America's Instrument

A Short History of the Banjo
(Part One)

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I'm not sure why I bought a banjo when I was 18. It might have been all those Pete Seeger records I had listened to growing up. It might have been because there was one in the window of the local music store with the unbelievable price tag of fifty dollars. I couldn't pass up that bargain! I bought the banjo and a forty dollar case with money from my first part-time job. The banjo was a bluegrass banjo - meaning it had a round, wooden resonating disc on the back, which made it loud to play and heavy to hold. I had not paid much attention to banjos at that point - I did not know that there were different kinds of banjos and different styles of playing - styles that were much older than the seemingly pervasive bluegrass style. I did not know that the banjo had its origins in Africa and that it began its North American life amongst enslaved Blacks on plantations in the American south and the Caribbean. I had assumed that like the fiddle and the guitar, its origins were European. When I did learn that it was considered to be "America's instrument" (Lomax and Lomax, 1947; Gura and Bollman, 1999), I assumed its origins were amongst white "hillbillies," like the ones portrayed in the television show, *The Beverly Hillbillies*.

This assumption was held in place by various white cultural references. In my home growing up there was a well-worn copy of John and Alan Lomaxes' *Folk Song: USA* (1947), from which I learned that the banjo was "America's only original folk instrument" (p.114). A copy of *Foxfire 3* (Wigginton, 1975) that was lying around my family's cottage included a section on a white Appalachian banjo and dulcimer maker. In the film *Deliverance* (Boorman, 1972), there is an opening scene where the white city slicker picks out a duet on his guitar with a backwoods white boy who plays an open-backed banjo. They play a tune called "Duelling Banjos," deceptively slowly at first and then fiendishly quickly and virtuoso-like. The tune is heard again as part of the musical score when the party sets out on their ill-fated adventure. As they fly down river they pass under a footbridge, where the boy who played the banjo in the opening scene stands, staring down at them and swinging his banjo in a slightly menacing way. The tune "Duelling Banjos" appears throughout the movie - sometimes heard on guitar alone and sometimes as the guitar - banjo duet.

In a more recent cultural reference - the Coen brothers' film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2002) - there is a scene wherein the three escapees drive off in a stolen car. One of the characters, Delmar, picks up an open-backed banjo he finds on the back seat and starts strumming it as if playing the banjo is a familiar and commonplace activity. It is also interesting to note that the Black character in the film, Tommy Johnson, plays the guitar. The banjo references all pertain to white characters.

These references seem to affirm the Lomaxes' take on the banjo's origins and history. Their tome, *Folk Music USA* (Lomax and Lomax, 1947) is both a classic and a giant among American folk music compendiums. Of the banjo they say this:

> It is related on its mother's side to certain primitive West African stringed instruments; it was raised up by Negro slaves; it was polished and given a fifth string by one Joe Sweeney of North Carolina in 1840; and strangely, it found its final home, after everyone else had grown tired of it, in the lonesome hollers of the Southern mountains (p. 114).

Although various accounts of the banjo's origins differ in small details, it is generally agreed that the instrument originally came from the west coast of Africa. It crossed the Atlantic via the slave trade and over the course of about 150 years or so, existed in various iterations as the instruments that enslaved Blacks used to accompany their singing and dancing. The banjo is thought to be derivative of a chordophone from the Senegambia region of West Africa, called a *xalam*. The *xalam* had three or four strings strung on a wooden neck over a skin-covered, hollowed-out gourd. In America and in the Caribbean it became known by enslaved Africans as the *banza*. Whether that name was of African origin, or whether there were other predecessors other than the Senagambian *xalam*, is widely debated (Webb, 1984; Conway, 1995; Ellis, 2001). From the late 17th century, Europeans writing about enslaved Africans made reference to the "bania, banjer, bangoe, bangie, banshaw" (Webb, 1984, p. 2), as well as to the "banjo, banjar, strum strum and merrywang" (Ellis, 2001, p. 23).

Until roughly 1840, the banjo was almost exclusively an instrument of the Africans. But like most music traditions, banjo playing spread because others were exposed to it and wanted to learn. Around that time, white minstrel show impresarios and musicians took up the banjo and incorporated it into musical shows intended for white audiences. While the history of the minstrel show is complex and predominantly racist (in that Black culture - including its music and instruments - were lampooned), it was this cross-over that brought the banjo into white musical culture. And, it also "preserved" much of the original music, as white banjo players got busy transcribing the tunes they learned and publishing them in banjo instruction books (which date back as far as 1851) (Ayers et al., 1994, liner notes; Gura and Bollman, 1999).

After the Civil War, which "served as a watershed for the dissemination of banjo music" (Webb, 1984, p.11) from the south to the north, instrument manufacturers, particularly in the north-eastern states, began manufacturing banjos for white Americans. As the banjo crossed over to white culture, one of the changes that took place was that the humble and readily available building materials of wood, gourd and animal skin were refined and standardized. The gourd body gradually gave way to a wooden rim, and then to a metal rim which borrowed from drum making technologies. This latter change, for the most part, shifted the production of the banjo from the homestead woodshed to the industrial factory where it was mass-produced.

This history mostly resides with ethno-musicologists and banjo enthusiasts. It is not a history readily available to the "average" American – or Canadian, for that matter.

In *Ring the Banjar!* Robert Lloyd Webb (1984) traces the banjo from its African origins to factories in the north-eastern states that by the mid nineteenth century were manufacturing banjos for white consumers. Webb captures the banjo's complex history in his opening paragraph:

> How little we know about the banjo! The history of the banjo in America tells something of the history of the nation. The banjo takes a place in our folkways, in our humour, and in the tragedies of our past. The banjo belongs to all of us; to blacks, to whites, to the first immigrants and, by adoption, to many of the latest. It casts both bright and dark shadows: banjo is frolic (but banjo is slavery); banjo is entertainment (but banjo is blackface); banjo accompanies the dance (but dancing in bondage, longing to be free) (p. 2).

In his book, *With a Banjo on my Knee*[1]*: A musical Journey from Slavery to Freedom*, Rex Ellis (2001) suggests that because of the banjo's context as an instrument of slavery, and its subsequent appropriation into minstrelsy, in "the African-American struggle for acceptance and full citizenship after emancipation, the banjo was seen as an obstacle to overcome" (p.18). While it did continue as an instrument within Black music traditions, its identity with African-American culture was dwarfed by its growing popularity amongst middle class white Americans. This growth in popularity was encouraged by the manufacturers of banjos and the publishers of banjo method books who took great pains to explain how their particular banjos and method books elevated the banjo above its African-American, "lowly" roots. One such entrepreneur pointed to how the "guitar-style" (of picking) was superior to the "stroke style," and how banjo afficionados who purchased his banjos, played in the concert hall and not on the minstrel stage (Gura and Bollman, 1999). Another claimed the banjo was "not of 'negro origin' as others thought, but rather took its name from the Spanish 'bandore'" (Gura and Bollman, 1999, p. 160). The vast mechanical "improvements" to the banjo in the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s took place, for the most part, in northern factories, and were driven by the desire to make the banjo suitable for classical European music. One virtuoso billed himself as the "Paganini of the banjo" (Gura and Bollman, p.152). The banjo's minstrel repertoire was often referred to derisively as "plantation music" (Gura and Bollman, 1999), although white audiences flocked to minstrel shows for decades to come.

In northern factories, banjos were made in several sizes, with a wide range of accessories and decorative motifs to suit various family configurations and pocketbooks. By the 1880s, the banjo had become a parlour instrument sized for small children up to adults. There were small banjos, called "piccolo" (the smallest size) and "pony" (the next size up), lady-sized banjos as well as novelty banjos of many sizes. Like the piano it became an instrument of respectability. Interestingly, changes were made to its construction to accommodate the growing number of women who played either socially or professionally. One manufacturer made a closed-back banjo which "[did] away with the screws on the side which flay the dresses of the lady performers" (reviewer for the

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[1] "With a banjo on my knee" is a line from Stephen Foster's song, "Oh! Susanna", which he wrote for the minstrel shows. (It was published in 1848.) Many of Foster's songs were performed in minstrel shows (Howard, 1946).

Boston Daily Evening Voice, quoted in Webb, 1984, p.15). I own a "pony" banjo which was made in the 1880s by the James Buckbee Company in New York - one of the many firms that manufactured banjos for the northern states' white middle class market. It is delicate in nature, and has the word "Daisy" punched into the metal tailpiece, identifying it by its style and patent, possibly so named to be marketed to young female players.

The banjo's complex and contested history may also be traced through the documentation provided by nineteenth century photographers and makers of fine china figurines. While the banjo appeared in family and individual portraits of white middle class Americans, which exuded notions of respectability and stability, it also figured in racist figurines (manufactured in Europe as well as in America) of African-American plantation workers, which stereotyped and lampooned African-Americans as pleasure-seeking buffoons (Gura and Bollman, 1999).

Skipping ahead to the mid-twentieth century, the banjo found its niche in what would become bluegrass music. If it survived in cultural consciousness at all as a Black instrument, it might have been as an instrument of ragtime and the jazz bands of the early 20th century. By and large, by the Second World War, it had disappeared from the parlours, the music halls, and the entertainment cards of both white and Black America. Its original form and musical style continued in remote areas of the Appalachian and Ozark Mountains where its tradition of being handcrafted also persisted (Wigginton, 1975; Webb, 1984). Of interest to (mostly white American) historians and musicologists, the banjo's "old-time" tradition was analysed and preserved. The tradition is largely associated with white performers, although Black performers still exist (Conway, 1995). It is worth noting that its history as an instrument of choice among white, middle class Americans has been forgotten. Its current-day association with white Appalachia has both race and class connotations.

What's interesting about old-time banjo is that the playing style contains remnants of what is believed to be "original" Black playing style. It is the hammer action (down stroke action) of the right hand that seems to match early nineteenth century descriptions of banjo playing amongst Black plantation slaves. "Beating on the strings" and the onomatopoeic "strum-strump" (Conway, 1995, p. 196) are two such descriptions, both suggesting the banjo strings were hit rather than plucked or strummed. Although white old-time banjo players have acknowledged the Black roots of their technique and much of their music, the connection has largely been left to the musicologists, who have found evidence that closely ties white old-time music to its Black predecessor (Conway, 1995; Ellis, 2001).

When I purchased my first banjo I took some lessons at the (now defunct) Toronto Folklore Centre, where I learned what was called "frailing" or "old-timey" banjo. About ten years ago when I connected with another old-time banjo player for some more lessons, I learned that the style was also called "clawhammer" - a term that well describes the down-stroke action of the old-time style. (While any banjo-players reading this article may suggest differences between "frailing" and "clawhammer," I have yet to discern them! They are both regarded as the old-time style.)

Clawhammer banjo has been experiencing a renaissance and resurgence of late. There are dozens of young clawhammer banjo players, revisiting and rejuvenating the traditional old-time repertoire. In Canada, there are such performers as Chris Coole and Arnie Naiman, and groups that play old-time music and have banjo players: The Duhks, The Be Good Tanyas, Dyad, to name a few. This resurgence is also going on in the United States with groups like Uncle Earl and talented young banjo players like Abigail Washburn. In a recent interview with Canada's pre-eminent folk music magazine, *Penguin Eggs*, country singer Emmylou Harris had this to say: "The Be Good Tanyas, I love them. They're terrific and kind of play everything. There's no, 'Don't you dare pick up a banjo, because people are going to assume certain things about you, you know.' There's still a lot of banjo jokes, of course" (Campbell, 2006, p. 45). Harris is referring to the now age-old connotation that the old-time banjo has as the instrument of "hillbillies", like the ones depicted in the film, *Deliverance*.

Of late, my interest is in learning more about the history of the banjo in Canada. It seems to me that the banjo would have first found its way here with enslaved and free Black populations who came to British North America after the United States' War of Independence, in the late eighteenth century (www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com). Subsequent to that, it may have accompanied Black refugees fleeing slavery in the pre-Civil War decades of the nineteenth century. My research is in its beginning stages at the time of writing this article. To date, I have found four references to the banjo's history in Canada, all but one of them pertaining to the minstrel tradition. The first reference is a theatre handbill for a concert in Toronto in 1858, by a minstrel troupe called "Burgess & Redmond". In a program consisting of items entitled things like "Slave's Lament," "Poor Old Tom," and "Vilikins and his Dinah," a "banjo solo" is also featured. By 1858, minstrel shows were all the rage amongst white audiences on both sides of the border. Two other theatre handbills referenced in this collection (City of Toronto and the Ontario Black History Society, 1981) advertise minstrel shows in Lindsay, Ontario, 1888 and Stouffville, Ontario, 1906. I assume that all of these minstrel bands were made up of white performers.

The second reference concerns the Bohee Brothers, Black Canadians from St. John, New Brunswick, who made names for themselves in Great Britain (1870s - 1890s) as Black impresarios of the British minstrel tradition (www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com). Ironically, the Bohees made their living poking fun at their Black American brethren, through the racist "black-face" minstrel tradition. Their fame in Britain included giving lessons to the Prince of Wales (later, Edward VII) (www.peopleplayuk.org.uk) and being referenced by James Joyce in *Ulysses* (Joyce, 1922/2000, p. 573).

The third reference is a photo reproduced in Webb's (1984) *Ring the banjar! The banjo in America from folklore to factory* that shows a white Albertan homesteader - in 1912 - playing his banjo while supper is cooking on the wood-heated stove. This photo affirms the place the banjo had in white culture on both sides of the border. Their availability was made possible through mail-order catalogues and banjo factories here and there. (I learned from Canadian banjo-maker, Lucie Mercier, that there was a banjo factory in Bowmanville, Ontario.)

The fourth reference is anecdotal. I was in one of Toronto's guitar shops, The Twelfth Fret, when an older gentleman walked in with a battered-up banjo case. He opened the case to reveal an old open-back banjo. "This was my uncle's," he proudly exclaimed. "He lived in Guelph in the 1920s and he played the banjo in a minstrel band. They did the black-face and the whole nine-yards." He chuckled and then asked the shop attendant what the banjo might be worth. His comments were instructive: they suggest that people can fondly recall what is now historical entertainment, without thinking about its racist intentions and context. It is no wonder many Blacks regard the banjo in a negative light (Conway, 1995; Ellis, 2001).

Today's Canadian old-time banjo revival is really part of a larger North American revival, centred in the Appalachia and Piedmont regions of West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia and North Carolina. It is largely a white revival – although there is now an organization of Black banjo players – Black Banjo Players Then and Now, which was formed in 2004 in New York (www.rhisong.com/blackbanjo/). Today's young players make pilgrimages to Appalachia and the Piedmonts to learn from elderly white banjo players. This revival is quite detached from the banjo's Canadian history in the minstrel shows, white settler and Black musical traditions. It is this latter one that interests me! Where do I start looking? Karolyn Smardz-Frost suggested that I read slave narratives to find references to the banjo and then track the authors in their journey northward. Although it is not likely that Black refugees would be packing their musical instruments for the long dangerous trek to freedom, they would have certainly had access to the raw materials necessary to craft their own instruments, and as their economic conditions improved, to manufactured banjos. The question, I think, is, could a Black banjo tradition withstand the inundation of the white, racist banjo tradition facilitated by minstrel shows? If the Bohee brothers are any indication, a Black musician's livelihood might depend on embracing the dominant banjo tradition.

I am heartened by another anecdote which concerns a double bass that Canadian fiddler, Erryn Marshall, inherited from her great-uncle. The instrument has two rectangular patches, on either side of its main body. The story goes that her great-uncle purchased it in the 1920s from a Black family of musicians who lived in Wallaceburg, Ontario. One winter's night when the family was heading out to a gig on a sleigh, they had an accident and the double bass slid off the sleigh, whose runners then ran through it, creating small rectangular holes on either side - hence the wooden patches! Although I do not know whether this family band had a banjo player, the story suggests that there were Black musicians playing music for entertainment in rural Ontario in the early twentieth century. I am conjecturing that such a band included, along with the double bass, a fiddle, a guitar and possibly a banjo. But that conjecture awaits further investigation.

The banjo is a much-derided instrument. People often laugh when I tell them I play the banjo. It is my hope that further investigation will uncover a rich history of this complex, but wonderful instrument - one shared by whites and Blacks - with a truly "Canadian" history and tradition. I included "Part One" in the title of this paper because I intend to do more research on the history of "America's instrument" here in Canada. I invite readers of this piece to contact me if they have any information whatsoever of Canadian Black banjo players, past or present.

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