

A LOOK AT DIDDLY “BOWS” IN HISTORY.

Brian Lemin. August 2009

Introduction.

The DIDDLY BO as we know it, is a single stringed (mostly, but can have two strings) instrument, either with a resonator “compartment/box” or amplified or both; when amplified it need not have a resonator compartment. It is struck, plucked or bowed and the string length is varied, usually with a bottle as a slide or any other commercial or improvised slide.

Early History.

The indirect history has its roots in a very ancient ethnic instrument, the mouth bow.



This uses the mouth and the hollow cavities of the skull (OK, No rude remarks!) i.e. the mouth and sinuses, to amplify the sound. It is the shape of the mouth that gives the note as the string is plucked or bowed, rather like the familiar Jaws/Jews harp produces its sound.

Other forms of mouth instruments are very much like you made in your younger days, i.e. you tapped your teeth with a ruler or pencil and got a tune out of it. You might have stretched an elastic band in front of your mouth and twanged it while you altered the shape of your mouth.

In regard to the Diddly Bo it is the single string and manner of varying the string length that we are most interested in. Enter the world of Science.

The Monochord

In many ways the inquisitiveness of people from the Middle Ages and later, to whom we owe so much of our understanding of our modern world. The planets, the calendar, even numbers and counting came from those wise people of old.

In the area of physics there was interest in the relationship of sounds to mathematics, and add to this wave lengths and their general interest in music and you arrive at the wonderful scientific invention called the Monochord.

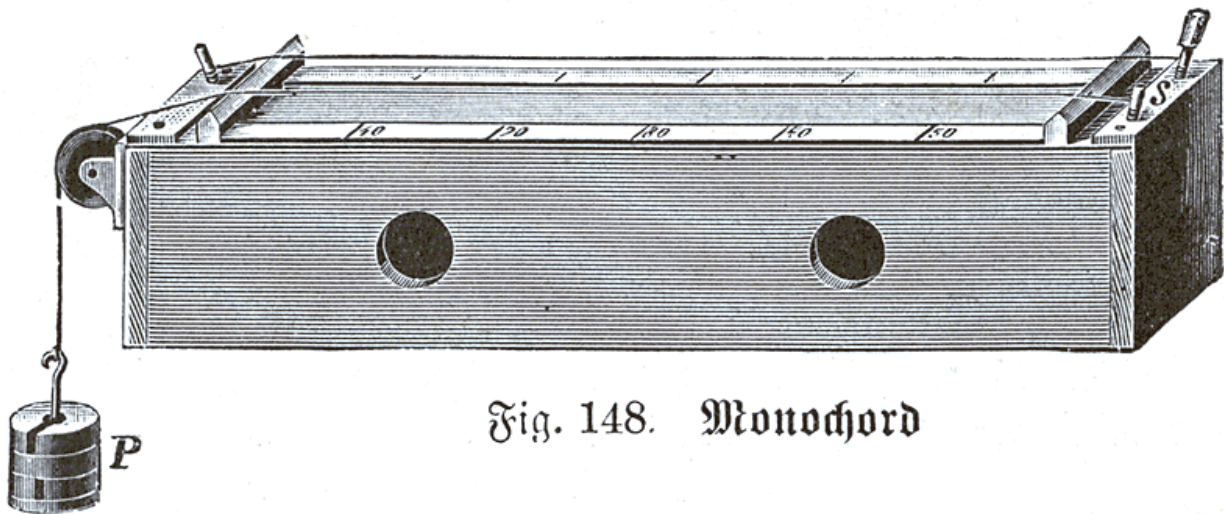


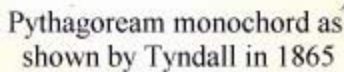
Fig. 148. Monochord

This version has a fixed string and weighted string. There are markings to record the positions etc used for each experiment.

This next series of pictures show in a diagrammatic manner more about what they were searching for.



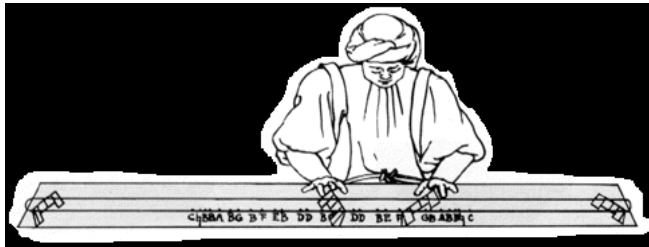
Fig. 40.



With the illustration of the picture above, we are getting close to our modern day concept of the Diddly Bo. It is being bowed and the string length is being varied with some form of a rod.

The Old and the New.

Have a look at these two pictures.



"One String Willie" meets Mr. Pythagoras!

So how did we travel through time? I am sure that musical scholars could take us through the development of the monochord century by century. Nothing much would have happened to it until we come to the late 1700s and 1800s when there was a surge in the invention of new and often weird instruments. I once made a "Tromba Marina" for an Early music group. It looked much like the following drawing but rather smaller. It was designed by the renaissance musicians to be a stringed instrument that sounded like a trumpet!

It would only play harmonic notes (like the bugle does) and the bridge was constructed so that it vibrated on to the sound board. This combination of string vibration and soundboard "rattling" produced something very vaguely (?) like a trumpet sound. Of course it was a bowed monochord.



"Old meets new", in terms of the Diddly Bo can often refer to the single string slide instrument used by the poor black people of the Southern "States", (which we will, soon come to) and the electric slide guitar that is so familiar to us. So let us now take a look at the more modern history of the Diddly Bo, as opposed to the monochord of the distant past.

Early Origins of the Diddly Bo.

Here I have to acknowledge the contributions of many individuals on the net whose work I have read, taken on board, paraphrased and any other word which might avoid the obvious... plagiarized. This is not an academic article, it is not presented for personal gain and should anyone feel that I have crossed the boundaries of fair play, I apologize and they should contact me and I will acknowledge their unique contribution to this article. Meantime I ask my readers to do Google searches where they will be able to find many

articles and snippets about the Diddly Bo and obtain a better overview than I can offer. Most images are from the "Cigar Box Museum".

Most authorities that I have read start of their discussion on the origin of the Diddly Bo with a description of the black slaves, their love of music, their expression of music and all that their various forms of music, did and expressed, about their plight and circumstances. We have seen above how easy it is to "invent" this instrument. Many of the slaves may have seen or used mouth bows in their country of origin and the availability of a piece of wire gave them the opportunity to be inventive, musical and expressive.

It is thought that a piece of wire strung across the porch was the most simple provider of music to them, but the absolute inventiveness of stringing the wire across a door and using the room behind as the sound box, shows real genius.



The problem with this initial idea was that it is not portable and I imagine that devising a portable version was probably simultaneous with the "home" version. Possibly the portable version came first, who really knows?

It does not take much of our informed imagination to visualize the portable version of the Diddly Bo. It comprised a plank, usually some kind of sound box made from available utensils or wood, a couple of bridges to define the original string length, then a slide, usually a bottle and striker or finger to start the string vibrating. Here is a diagram of the idea.

Sorry it did not come out in the PDF. It is a plank and tin "make it yourself" diagram

The actual application of this is shown in the following pictures.



Having got this simple, portable instrument, how did they use it?

The practice of singing in the fields was well established and we are told that the antiphonal style was one which they used regularly. In this two way type of singing, the leader would sing (call) a line or a phrase and the rest of the people would reply. As I have already told you I have worked in Nigeria (and Ghana) and this style is as natural to them as it is to us to sing our National Anthem.

I know a great version of the gospel song "There is a green hill far away". In the chorus the lead singer calls "Who died" (slowly and loudly) and the rest of us sang quicker and in harmony "Who died for me", it is then repeated a few times before we go on to the next verse. Sounds great!

Back to their Diddly Bo. It is thought that it would be played in a rhythmic pattern, the lead singer called a line, then the Diddly Bo would reply with a slide and or a riff. For you guys that takes no imagination to cunjer up the sound for yourselves.

It was what we would call "the Blues". Nowadays we have all sorts of types of blues and the thinking is that this was probably the start of what we now call the "Delta Blues". This Delta blues has been described as being sung with a "gravelly voice", a voice which many exponents, wanting to be as authentic as they can, try to mimic. If I may express a personal opinion, based on my experience in West Africa and a long time association with jazz.

I feel that the difference between a western voice and an African voice is indeed very different. Many African male singers have a deep voice; many female singers have a high shrill voice (according to our western judgment)

These untrained voices have an accent, no vibrato; the phrasing is based more on breath than the words. I know I am making a sweeping generality, but those who always sing in the gravelly, gruff voice, that is often difficult to understand are in danger of copying a western stereotype of a black African slaves" singing rather than the reality. There would have been a variety of singers all with different voices, some may have been gravelly many would have been much more in line with our idea of a good or OK "western" voice.

Regarding the origin of the name for this instrument the "Diddly Bo" I am less opinionated; some have proposed the name of the black Rock and Roll singer Bo Diddly; others suggest that "Diddly" means the pattern of striking the string and "Bo" reflecting an ancestor of the instrument... the mouth bow. We would need to research the "first time a word is recorded" to put the Bo Diddly origin in or out of the argument. If I am pushed to decide I like the "Striking and the ancestor" idea. But what is in a name?

Bo Diddly Variants

I thought that we should at least briefly mention the "other" one string instrument with which we are all familiar.

There is the "one string": Violin; bass; bowed horn; bowed gourd, and a large number of ethnic instruments. Here are few pictures to remind you of them.



Conclusion

Three steps to the Diddly Bo:

1. Primitive, single string mouth bow
2. Scientific instrument

3. Negro slave musical inventiveness.

Possibly there are "all stations in-between" too, but I hope this background and initial approach to an historical development of the Diddly Bo, will both interest you and also, possibly, stimulate you to further research to build upon this article. There are lots more to say on the subject.

PS. These are purely the opinions of the writer and I take full responsibility for them. I apologize for any breach of writing protocol and will be happy to acknowledge and individual's unique contribution in the article above that is not referenced.