

21H.390 Term Paper

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From Slaves to Hillbillies:

A Racial History of the Banjo in the 18th and 19th Centuries

The jangly sound of banjo playing evokes for many Americans a very specific kind of imagery. Rolling piedmont hills, colorful deciduous forests, and tall pine trees, the landscape of Appalachia. And as for its player, a white farmer in overalls singing along in a thick southern accent, a hillbilly, comes to mind. This stereotype is somewhat rooted in truth: most current music that prominently features the banjo is country music made by white men, and in the 20th century, almost all commercially released music with the banjo came out of white Appalachia and was even referred to as hillbilly music.¹ Furthermore, the 1972 John Boorman film *Deliverance*, with its infamous “Dueling Banjos” scene, forever linked the banjo to impoverished and possibly inbred white hill people in the American cultural psyche.² Robert Winans describes this connection 46 years later in his Editor’s Note to the seminal text on the banjo’s history, *Banjo Roots and Branches*, as “the generalization (still embraced by many) of the banjo as iconic of American ‘whiteness’.”³ Contrary to popular belief, though, the banjo’s true roots do not lie in the dirt of the South, but of West Africa. Its predecessor was brought over by enslaved people

¹ Dayton Duncan, *Country Music: A Film by Ken Burns* (PBS, 2019).

² *Deliverance* takes place in West Virginia, though was filmed in Georgia on the Chattooga River. Most of the film takes place outside in the forest, and as such did not only further perpetuate the hillbilly stereotype, but linked the banjo even further to land itself in Appalachia; James Dickey, *Deliverance* (Warner Bros., 1972).

³ Robert B. Winans, ed., *Banjo Roots and Branches* (University of Illinois Press, 2018), ix.

taken to the Americas, where its easy construction flourished on plantations.⁴ As it became more popular among slave communities, the banjo became a very important part of the African American folk music tradition. However, it first gained commercial popularity as a core instrument in minstrel troupes, white musicians who covered their faces in burnt cork to appear black and perform, often deeply racist, songs and skits in so-called minstrel shows. It was not until the 1890's that it became acceptable for a white performer to use a banjo in a serious musical context, outside of the minstrel world.⁵

The history and historiography of the banjo is fraught with racism and deliberate whitewashing. An article written by Dena Epstein in 1975 for *Ethnomusicology*, "The Folk Banjo: A Documentary History" was the first real scholarly attempt to concretely ground the banjo in African American communities. She traces all the first mentions of the banjo from colonial sources, in reference to an instrument played by slaves on plantations, as well as its continual growth as a black folk instrument during the minstrelsy period, theories that would be fully fleshed out in *Banjo: Roots and Branches*.⁶ Before this research came into prominence, many believed that the banjo was an instrument of white American origin even though the evidence was in the archive; it had just been previously ignored, often intentionally. As more proper research was done, eventually a firm connection was made to West Africa, specifically with a family of spiked gourd lutes known as the Akonting.⁷

⁴ Greg C. Adams and Shlomo Pestcone, "The Jola Akonting: Reconnecting the Banjo to Its West African Roots," *Sing Out!* (Spring 2007), 44.

⁵ Karen Elizabeth Linn, "The 'Elevation' of the Banjo in Late Nineteenth-Century America," *American Music* 8, no. 4 (1990), 441-64.

⁶ Dena J. Epstein, "The Folk Banjo: A Documentary History," *Ethnomusicology* 19, no. 3 (1975), 347-71; Winans, *Banjo Roots*.

⁷ Adams and Pestcone, "The Jola Akonting," 44.

To be clear: “the banjo is not African in origin, but, rather, African American.”⁸ As more ethno-organology, or the study of musical instruments and their cultures, research is done, it has become clear that the banjo as we know it is a distinct instrument from the African lutes that share its heritage. Likely, the first banjos were instruments unique to the African diaspora in the Caribbean and displayed heavy influence from continental African instruments, though not exact copies.⁹ Early banjos have two glaring distinctions from their modern counterparts: the body was fashioned from a gourd with the neck “spiked” into the body, and there were only four strings. The modern banjo consists of a skin stretched over some sort of hollow drum and five strings. The specific “spiking” of the neck is a clear organological connection to African gourd lutes, and is not a feature of any European instruments. However, there are significant differences as well: the banjo has a flat fretboard and tuning pegs, aspects of the instrument that the Akonting did not share but can be found in lutes of European origin.¹⁰ This process of African, European, and other cultures merging in the Caribbean in the 17th and 18th centuries is known as creolization, a mechanism that informed much of African American culture’s beginnings as slaves and free blacks moved north into America.

Evidence of the mixed heritage of the banjo can be found in “The Old Plantation,” a painting attributed to plantation owner John Rose of South Carolina in the late 18th century.

⁸ Winans, *Banjo Roots*, 21.

⁹ *Ibid*, 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 35.



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Figure 1: The Old Plantation

It shows a group of enslaved people dancing and playing music on a farm, presumably Rose's, and generally treats the subjects with more respect and less caricature than the average contemporary depiction of slaves by a white artist.¹¹ On the right side, a man is playing what appears to be a four string banjo made from some kind of gourd, with a flat neck and what looks to be four tuning pegs on the head of the instrument. It is unclear if the banjo design seen here was brought by enslaved people from the Caribbean, or evolved independently in a similar way. Nevertheless, it is the same design that appears in sources from the Caribbean in the early 18th century, unique from both African and European lutes, and implies that by the time of painting, such a design was present in South Carolina. Sources even discuss a similar instrument being

¹¹ John Rose, *The Old Plantation*, 1785-1790 (probably), Watercolor on laid paper, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

played by blacks in places like New York City, such as a letter in the *New York Weekly Journal* in 1736 that describes some kind of fair he witnessed:

...the Negroes divided into Companies, I suppose according to their different Nations, some dancing to the hollow Sound of a Drum, made of the Trunk of a hollow Tree, othersome to the grating rattling Noise of Pebles or Shells in a small Basket, others plied the Banger, and some knew how to joyn the Voice [to] it...I leave it to you to judge whether all these confused Noises so to one another didn't make a-cord.¹²

Here, as in “The Old Plantation,” the “Banger” (banjo) is firmly rooted in Black traditions and music quite distinct from white culture; in fact, the white listener seems to look on with disdain, hearing only a tangle of “confused Noises.” These sources, both created by white people and describing black people, are evidence of the cultural osmosis that the banjo was a part of both on and off the plantation in early America.

Though musical and cultural ideas certainly flowed between white and black communities in 18th and 19th century America, one must be careful not to imagine an even, fair exchange. In many cases, especially on plantations, slave owners violently ripped African Americans' culture from them, along with any semblance of dignity or respect. These stolen ideas and traditions were often appropriated into white American society, and the banjo was no exception. It became one of the core instruments of minstrel troupes, groups that toured the country, their faces covered in burnt cork, performing racist skits and songs. At the height of their popularity in the 1830's and 1840's, groups even played shows in Europe.¹³ These performances entertained audiences by mocking black traditions and people, often pretending to

¹² “Utopia, April 10,” *The New-York Weekly Journal*, Mar 7, 1736; full text in Winans, *Banjo Roots*, 165.

¹³ Bob Carlin, *The Birth of the Banjo: Joel Walker Sweeney and Early Minstrelsy* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2007).

be slaves, feigning intellectual disabilities, using racist slurs, or dressing in costume. As the banjo was an important part of slave (and wider black) culture, it soon joined the minstrel's quiver of tools used to bully and mock. Understanding minstrel shows is crucial to understanding the evolution of the banjo because they were the mechanism that propelled the instrument to a larger, whiter, and eventually international audience.

Rachel Sussman sums up the essence of minstrelsy with the title of her 2001 article: "The Carnivalizing of Race."¹⁴ She describes how minstrel shows liberated performers "from the usual restraints imposed by nineteenth century society and politics" by using the "façade of race."¹⁵ It allowed white performers to act in ways that were not socially acceptable, such as playing the banjo, since they were "black" for the night. At the time, the banjo was not seen as a serious instrument by white society; outside of the minstrels themselves, it was merely regarded as a way for blacks to entertain themselves. However, several of these white musicians would become very famous not for their comedic value, but their banjo playing ability. Joel Sweeney became so well-known that until relatively recently he was credited by many as the inventor of the modern five-string resonator (as opposed to gourd) banjo. This has since been proved false, as both of those changes have been found in earlier black banjos, but it was accepted as reality for a long time.¹⁶ It is interesting that in an enterprise designed to mock black culture, to create a caricature of it, some people gained so much fame and wealth from playing a uniquely African American instrument in a style learned directly from black players. Minstrel tunes became the center of the American music industry, and the banjo could be heard all over the nation. I argue that this tension between enjoying the music and playing itself *and* enjoying the demeaning

¹⁴ Rachel Sussman, "The Carnivalizing of Race," *Etnofoor* 14, no. 2 (2001), 79.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Robert B. Winans and Charles Reagan Wilson, "Banjo," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 12: Music*, edited by Bill C. Malone (University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 174.

racial aspect of minstrel shows is what led to the belief that the banjo was an instrument of only white people.

An article titled “The Negroes and the Banjo.” written in *The New York Times* in 1884 reads:

The banjo may be the typical instrument of the plantation negroes, but I have never seen a plantation negro play it... I have seen the negro at work and I have seen him at play; I have attended his corn-shuckings, his dances his frolics; I have heard him give the wonderful melody of his songs to the winds; I have heard him fit barbaric airs to the quills; I have seen him scrape jubilantly on the fiddle; I have seen him blow wildly upon the bugle, and beat enthusiastically on the triangle; but I have never heard him play on the banjo. A year or more ago a band of negro serenaders made its appearance upon the streets of Atlanta... His voice drowned out the banjo, but a close observer could see that he was thumping the strings aimlessly. I have heard of another negro since the war who could play the banjo, and there may be dozens who have acquired the art. But I think it is not wide of the truth to say that the genuine plantation negro left the banjo and banjo-playing to nimbler fingers.¹⁷

The writer of this article does not believe that black people are capable of playing the banjo, and the fervor in which he talks about the subject seems to imply some level of emotional investment in this opinion. Furthermore, the way he describes the actions of black people, how they “scrape jubilantly,” “blow wildly,” and “beat enthusiastically,” is the same over-exaggerated rhetoric that minstrelsy is rooted in, and therefore he seems to believe that such rhetoric is accurate. Later, however, he writes that “a representation of negro life and character has never been put on the stage, nor anything remotely resembling it,” a seeming critique of the caricatures displayed in

¹⁷ “THE NEGROES AND THE BANJO,” *New York Times*, Jan 2, 1884.

minstrel shows.¹⁸ His values are paradoxical: he thinks the minstrel show parodies are false, but perpetuates the exact same stereotypes with his charged language (similar to the “confused Noises” described in the letter from 1736), as well as his belief that blacks simply were not skilled enough to play the banjo.

An 1891 Atlanta Constitution article titled “Negro Minstrelsy and the Negro,” is yet another example of this phenomenon. The author, and an editor for the Constitution, Joel Chandler Harris is otherwise famous for his collection of slave folktales called “Uncle Remus.” In this article, he critiques the minstrel show as a performance art and how it lacks any kind of purpose or real value. However, he makes sure to distinguish between the show and the music:

It is not with the minstrelsy pure and simple that I have any quarrel; the ballads, indeed, are the one feature that gives vitality to the curious compound. The majority of them are not negro songs and bear no definite relation to the plantation melodies of the south, yet balladry of any kind touches the heart and appeals to the understanding.¹⁹

Once again, the music is seen as impressive and beautiful but distinct from black music, or the “plantation melodies of the south.” Harris takes this further by also arguing that the banjo could not possibly have been a black instrument, attributing its origin to the Arabs and its current iteration to Joel Walker Sweeney, writing how “it is doubtful indeed, if the banjo has ever had such a master as ‘Old Joe Sweeney’,” thus attributing to him some credibility as its inventor.²⁰ Harris had spent time on a plantation as a young man, where he collected the oral stories that would be put together in his “Uncle Remus” books. These stories cannot be taken as exact

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Joel Chandler Harris, “NEGRO MINSTRELSY AND THE NEGRO,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, Mar 22, 1891.

²⁰ Ibid.

reproductions of slave folklore, but show that Harris had spent time among slaves, learning their culture and stories, and nonetheless still believed that they could not play the banjo.²¹ Now contrast this language with an advertisement in the *New Orleans Daily Creole*, a black newspaper, from 1856:

Rumsey, the greatest banjoist in the whole army of Negro Minstrels, takes a benefit to-night at Spalding and Rogers' Museum and Amphitheatre. He out-Sambos Sambo on his peculiar instrument. We fancy we can hear him now singing: 'When I am dead and gone to rest, Lay the banjo by my side!''²²

Rumsey, a presumably white blackface performer (given that this was in Louisiana prior to the Civil War), is seen by the author of the advertisement as “the greatest banjoist” who “out-Sambos Sambo.” Sambo was an insulting caricature of black men, seen as a bumbling, grinning, stupid buffoon.²³ Once again, skilled banjo playing is seen as something a black person cannot do – but a white person can make great music from it. Across the nation, the minstrel shows perpetuated the Sambo stereotype of African Americans so thoroughly, and at the same time played the banjo so proficiently, that the average listener believed there was no possibility that it could be played by a black person, or even that it could have come from black people.

While the myth of white banjo playing spread through minstrel shows and influenced white folk and string band music, black players were continuing to spread their techniques and sounds in rural Appalachia. Cecelia Conway, a folklorist and Professor at Appalachian State University, has done extremely valuable fieldwork in the Piedmont region of rural North

²¹ Ibid.

²² “Benefit of Mr. Rumsey,” *New Orleans Daily Creole*, Dec 17, 1856.

²³ Charles Reagan Wilson, “Sambo,” In *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 4: Myth, Manners, and Memory*, edited by Charles Reagan Wilson (University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 260.

Carolina in order to document black banjo and fiddle playing in the 19th century outside of minstrelsy. Her essay “Mountain Echoes of the African Banjo” is somewhat of a response to Robert Winans and his theory that minstrelsy brought the banjo to Appalachian communities.²⁴ Paul Wells, in his essay “Fiddling as an Avenue of Black-White Musical Exchange,” puts forward the idea that the truth is perhaps a combination of both theories, which I believe to be the most convincing argument.²⁵ Minstrel shows were ubiquitous across America; it is nearly impossible that even the most remote communities in the rural South did not at least know of banjo playing in minstrel shows. However, like all forms of amusement in the 19th century, they were more of a middle-class activity as they required disposable income and time, meaning that rural farmers were much less likely to have been seriously engaged in minstrelsy. Furthermore, Conway’s research and interviews makes it clear that white banjo players in certain rural counties in North Carolina had both technical and lyrical influence primarily from black music, not minstrel tunes. One of the most important differences is the picking style: most of these musicians played in the “clawhammer,” or “frailing” style, a two fingered, percussive, down-stroking, distinctly African American technique. While some, especially early, minstrels played with this method, it was primarily associated with old-time black musicians.²⁶

Though this is just one region in the South, the communities that Conway and Well’s research focuses on are widespread across Appalachia: rural mountain villages comprised mostly of Northern European descent with some free blacks, very little slave ownership in antebellum times, and most people working in the mines or the fields. These communities were often significantly less racist due to the relatively low numbers of blacks and lack of slavery, and as

²⁴ Cecelia Conway, “Mountain Echoes of the African Banjo,” *Appalachian Journal* 20, no. 2 (1993).

²⁵ Paul F. Wells, “Fiddling as an Avenue of Black-White Musical Interchange,” *Black Music Research Journal* 23, no. ½ (2003), 143.

²⁶ Conway, “Mountain Echoes,” 154.

such, may have allowed more musical interchange between races than otherwise would have been possible.²⁷ However, there has not been enough scholarship and fieldwork on these mountain communities to comfortably generalize about the spread of the banjo throughout them. Sadly, many of these areas have been poverty stricken for centuries, and rank among the poorest in the United States today, making research extremely difficult due to widespread crime, drug addiction, and lack of education.

Clearly, from its invention and introduction in the Caribbean, to its spread across America in the 19th century, the banjo was unequivocally an instrument of the black community. Evidence abounds for its early use on plantations, its spread North, and eventually its use by white musicians to mock African American culture. However, around the turn of the 19th century, there was a shift; the banjo became an iconic white instrument, primarily due to two main events. The first was a brief period in the 1880's and 1890's where the banjo became a popular parlor instrument, played by high society musicians. Karen Elizabeth Linn writes how there was an effort by banjo players and makers starting in the 1870's to "elevate" the banjo to a level of societal acceptance, breaking its association with minstrel shows and black people.²⁸ This effort was a massive economic success; magazines such as "S.S. Stewart's Guitar and Banjo Journal" displayed advertisements for banjos, concerts, clubs, books, and the like. One reader even wrote a letter to the journal in 1888 on "The Banjo Craze in Philadelphia," or how "the banjo mania has broken out again in fashionable society with a virulence that exceeds anything ever known before... The banjoist, in a word, is the boss of the hour."²⁹ Banjo clubs, where large

²⁷ Ibid, 156.

²⁸ Karen Elizabeth Linn, "The 'Elevation' of the Banjo in Late Nineteenth-Century America," *American Music* 8, no. 4 (1990), 442.

²⁹ S.S. Stewart's Banjo and Guitar Journal 4, no. 8 (February-March 1888).

groups of women would play banjos, guitars, and mandolins in an almost orchestral fashion, became commonplace at universities.³⁰



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Figure 2: Banjo Club at Wellesley College, 1892³¹

The second event that occurred around the turn of the century, in the 1910's and 1920's, was the beginning of commercially released "hillbilly" and "race" records. The advent of radio in the 1920's and more affordable record players meant that even more money could be made from commercially released music.³² Hillbilly music was old time string music; much of what was being played in Appalachia, old fiddle tunes, even some minstrel music fell into this

³⁰ Linn, "The 'Elevation'," 442.

³¹ Partridge Studios, *Banjo Club (Mandolin)*, Wellesley College, 1892-1893.

³² Archie Green, "Hillbilly Music: Source and Symbol," *The Journal of American Folklore* 78, no. 309 (1965), 205-10.

category.³³ Race music, on the other hand, described early black blues and jazz music made by African Americans, often featuring piano, horns, and drums.³⁴ The race of the performer was deeply tied to the genre. Hillbilly music was made by white musicians, and race music by black musicians. Black musicians who played banjo and string band music were therefore left out, and very little of it was recorded.³⁵ With the popularity of radio exploding and the first country music stars being made, such as Jimmie Martin and Roy Acuff, the black banjo tradition fell out of memory except for the occasional player.

I am, admittedly, a big fan of modern bluegrass. I've been to probably close to forty bluegrass concerts from different bands, play the guitar and mandolin (and a small amount of banjo), and listen to it almost all the time.³⁶ As such, it was a surprise when I realized I really knew nothing about its history and assumed it had come from Northern Europe with the fiddle. I am not unique; the true history of the banjo is mostly due to very recent scholarship, and most people, besides perhaps banjo fanatics and historians of ethnomusicology, still think of the banjo as a white instrument. There was an interesting exhibit on the banjo at the MIT museum in 1984, an article about which was written in the *Boston Globe*. It appears the exhibit did correctly attribute the roots of the banjo to Africa and enslaved people, however there is no mention of black banjo playing beyond slaves.³⁷ Even at MIT, a respected research institution, less than 40 years ago, the history was incomplete. It is important to acknowledge the troubling

³³ For more on the origins of country music and recordings of hillbilly music, see Ken Burn's excellent 2018 documentary; Duncan, *Country Music*.

³⁴ David Brackett, "Forward to the Past: Race Music in the 1920s," In *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (University of California Press, 2016), 69.

³⁵ Wells, "Fiddling," 136.

³⁶ Billy Strings, Greensky Bluegrass, Railroad Earth and The String Cheese Incident are the leaders of the modern Bluegrass scene. Players like Sam Bush, Del McCoury, and Bela Fleck are among the most famous contemporary pickers.

³⁷ Steve Morse, "Ring the Banjar! Banjo's History is Focus of MIT Museum Exhibit and Workshops," *Boston Globe*, Apr 19, 1984.

circumstances of the banjo's rise to popularity: its creation on plantations and popularity among slave communities, its commercial success in minstrel shows, and finally its place as a core instrument in whitewashed hillbilly music. Repeatedly, white musicians appropriated the banjo and its techniques from black people without remorse or respect, to the point that nobody knew anymore where the banjo actually came from. Cultural appropriation is something that still happens today, especially in the music world, and the history of the banjo serves as a roadmap of what can happen when it goes unchecked.

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