-up" guitar, but not your "good one".

The tall, handsome young man providing most of the actual music with his fiddle is the sophisticated (he was born in Pennsylvania) **Dan Kelly**. Even if you can't recognize a fiddle, or real music, you can tell Dan by his snazzy clothes— he doesn't have enough seniority in the band yet to earn his suit of overalls, and Liberty don't make 'em in a size 40-Suave anyway. As a mere stripling youth, Dan won hundreds of fiddle contests and was a six-state champion— he even won the Canadian National Open championship at age 12! Which may say a lot about the quality of Canada's fiddlers. In 1983 Dan took home the big prize when he won the coveted Grand Masters Fiddle championship in Nashville against REAL competition. After fiddler Big Howdy Forrester's passing, Roy Acuff hired young Dan to be the Smoky Mt. Boys' fiddler, and Dan worked with The King of Country Music until his death in 1992. Dan can really play those beautiful and tricky Howdy Forrester pieces! Now Dan is a real polite fellow, sort of the "anti-Ferg", but he WILL tell you some choice stories about the shenanigans in the old Smoky Mt. Boys!! Since Acuff's passing, Dan has fiddled his way through a number of top country bands including those of Pam Tillis, Steve Wariner, James Bonamy, Faith Hill, Jessica Simpson and SheDaisy. Poor guy, can't hold a job. Since 2002 he's been featured on fiddle and mandolin with Alan Jackson's band The Strayhorns. Dan hopes to finally break into the "big time" with the Jug Band.

If the Jug Band can be said to have a brain, that would be guitar man and booking agent **Mike Armistead**, Lester's son and heir. Mike shares lead singing duties with Leroy, sings harmony in the trios, books the band, engages sidemen to play Dobro (tm) or whatever, runs the mercantile empire of their recordings, hoss trades in knives, dogs and guitars, and is the Jug Band's tenuous contact with the twenty-first century. Like his dad, Mike has a taste for strong tenor singing and loves the repertoire of Bashful Brother Oswald and Ira Louvin. He runs his own record label out of a spider hole at the far end of Dickerson Road in Goodlettsville Tennessee. Mike is the wheeler-dealer of the outfit, with contacts throughout the entertainment bizness. He's a graduate of the very first International Bluegrass Music Association Leadership School, if you're a student of "faint praise". He also serves the citizenry of Nashville with the Fire Dept. While Lester and Leroy are the obvious cut-ups on stage, Mike and Ferg are the two schemers ready to bring anything into the show that will entertain. Mike and Ferg can smell any kind of entertainment that makes money.

The Tennessee Mafia Jug Band has a CD "Barnyard Frolic", and they've had a video on CMT and GAC cable tv. They can be heard on the sound track of Faye Dunaway's movie "Yellowbird". They provided the entertainment for the society wedding of Billy Bob Thornton and Angelina Jolie a little while ago— you see how well that turned out. They played a New Year's Eve at the historic Ryman Auditorium in Nashville and nearly brought the house down. They perform concerts all over the south, for bluegrass festivals as far away as Bean Blossom, Indiana and even the State of Maine, and at the famous Carter Family Fold in Hiltons Virginia. Tours of Europe and the Far East are in the works. They'll appear soon at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC (our nation's capitol). They've been on the Grand Ole Opry stage over a dozen times, and in spite of their wild antics, they get invited back!

Hot picking, powerful harmony singing and riotous hijinks that will perk you up between the "hot young country" acts— that's the Tennessee Mafia Jug Band, and thank God for them.

By: TMJB Staff Writer, Dick Bowden, copyright 2006, may be used with permission of TMJB