

The Banjo: America's African Instrument.* Laurent Dubois. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016. 364 pp.

Reviewed by Ken Perlman

In *The Banjo*, Dubois painstakingly traces the history of the instrument and shows how its story is fully entwined with the development of African American cultural identity in the New World. Taken as a whole, this is a work of great insight and considerable scholarship.

It is well known that the modern banjo is a synthesis of European and African technologies. Dubois convincingly makes the point, however, that even the very first banjos that appeared in the New World were cultural hybrids or “creoles:” amalgams of elements drawn from a variety of stringed instruments played in several west and central African cultures. For this reason, these early banjos can be described as pan-African. Or, as Dubois puts it in his subtitle, the banjo is best understood as “America’s African Instrument.”

Through accounts gleaned from a variety of primary sources—period journals, diaries, newspapers, works of fiction, and painted or drawn images—Dubois shows how the instrument developed during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries among African-born slaves and their descendants in the Caribbean and the American South. Variouslly described as *banza*, *banjoo*, *bonja*, *banjar*, *bangoe*, and of host of similar names, the original version of the instrument consisted of a sound box constructed by stretching animal skin over a calabash, plus a carved, fretless neck with flat fingerboard upon which were mounted three or four strings. When held in playing position, the uppermost string would generally be considerably shorter—and tuned much higher—than the others. When played, the banjo of that era was often described as producing a low humming tone, and its music was often associated with accompanying dancing.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the banjo seems to have been generally known in North America as an instrument associated with African Americans (Dubois quotes references to the instrument, not only from the South, but also from New York City and New England). By the 1830s, many if not most North Americans were highly aware of the instrument and its association with plantation life (and in particular its use to accompany and stimulate dancing following the long work day). By that time, African American banjoists had begun to perform for white audiences, among whom there was a growing fascination with the sound of the instrument and its repertoire.

The crossover to mainstream America begins in the mid-1830s. A few Caucasian men—Joel Walker Sweeney and Dan Emmett being perhaps the best known—learned to play banjo by observing and learning directly from African Americans, and began to perform with the instrument on stage to great acclaim, both as solo acts and as members of banjo-centric ensembles. From these beginnings grew a form of highly popular entertainment known as “minstrel-shows,” which featured not only music, but also elaborate skits and stage routines that parodied plantation life. The performers—almost entirely white but pretending to be African Americans—usually enhanced the illusion by “blacking up” (donning black makeup). Dubois

* This editorially reviewed contribution was accepted for publication in *Museum Anthropology Review* on August 25, 2016. The work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

makes the excellent point that the minstrels did not invent blackface, but merely tapped into a long-standing theatrical tradition of using black makeup on stage. Similarly, they did not invent the Jim Crow character; it had already been introduced to the American stage a decade or two earlier by a Caucasian actor performing in blackface.

Despite its racist overtones, the minstrel-show era (often referred to as *minstrelsy*) is an extremely important one in American music. The songs and instrumental tunes that developed—a synthesis of African American and European melodies and rhythms—represent the first distinctly American popular music style. Minstrelsy also set a pattern for American popular music that persists to this day: new styles of music such as ragtime, blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, rock ‘n’ roll, and hip hop, originate in the African American community and are then adopted, imitated, and often co-opted by the predominately white culture.

The rest of the banjo’s story is relatively common knowledge to those familiar with the instrument. The number of strings was standardized at five: four long ones and one short. Improvements in building techniques made the banjo louder and brighter as the gourd with tied-down skin head is replaced by a drum frame equipped with nuts and bolts, and well-seasoned hardwoods are used in neck construction. After the Civil War, “guitar-style” fingerpicking replaced the old African-based stroking method of play and the instrument was increasingly built to resemble the guitar. To take the banjo even farther from its African roots, it was often decorated with marquetry, or inlaid with mother of pearl and ivory by some of the most accomplished artisans of the day. Although there have certainly been some notable black banjoists since the late nineteenth century, for the most part the instrument has passed almost entirely into the hands of “white folk.” In fact, Dubois’ chapter on present-day trends, entitled “Sounding America,” focuses primarily on the careers of two white musicians: folk-music visionary Pete Seeger and bluegrass pioneer Earl Scruggs.

The great strength of Dubois’ work lies in the first two-thirds of the book, as he pieces together evidence to show how the instrument arose, evolved, and assumed its place in the culture of the New World. His treatment of the period from 1850 on can be regarded as a summary, given that most of its subject areas—the development and spread of minstrelsy; the rise of the great late-nineteenth and early twentieth century banjo builders; and the origins of jazz, bluegrass, and the folk revival—are covered in far more depth in other works.

By way of minor shortfalls, I would have liked to see more illustrations, and I was puzzled by the choice—despite copious and detailed endnotes—to eschew a bibliography. There is also something of a mystery that turns up, which could easily become a direction for future research: whatever happened to the apparently once extensive banjo culture of the Caribbean? Dubois mentions some relatively contemporary Caribbean musicians who play, or have played American-made banjos, but there is no convincing evidence that their approaches have any direct connection with the region’s early banjo-playing traditions.

All in all, there is plenty in *The Banjo: America’s African Instrument* to interest both scholars and music enthusiasts. As a seminal work on a fascinating subject, it deserves to be accorded a place not only on private bookshelves, but also on those of libraries devoted to popular and folk music, folklore, American studies, and African-American studies.

Ken Perlman is a professional banjo player and independent scholar who is active in the fields of folklore and ethnomusicology. He has written extensively on banjo playing techniques and repertoire, takes a lively interest in banjo history, and is a leading authority on the fiddling traditions of the Canadian province of Prince Edward Island. His most recent book is Couldn't Have a Wedding Without the Fiddler: the Story of Traditional Fiddling on Prince Edward Island (University of Tennessee Press, 2015).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14434/mar.v11i1.23545>