

# What's So Funny About the Banjo?

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## Readings

Psalm 137:1-4

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land?

from *The Banjo: America's African Instrument* by Laurent Dubois

The banjo has had many names.

Banza... Banjier... Bonja... Banjar... Bangoe...

But they all name one sound: the sound of strings humming over skin. That is the sound a banjo makes, the sound that defines it. That sound has accompanied songs and stories, consoled lonely souls, and electrified crowds. It has had many meanings: it is the sound of Africa, the sound of slavery, the sound of blackness, the sound of progress, the sound of protest – the sound of America. But most of all, the banjo has been the sound of solidarity, of gathering in the midst of exile, of being together and in so doing being able to recount the past and imagine the future.

## Sermon

This morning you've been hearing the banjo accompany a variety of sorts of music, and there's more variety you haven't heard – from old time clawhammer to bluegrass, even to Beethoven!

So then, what's so funny about the banjo? There are plenty of banjo jokes, that's for sure. For example:

What's the difference between a banjo and a lawnmower?

You can tune a lawnmower.

What's the difference between a South American Macaw and a banjo?

One is loud, obnoxious, and noisy; and the other is a bird.

Myth: It takes hard work and talent to play the banjo.

Fact: The only talent most banjo players have is a talent for avoiding hard work.

Okay: Why *are* such things at all funny?

I've begun to wonder whether it has something to do with the very origins of the banjo.

Listen, for example, to this:

Thomas Jefferson wrote of the giftedness of African Americans for music, more-so than whites, he said; and he noted that "The instrument proper to them is the Banjer, which they brought hither from Africa..." Then he concluded, in regard to the musical talent of African Americans, with this thought: "Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony is yet to be proved." (from *The Banjo: America's African Instrument*, p.. 109)

Hmm.

Another example: Some decades later an 1840 playbill for a minstrel show "warned audiences that if they came to the show they would hear 'dat terror to all Pianos, Harps, and Organs, de BANJO'." (from *The Banjo* p. 195)

So... with these examples and much else in mind, reading Laurent Dubois's book led me to wonder: just why do we think it is that jokes are told about the sound of the banjo and about the character of the banjo player?

I don't think it is conscious racism – but then, much racism is not conscious. And there is some classism here too, after all, since some banjo jokes play on the stereotype of the banjo player as an ignorant, gap-toothed poor white from Appalachia.

Now, I will accept that many banjo jokes are plain fund, and I will continue to laugh at them.

But in addition to reflecting on the roots of banjo humor (so-called), reading Dubois' book and delving into other sources has led me more importantly to a deeper sense of just what the banjo is and what its history can teach us about our American history: in particular the complex and often tragic interwoven histories of Americans of African and European heritage.

The brief takeaway from all this is the sobering realization that I would not have this banjo or any banjo were it not for the centuries of the human suffering brought about by the enslavement of African Americans.

But here it is, this particular instrument made in 1965. Here it is:

A descendant of... a variety of African instruments from various parts of that continent and of many shapes and sizes, but all with skin stretched over gourd or calabash.

Descendant of... the memories of those instruments and sometimes the instruments themselves brought on the middle passage of slave ships.

Descendant of... instruments, particularly in the Caribbean to begin with, instruments of likely much more mellow sound than most modern banjos, like their

African progenitors made of skin stretched over a gourd, and with three or four strings made of horsehair or plant materials stretched along the drum head and a long carved piece of wood.

And descendant of... the 19<sup>th</sup> century increasingly standardized (by white manufacturers) banjos more and more often with metal components and strings now often of steel – in short, near ancestor of the banjo as we generally recognize it today.

As for the players of the banjo in its many forms?

For a long time it was only African Americans who played, played for recreation, for dancing, for solace, and sometimes forced to play for their masters (“required of them a song” to paraphrase the Psalm we heard earlier) (And some of the masters, intrigued by the instrument, learned to play themselves.)

But backing up a step, Dubois in his book notes that the instrument itself served as a way of creating solidarity among a diverse population of people thrown together by their enslavement, having come from various parts of Africa, speaking different languages, bringing varied cultural traditions – but all familiar with some version of an instrument with strings stretched over a skin. So, as Dubois writes, the banjo in its early iterations was “the first ‘African’ instrument.” In other words, as Dubois also put it, in the forms the banjo was taking in the Americas it “succeeded in this context by being an African instrument in a general sense without being specifically tied to one or another group or part of the continent.”

So, eventually... with the rise of blackface minstrel shows in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the banjo came to be seen as the quintessential plantation instrument. This, through performances which presented a thoroughly idealized and fanciful image of life for African American slaves on southern plantations, the banjo one among the many ways that slaves were depicted as carefree and happy with their lot.

Did you know, for example, that Stephen Foster’s “Oh Susanna” became a staple in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century minstrel shows and was originally written in so-called black dialect? (And included some very racist language you’ve likely never heard and I’ll never sing.)

In any case, the banjo’s centrality in minstrelsy meant that more and more whites, though in blackface, were playing the banjo, and continued to play as it eventually migrated in its four-stringed tenor form to the jazz bands of New Orleans and in its five-stringed form to the string bands of Appalachia. As well as to the drawing rooms of middle and upper class whites, as banjos were increasingly being mass marketed.

To bring the banjo to the present day, then, in this much too condensed history, just this important point: Even though today most of us may associate the banjo primarily with white performers from Pete Seeger and Earl Scruggs to Bela Fleck, Abigail Washburn, Tony Trischka and others, African Americans have never stopped playing the banjo. Indeed there is an unbroken heritage of African American string band music to this day – which was too often invisible because not commercially marketed, particularly through the twentieth century. I’m not proud to say that I have only just recently

discovered, to give one example, the Carolina Chocolate Drops wonderful traditional string band music.

And of course banjo history is not over. The banjo itself continues its travels, both geographically and musically – the tenor banjo often a standard part of Irish traditional music, modern banjos have made their way back to some African music, and musicians are discovering that all sorts of music can be played on the instrument – as I’ve tried to give you a taste today.

Well then, with this complex history of the banjo in mind, a history rooted at the outset in centuries of slavery, a question: Should white people, like me, stop playing the banjo because of its history in slavery, plantations, and black face minstrel shows? To bring it close to home: is it culturally *inappropriate* for a white guy from the New York suburbs to play the banjo?

Of course not.

This said, though, we banjo players – whether white or black – would do well to acknowledge the history of the instrument, to acknowledge and name that, as I said, we wouldn’t even have the instrument in our hands were it not for this history I’ve too-briefly summarized, this history marked by suffering unimaginable for most of us today.

Even more, though, to my mind, knowing this history gives the banjo even more power. For the history includes, after all, not only the slave trade and the brutality of slavery itself, but includes and embraces resistance and protest, embraces the incredible resilience of the human spirit, to be able to make music in the most brutal of circumstances.

In this spirit, I can do no better than to quote at some length from the conclusion of Dubois’ book:

Where will the instrument journey from here? How will its accumulated history sound out? That part of the story is as yet unwritten: it is the musicians to come who will keep it living, twisting, and spiraling through our cultural and sonic landscape. But wherever and whenever they pick up the instrument, whatever song they choose to play, they will be inheriting something from those musical ancestors who first invented the instrument on the plantations of the Caribbean and North America. They will feel the hum of an instrument that was created to cross cultural boundaries and create new solidarities. They will hold on to an object that has been reinvented over and over again but made generation after generation feel like they were connecting to deep wells of tradition. In its richness and flexibility as both sound and symbol, the banjo has been a tremendous, inexhaustible gift. Whenever we listen to that sound of strings humming over skin, we should remember to say a word of thanks to those who, in the midst of unimaginably dark conditions, created this source of illumination, solidarity and unending wonder.

It seems to me, then, that we – white folks – should no more stop playing the banjo than we should stop worshipping here in this Old Ship Meeting House, since we know it is only here because extraordinary old growth oaks and pine were cut down on land that the ancestors of many or most of us in this room had taken from the Wompanoag people.

So we should only *stop* playing the banjo if we are unwilling to acknowledge and even embrace its history, just as we *should* stop worshipping here if are unwilling to acknowledge the history of this Meeting House, rooted as it is in the history of English colonialism and the genocide of native peoples.

You see, the question for us – whether in terms of our personal history or our shared history – is always how we will live from and grow from our history. One thing for sure: denial never gets us far.

Pete Seeger, for his part, had printed on his banjo, the banjo he took to Mississippi and Alabama during the Civil Rights movement, the banjo he played on campuses across the country protesting the Vietnam war, the banjo he played on the Sloop Clearwater raising energy and funds to clean the Hudson River, the banjo he played around the world... he had printed on his banjo these words:

THIS MACHINE SURROUNDS HATE  
AND FORCES IT TO SURRENDER

Banjo players or not, these words suggest, don't they, one of our primary tasks in life? Maybe in a way the banjo and its history as a sort of stand-in for all of us as Americans.

After all, no one's hands are clean when it comes to history – whether personal or shared. To be sure, some carry more guilt for injustice and violence and abuse than others, sometimes far more guilt. But whatever our past and relative responsibility, we are all in this thing called life together (in America, as we know, thrown together from all of the world) and the important question always has to do with what we will do *now* and in days and years to come with our hands and hearts – and for some of us, banjos.

Will we help and heal? Will we care with compassion for one another and for all life?

May it be so.