

*An Olive Branch in Appalachia:
The Integration of the Banjo into 19th Century
American Folk Music*

by Sean Peters

Few instruments are as identifiable to Americans as the banjo and arguably no time period was more transformative for the banjo than the 19th century. Appealing to the wealthy, bridging racial gaps, settling the west, and finding its home in the mountains, the banjo witnessed American history transpire firsthand. A stick attached to a gourd and strung is a relatively simplistic invention, but the history of the banjo is full of challenges and intrigue that make this instrument an important symbol in American music. The banjo's journey through the 19th century exemplifies what the "American Dream" is and shows the impact a symbol can have on a culture. A quote from *Philadelphia Music and Drama* from 1891 describes the banjo and its appeal. According to the publication "the banjo has a positive musical charm in the country. Here we can see that it fits the surroundings. Its half barbaric twang is in harmony with the unmechanical melodies of the birds." ¹

The association of African American culture and the banjo led to the minstrel shows of the 19th century. The minstrel show brought the banjo into the mainstream, and at the beginning of the nineteenth century, represented African American music at the time. It was in the 1840s that the minstrel shows began to popularize the banjo in America. These minstrel shows in the United States appear to have helped secure a permanent, albeit niche role, in American folk traditions. This is evidenced by the continued use of early

¹ John Fluth, "Favorite Banjo Quotes," accessed May 12, 2014, <http://www.fluth.com/pages/1/index.html>.

minstrel style playing called “clawhammer” or “frailing”, which are still techniques used today.²

While the minstrel shows of the nineteenth century are considered exploitations of African American culture, there was an appreciation for the music and culture of African Americans during the nineteenth century. The minstrel show combined this “parody of black Americans” with the “genuine fondness” they had for African American culture.³ This adoption of the banjo by white performers led to the instrument transcending its reputation as a novelty instrument. By the late nineteenth century white performers were able to move away from performing with darkened faces and were able to no longer “feign blackness” in order to perform.⁴

The minstrel show became a sensation in America during the middle of the nineteenth century. Notable Americans of the era such as Mark Twain were advocates of the entertainment. Twain went so far as to say that “the show which to me had no peer and [is] a thoroughly delightful thing.”⁵ A more disturbing aspect for contemporary readers is the belief of the 19th century white population that minstrel shows provided an accurate depiction of African American culture. The University of Virginia research showed white commentary of the time period on minstrel shows, “assume its accuracy, its essentially faithful imitation of African-American speech, singing, and dancing.”⁶ These minstrel shows were so popular in society that Mark Twain included them in his famous work of fiction *Huckleberry Finn*.⁷

Minstrel shows were born out of two types of entertainment that existed in America in the early nineteenth century. These two entertainment forms were the use of makeup by white actors to impersonate African Americans during intermissions of plays and circuses, and African American performers who sang and played banjo in the streets of cities.⁸ The man credited with minstrelsy in America is Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice who created a sing and dance routine based on a caricature of an African-

² Robert B. Winans and Elias J. Kaufman, “Minstrel and Classic Banjo: American and English Connections,” *American Music* 12, no.1 (1994). JSTOR. Web. 1.

³ George Mason University, “The Minstrel Show,” accessed December, 20, 2013, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/jackson/minstrel/minstrel.html>.

⁴ Karen Linn, *That Half-barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture* (University of Illinois Press, 1994), 442.

⁵ University of Virginia, “Black-Face Minstrelsy,” accessed December, 20, 2013, <http://twain.lib.virginia.edu/huckfinn/minstrel.html>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Hanna Glomska and Janet Begnoche. “American Minstrel Show Collection,” Princeton University, November 30, 1999, <http://library.princeton.edu/libraries/firestone/rbsc/aids/tc050.html>.

American slave.⁹ This routine gained him popularity and by the 1840's more performers had created their own acts in a similar vein.¹⁰

The first minstrel shows began in the mid-19th century with the group Dan Emmett's Virginia Minstrels who were, as John Kenrick writes, "four unemployed white actors [who] decided to stage an African-American style spoof."¹¹ In 1843 they had gained enough notoriety to perform at New York's Bowery Amphitheatre.¹² There are several songs that are familiar to Americans today that were written by these minstrel troupes. Songs like "Polly Wolly Doodle" and "Blue Tail Fly" trace their origins back to the Virginia Minstrels.¹³ The Virginia Minstrels had started a new fad in American entertainment and by 1856 there were ten full time companies based in New York City.¹⁴

In the 1850's the minstrel shows had begun to emphasize music of the time period, as opposed to the earlier shows which focused on racial parodies of African American music. Anna Glomska writes this new iteration of the minstrel show had three sections:

Music of the "genteel" tradition now prevailed in the first section, where popular and sentimental ballads of the day and polished minstrel songs supplanted the older and cruder dialect tunes. The middle part consisted of the "olio," a potpourri of dancing and musical virtuosity, with parodies of Italian operas, stage play, and visiting European singing groups. The high point of the show was the concluding section, the "walk-around." This was an ensemble finale in which members of the troupe in various combinations participated in song, instrumental and choral music and dance.¹⁵

In the second half of the nineteenth century the minstrel show did lose its popularity with American audiences. Their legacy is still present in America and exemplifies the complicated history of race relations in the United States. Many of the folk songs that are present in our culture can trace their roots to the minstrel shows as well as many of our racial stereotypes. Minstrelsy greatly benefited the banjo but at a cost to race relations. Robert C. Toll described the minstrel shows as, "Minstrelsy was the first example of the way American popular culture would exploit and

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ John Kenrick, "Minstrel Shows," 1996, accessed December 21, 2013, <http://www.musicals101.com/minstrel.htm>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Glomska, "American Minstrel Show Collection."

manipulate Afro-American and their culture to please and benefit white Americans.”¹⁶

While the minstrel shows may have fallen out of favor with the mainstream entertainment industry in the second half of the 19th century, they continued to be performed well into the twentieth century. The minstrel research at the University of Virginia states, “minstrel shows continued to be popular well into the 1950s, and high schools, fraternities and local theater groups would often perform minstrel shows in blackface.”¹⁷ Interestingly some African American performers gained fame by using makeup to appear White, as African Americans were not permitted to perform in the minstrel shows.¹⁸

What the minstrel show symbolized to the White population of the nineteenth century stood in stark contrast to the way it was perceived by the African American community of the time period, and how it is perceived today. The White community, as John Kenrick observes, saw the shows as a nostalgic reminder of a time period they yearned for, “many skits took a sentimental view of the lost world of plantation slavery.”¹⁹ These minstrel shows were so beloved by the Southern White community that they made the minstrel tune “Dixie” the unofficial anthem of the Confederate States of America.²⁰

However, the nineteenth century also saw a quest for status and respect among the American banjo community. Banjo players were compelled to advance the reputation and utility of the banjo around the world. They were keenly aware of the paradigm shift occurring in the instrument’s perception in western culture. Karen Linn writes that banjo players of the late nineteenth century noted “the banjo-playing habits of the European aristocracy provided the ultimate argument for respectability. It was a source of pride that Albert, Prince of Wales played the banjo.”²¹

This endearment to the wealthy and powerful people of the era encouraged the advancement of the instrument. Unfortunately the attempt to bring the banjo into the aristocratic upper class was ultimately unsuccessful, only lasting a little more than twenty years.²² However, the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ George Mason Univeristy, “The Minstrel Show.”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Kenrick, “Minstrel Shows.”

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Karen E. Linn, “The “Elevation” of the Banjo in Late Nineteenth-Century America,” *American Music* 8, no. 4 (1990), JSTOR, 20.

²² Karen E. Linn, *That Half-barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture* (University of Illinois Press, 1994), 442.

increased profile of the banjo led to the instrument having more utility in the music of the period, including that of American folk music.

The utilization of the banjo has been influenced by the culture and stigmas attached to the instrument that has evolved over the past two centuries. It has a complex, and at times, contradictory image. In America it has always been seen as an instrument of the lower class, but the banjo has also been stigmatized in regards to gender. Karen Linn remarks that it “was presented as feminine, rather than rational, it hinted of emotional or even sexual meanings.”²³

The entrance of the banjo into high society is attributed to the marketing of the instrument towards these wealthy women. The banjo was seen as the feminine alternative to the guitar and women of means were a large segment of the banjo playing population. One of the marketing campaigns suggested that the banjo was a more appropriate instrument for women to play, as playing guitar made women sit in an “unfeminine position”.²⁴

The elevation of the banjo into high society was not only channeled through females though. Banjo manufacturers felt they needed to play a role in garnering notoriety for the instrument. In the second half of the nineteenth century banjo manufacturers began to modify the construction of the instrument.²⁵ The research done at Hamilton College states that “manufacturers created very high-quality banjos that are as valuable for works of art as instruments to be played. These banjos were usually given names with superior-sounding adjectives.”²⁶

The banjo’s African origins are contradictory to its contemporary perception in America as a traditionally “white” instrument. The arrival of the banjo in America is attributed to the slave trade that existed in the 17th and eighteenth centuries. The African population that was brought to America continued their musical traditions in their new surroundings. Thomas Jefferson said of the Africans who tended his plantation and their use of the banjo, “The instrument proper to them is the Banjar, which they brought hither from Africa and which is the original of the guitar, its chords being precisely the four lower chords of the guitar.”²⁷

The banjo of the eighteenth century, as Thomas Jefferson noted, had only four strings. The nineteenth century brought with it the addition of a

²³ Linn, “The “Elevation” of the Banjo in Late Nineteenth-Century America,” 35.

²⁴ Ibid, 23.

²⁵ Hamilton College, “19th Century Banjo Instruction Manuals,” accessed December 27, 2013.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Gene Bluestein. “America’s Folk Instrument: Notes on the Five-String Banjo.” *Western Folklore* 23, no. 4 (1964): 241-48. JSTOR. Web. 27 October 2013.

fifth string and an expansion in the use of the instrument. This fifth string was an American contribution to the instrument by Joel Sweeney; however this claim is disputed. Joel allegedly made contributions to the banjo that shaped it into the instrument we recognize today. Gene Bluestein writes, Joel, "...made an instrument of wood with a skin head... About the year 1831 he added a fifth or thumb string to this new invention, thus producing the first of a long line of banjos."²⁸

The innovations made to the banjo and increased use of the instrument in music led to increased opportunities for banjo players in fields that had not been available to them before. Banjo players were able to carve out a living capitalizing on the banjo fad of the late nineteenth century by teaching lessons. Karen Linn writes that banjo teachers served their communities in many capacities, "Some banjoists managed to make a career of giving private lessons and recitals, and directing local banjo clubs, thus completely breaking with the old-time banjo tradition."²⁹ The struggle to elevate the banjo in the nineteenth century would appear to be successful in this regard as the instrument started to appear in more American homes. This changing of venue for the banjo suggests a change of "class orientation and social values."³⁰

The banjo in the late nineteenth century did elevate itself to a higher social status for a period of time. This newly achieved status allowed the banjo to permeate segments of American culture to which it previously had no access.³¹ In the:

1880's and 1890s, banjo makers created different members of the banjo family such as bass banjo and piccolo banjo. Players formed banjo orchestras out of these family members as well as related instruments like mandolin and guitar. Most colleges had banjo orchestras by the 1890s.³²

As stated previously, minstrel shows were an important source of potential income for professional banjo players during the 19th century. Most banjo players were dependent on the perceived novelty of the instrument and were relegated to the minstrel shows and other variety shows. The lives of banjo players at the beginning of the 19th century saw a yearning for stable living and working conditions. According to Linn:

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Linn, *That Half-barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture*, 442.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Old-time professional banjo players were a mobile, rootless group that wandered in and out of minstrel theater troupes and medicine shows. If work could not be found, playing in the grog shop might bring in a little cash, at least enough to pay for drinks.³³

The banjo's popularity and integration into southern American music can be attributed to the exchange of culture between the African population and the white population. Cecilia Conway writes that, "musical exchange between Africans and whites, especially the Irish and the Scots, intensified as settlement continued, inspiring whites to learn to play the banjo."³⁴

Folk music was a part of life before the arrival of the banjo to the mountains. The fiddle, or violin, played an important role in various aspects of social gatherings in the Appalachian Mountains at the beginning of the 19th century.³⁵ When the railroads were built in America the cultural transmission in the Appalachians led to the introduction of new instruments to the region. African American section workers who were setting tracks for the railroads brought the guitar to the Appalachian region.³⁶ The guitar transformed folk music in the Appalachian Mountains and helped solidify the melodies of American folk music. Peggy Langrall writes that "guitar chords shaped melodies and evened out many irregularities, melodically and rhythmically, in old-time music."³⁷

The folk instruments were intertwined with each other in American folk music. In the late 19th century banjo, mandolin, and guitar ensembles were gaining popularity and increasing the profile of each instrument.³⁸ According to David Bradford:

The popularity of these banjo, mandolin, and guitar (BMG) ensembles eventually gained momentum sufficient to become a "movement" with a governing body, the American Guild of Banjoists, Mandolinists and Guitarists, and about a dozen journals devoted specifically to this segment of the amateur music market.³⁹

³³ Ibid, 452.

³⁴ Cecilia Conway, "Black Banjo Songsters in Appalachia," *Black Music Research Journal* 23.1/2 (2003). JSTOR, Web, 153.

³⁵ Peggy Langrall, "Appalachian Folk Music: From Foothills to Footlights," *Music Educators Journal* 72, no. 7 (1986). JSTOR, Web, 38.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ David K. Bradford, "The Unstrung History of the American Guitar: The Guitar and 19th Century American Music." accessed December 20, 2013.

http://www.19thcenturyguitar.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=81&Itemid=75.

³⁹ Ibid.

The banjo, mandolin and guitar ensembles were imperative in securing a permanent role in American folk music that each of the instruments still enjoys today. These ensembles remained popular in America into the twentieth century when jazz and pop would become the new trend.⁴⁰ The BMG ensembles did leave a small legacy in American music, though they appear to have been largely forgotten, they influenced the genres that came to replace them such as jazz and ragtime. The BMG ensembles, as Bradford states, “had little lasting impact on American music. These groups were generally conservative-if somewhat eclectic- in the types of music they performed. For the most part, they played simple popular tunes and light pieces in the refined European tradition.”⁴¹

As the nineteenth century was coming to a close the minstrel shows had lost a good portion of their popularity with America. This led to a formative moment in the changing perceptions of the banjo as the African American community moved away from the banjo and the racial stereotypes attached to the instrument.⁴² The instrument became synonymous with the White Appalachian culture that we associate the instrument with today. These musicians integrated the instrument to play the Anglo-American folk tunes that they were accustomed to, actually using banjo techniques that were employed by the African American musicians that had predated them.⁴³

The end of the nineteenth century was the culmination of a century long journey to find the banjo’s place in America. The growing popularity of the banjo in southern folk music and in the music of the mountains during this time period have continued to persist into the twenty-first century. This adoption of the banjo by white settlers fostered an exchange of culture between the white and African American communities of the region. Cecilia Conway explains “extensive African-Irish musical exchange enabled the little-recognized, but distinct, new genre of American folk music-the banjo song-to flourish.”⁴⁴

The banjo’s enduring impact on American music is evidenced today by its notoriety with most Americans. The instrument has become synonymous with the popular southern genre bluegrass. The banjo can also be found as a mainstay in various other genres such as jazz and even

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴²Jay Bailey, “Historical Origin and Stylistic Developments of the Five-String Banjo,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 85, no. 335 (1972), JSTOR, Web, 62.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Conway, “Black Banjo Songsters in Appalachia,” 156.

popular rock. America's embrace of the banjo in the nineteenth century was a pivotal time period in the viability of the instrument in the country.

While the early twentieth century saw the banjo lose its popularity to the new popular genres of ragtime and jazz, but the early twentieth century did see the banjo become more accessible to Americans. With the invention of the phonograph banjo music became more accessible to people of the twentieth century and the regionalized genre of bluegrass was allotted a larger audience.⁴⁵

Musicians like Bill Monroe and Earl Scruggs in the middle of the twentieth century led to the popularization of bluegrass in the American mainstream. Bill Monroe and his brother were popular in the 1920s and 1930s and appeared on the Grand Ole Opry in 1939.⁴⁶ Earl Scruggs would go on to invent his own playing style on the banjo called "Scruggs Style". Pioneers like Scruggs and Monroe advanced bluegrass beyond the mountains and the genre has expanded its reach since.⁴⁷ The Bluegrass Heritage Foundation also points out that bluegrass and the banjo have joined with other popular genres, "bluegrass bands today reflect influences from a variety of sources including traditional and fusion Jazz, Contemporary Country music, Celtic music, Rock & Roll, old-time music, and Southern Gospel music."⁴⁸

The banjo has seen many evolutions in society's perception of its place in the social hierarchy. Initially the instrument of the African American slaves that lived in the rural south, the banjo achieved an elevation in its status in the 19th century and garnered notoriety in the American mainstream conscience. By appealing to high society women and transcending the racial stereotypes it once represented, the banjo has carved out a role for itself in American folk music. The banjo, arguably more than any other instrument, has lived the "American Dream" as it navigated American history. Mark Twain aptly articulated the reputation of the banjo stating, "A gentleman is someone who knows how to play the banjo and doesn't."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Bluegrass Heritage Foundation, "Bluegrass Heritage Foundation - Bluegrass Info," accessed December 27, 2013, <http://bluegrassheritage.org/BluegrassInfo.html>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Good Reads, "Quotes by Mark Twain," accessed May 14, 2014, <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/89841-a-gentleman-is-someone-who-knows-how-to-play-the>.