

“Hurdy-Gurdy” vs “Crank Organ”

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Musical terms can be interesting, and the history of how various instruments came to be named is a story in itself. For purposes of this article, the confusion between the terms Hurdy Gurdy and Crank Organ is one of interest, if not some humor. The exact origin of Hurdy Gurdy has mostly been lost in antiquity. The most plausible explanation that I’ve come upon is that it derives from street lingo that generally refers to the slang that would have defined the player him or herself, i.e., a term of what is called in linguistic terms, an *onomatopoeia*, in other words, a word that sounds like, or is similar to, a sound or nonsensical or dissonant tone. Legends have persisted forever in an attempt to define the term yet the official definition, if such could exist, would be the “vielle a roué,” which dates to at least the renaissance era. This is a viola-like instrument that has three to six strings which are rubbed by a wooden wheel, turned by a crank, while the remaining strings are played in fashion similar to an Autoharp. The only possible connection between the Hurdy Gurdy and the Crank Organ, is that both of them have a crank!

the Crank Organ. The exact term should be mechanical pipe (or reed) organ; however, the terms monkey organ; belly organ; cart organ also apply interchangeably.

The most interesting of the terms is that of “organ grinder,” which often is used to describe the instrument, when, of course, it can only refer to the person who is cranking the organ.

The grinders and hurdy gurdys depicted in this article are representative of the many characters who once plied the byways of America, each bringing to the fortunate few, the opportunity to enjoy music without benefit of a trained musician. To be sure, the grinder was just one of scores of vendors who plied the streets of that era. Joining the grinder were the various services that either are no longer of importance, or were simply made available as services we take for granted today, including the knife/scissors sharpener, shoe shiner, chestnut cooker, flower seller, etc, etc. [Note, the author does not distinguish between male and female, though most would consider such street urchins as male, the truth is many of them were female.]

The image of the grinder/hurdy player is typically of a happy, stereotypical character who appears happy with life. As with so many other legendary images, nothing could be further from the truth. Those who were resolved to work the streets could hardly be considered at the top of their lives, as we say. No, sadly, those who were construed to street life were more than likely to be, as we would say today, homeless. This was especially true of children, as depicted in several of the accompanying photos. For further information on this aspect, see the book *Little Harps of the Street*.

Regardless what we may call the instrument, or the person cranking, imagine the joy of listening to such music in an era when music was reserved for those rich enough to hire a musician or to afford lessons... oh how life has changed in just one century! Our goal now must be to preserve the important histo-



Figure 1. Two ceramic figurines depicting hurdy-gurdy players; suggesting they would have been all dressed up for a parlor event.

Figure 1 depicts two Hurdy Gurdy players but in rare form, that of females. It would have been rare to see a female Hurdy Gurdy player mostly because women were uncommon as street entertainers, other than when coupled with a man or family. Of course, these players, dressed formally as they are, may well have been salon entertainers, not an unheard of idea.

And so it is that the misnomer has applied since nearly the inception of the Crank Organ. To further confuse the issue, there is little, if any, agreement about what to call what is known as



Figure 2. A somewhat unusual organ grinder and faithful friend—on a park bench.

ry of these street musicians; part of our American history that is engraved in the annals of time, and of music.

The photos of organ grinders that follow depict some of the many ways they were incorporated into the ordinary ways of community and family life. It's hard to imagine, barely half a century later, that at the time, grinders were expected to be depicted in every manner of commerce, industry and retail endeavors. In a subsequent article we'll explore the many ways they were depicted in the Christmas season. And eventually, an article that features grinders as they were saturated in our daily lives.

One of the more unusual grinders (**Figure 2**) in my collection shows the fellow and his monkey companion enjoying some rest time on a bench. It's the only "bench grinder" I've seen (sorry for the pun.) It was made in Occupied Japan and the grinder has a slightly Oriental look about him.



A common grinder that comes in at least three sizes, 4", 5" and 6" high, reflects a man who looks like it was made in Japan, and so he looks very Japanese (**Figure 3**). Little if anything is known in the literature about Japanese organ grinders. To my knowledge, no crank organs were made in the Orient and that holds true even for today.

Figure 3. This is a common grinder, made in Occupied Japan, which was produced in three sizes. Unusual only because he is Oriental, and history has not recorded a plethora of such.

The next photo is that of a more typical grinder, (**Figure 4**) as he would have been seen on the byways of city life; this fellow looking rather scruffy and with the more common parrot, rather than the ubiquitous but much more truculent monkey. The advantages of the monkey are legendary, with the ability to hold a cup for collecting money and the antics that always have and will draw a crowd. The parrot, though much less appealing, has none of the nasty habits of a monkey and yet, with the ability to mimic words and phrases, is nonetheless very appealing.

Christmas is always a special time for so many reasons, and it's no surprise that even modern-day collectibles depict various and sundry characters for their Nativity scenes.



Figure 4. A hapless chap, 2.5" tall, made of ceramic. Important because he has a parrot, the most common of grinder pets.

Figure 5 is of a grinder well out of his time and place in history; for the crank organ was not yet invented, yet Roman, Inc., the world's largest maker of Christmas-related items, chose this figure as a limited edition piece for a special promotion about 1997. He is made to look consistent with his many other characters to fit into the Nativity scene. Of note is that he is a very young man, which would have been historically consistent.



Figure 5. This is a large, over 11" tall, grinder made of resin, and with an artistic rendition of a crank organ, with metal pipes. Note the dog.



Figure 6. For something unusual, a monkey grinder . . .

And now for something simply fun... **Figure 6** is a stuffed monkey holding a crank organ in his lap. He stands, or sits, about 6" tall and the image is an interesting reversal of what we typically think of... the monkey being the accompanist to the grinder.



One of the more unusual crank organs is from a country we rarely associate with the instrument; that of Turkey (**Figure 7**) mug, 8" high, this heavily embossed porcelain vessel has several city scenes and notably includes a beautiful crank organ on a wooden stand. It's fun to see organs from other lands, and it is surely rare indeed.

Figure 7. A highly embossed mug, 9" tall, depicting a Greek village scene and featuring a Greek crank organ on stand.



Figure 8. This is a very rare scene from a bas relief picture, 24" x 18", and in full color. It's another village scene. Remarkably, I also have some vintage, unused gift paper with the same scene.

Figure 8 is of a framed gutta purcha village scene with the more traditional grinder standing on the right, looking rather unabashed with his long ruffled beard. This is the only rendition I've seen in this medium and measures about 24" wide by 18" high, including carved wooden frame. Equally interesting is that I have a package of new old stock wrapping paper depicting this very scene!

The largest organ grinder I've scene is that in **Figure 9**, standing 22" high, made of plaster of Paris, and in regal splendor, this fellow seems to defy any other image of the grinder, at least in historical terms. It's true that after WWI it became commonplace in Great Britain for grinders to dress in tuxedo and tails. This was done in large part to distinguish between himself and his more common street brethren, who more typically were thieves and scoundrels.



Figure 9. This classic gent stands over 28" tall and is made of a dense resin, weighing over 30 pounds.

Angelo Rulli is an organ grinder from St. Paul, MN, who can't seem to hold a regular job, having had 6 careers, and still waiting for one that's better than... organ grinding!