

## **Appalachian Music Fellowship Final Activity Report**

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My Appalachian Music Fellowship study in June 2009 was in furtherance of developing a film documentary dealing with the extinction of the Black Banjo that occurred in the United States during the period 1900-1930.

### **Background**

For three hundred years -- from the arrival of African slaves in Virginia to the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century -- the banjo was universally thought of as an African American instrument. It was common and accepted knowledge, for three centuries, that the banjo was invented by, played by, and associated with blacks, either directly or through black-faced minstrelsy. But over the course of the next half century, the black banjo tradition virtually disappeared in the U.S. My Music Fellowship supported research was directed at investigating why this happened.

### **Work in the Berea Archives**

My findings, after a month in the archives, were informed as much by what I didn't find as what I did. For reasons that I will explain shortly, the record is largely mute; there is no smoking gun. But, as in all good archives, clues were found in anecdotes, footnotes and glimpses of the wider historical tableau on which this story played. By casting a wider net through Berea College's library, faculty, various online resources, and sources and interviews suggested by the archive staff, I was able to sketch a conclusion. It is this:

Black banjo playing, and our knowledge of black banjo history, all but disappeared because of a sequence of cultural and racial "filters." Beginning with the arrival of slaves on American shores and accelerating with the rise of mass media, these filters gradually silenced the sound and memory of the black banjo. The final extinction, I discovered at Berea, occurred in just 30 years, from 1900 to 1930. By the 1940s, Americans assumed that the banjo originated with white Appalachians.

Not until the 1970s was this history uncovered, and with it, the discovery of a few elderly black banjo players still able to play and discuss its tradition in the African American community. They helped us bridge both the musical and historical gap. This, in turn, led to a revival of the black banjo in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. After nearly a century of silence, black banjo playing was heard again on recordings both old and new, and by touring musical groups such as the Carolina Chocolate Drops.

I play the banjo, but my interest in banjo history came through work on civil rights history. In 2001, while researching a guidebook to civil rights sites, I discovered Henry Tanner's "The Banjo Lesson." The touching painting shows an elderly black man teaching banjo to a black boy. Like everyone I asked, I had no idea that blacks played the banjo.

By the time I got to Berea, I had read several books on banjo history. The one blank spot was why blacks "abandoned" the banjo. That was the word most often used -- "abandoned." One prominent scholar suggested that blacks traded their banjos for guitars, invented the blues, and never turned back.

This seemed too simple. No instrument in American history had a more singular cultural connection as blacks and the banjo. “The Banjo Lesson” was painted in 1893, the same year that black poet Paul Dunbar published, “A Banjo Song,” with its similar, nostalgic paean to the “banjo on de wall.” I found the poem in the Berea library.

Moreover, virtually every country music star, from Earl Scruggs to Uncle Dave Macon to DeFord Bailey, acknowledged the existence and influence of black banjo players. Their biographies on Berea’s shelves yielded anecdotes that proved the widespread existence of black banjo players at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. What happened to them?

### Research Conclusions

Here, drawn from my month’s research, is a list of the “filters” I found that I believe are responsible:

- The earliest published collection of black songs, *Slave Songs of the United States*, was put together by missionaries in Port Royal, S.C. during the Civil War. Charles Ware’s diary of that mission clearly shows that missionaries, by their nature, were largely interested in gospel tunes and not “sinful tunes,” as Dena Epstein described black, secular, often bawdy, songs in her groundbreaking, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*. Epstein’s search of southern literature found similar blank spots in white plantation memoirs, as if the slaves that surrounded them possessed nothing of cultural value. Nearly a century-and-a-half of slavery passed before the first mention of a banjo in the U.S., in Maryland, two years before the Declaration of Independence.
- Folklorists who roamed the south were racially biased. Englishman Cecil Sharp, for example, was looking for pure English ballads, a targeted search that eventually created folk festivals for white players, among them, White Top, and Bascom Lamar Lunsford’s Asheville festivals, that excluded black performers. Some folklorists were racists, and, likely felt, as did most of the country at the time, that black culture not worth collecting. A contemporary, influential geographer, Ellen Churchill Semple, erroneously wrote: “There is no place for the negro in the mountain economy, and never has been.” In fact, I learned at Berea, that black populations in Appalachia reached as high as 20 percent in some states. It is more than likely that black banjo playing existed within that population. It is also possible that black musicians were wary of white folk collectors with recording machines over-eager to record, and direct, their singing.
- The many notable oral histories and collections at Berea College, including Buell Kazee, Bascom Lamar Lunsford and John Lair, are silent on the issue, a reflection of the times and biases in which they lived, though they owe their banjos, playing styles and much of their repertoire to black musicians. When Cecil Sharp visited Berea College (1916) the school was all-white, and there is no recorded evidence that earlier black students or their families played banjo. White students surveyed by Berea faculty member, John F. Smith in 1915 listed the banjo as an instrument they heard, and knew the names of many songs from the black tradition.
- The arrival of mass media had a major impact on the history of black banjo. Sheet music, records and, by 1930, radio began to shape American music, and provide the “roots” of what later became the folk revival. Mike Seeger wrote: “Most of the songs that we sing and play now were originally recorded by commercial companies and the Library of Congress in the Southeastern mountains between 1925 and 1935.” This record was rife with the biases of the gatekeepers who were

judging music for its commercial appeal amidst a period of Jim Crow segregation. The splitting of southern music into “race” and “hillbilly” was a mirror of Jim Crow. There was little space, apparently, for what we might call “black hillbillies” playing string band music. The Berea archives contain a handful of recordings in which blacks played in string bands during this period, but they were not identified on the records as black or photographed. In a telling anecdote I found in a Mike Seeger interview, Frank Walker, who started Columbia Records’ 15,000 Series of race records, recalled putting a white string band into a “race” category and being sued in Tennessee. As music became industrialized, black string bands had with no commercial outlets. They couldn’t make a living. What is recorded is what is remembered. Nothing was passed to the next generation, either in the media, or at home. Charles Wolfe summed it up this way, “Today, we are left with only a pathetic handful of recordings representing this tradition in its flowering.” He estimated maybe 50 commercial prewar recordings of black string bands, versus 20,000 blues and gospel.

- Jim Crow also prompted the great black migration to northern cities. One of the most puzzling blanks in this history is, what happened to all those black banjos? While there are scattered reports of urban black banjo players, one would think they dropped their banjos in the Ohio River. This doesn’t make sense to me. White Appalachians took their music north; why didn’t blacks?
- By then, African Americans had created new music, blues, ragtime and jazz and, as they have done repeatedly, progressed toward them, even as their old music was adopted by whites. Blues, for one thing, allowed for bawdy, sexual, secular, and protest story telling. The banjo survived for awhile in black ragtime and jazz – Louie’s Armstrong’s Hot 5, for example, -- but faded out as drums were added and amplified pianos and guitars eliminated the need for banjo rhythm. Sears’s catalog started carrying \$4 guitars in 1895 – and African Americans found it “could say more than the banjo could say,” as Mike Seeger put it, describing Elizabeth Cotton and John Jackson. I believe that new black music was a factor, but not the keystone reason for black “abandonment” of the banjo. Banjo playing declined generally in the 1930s, in both black and white communities, as pop music swept the country. Yet, we know now, there remained pockets of players of both races.
- The most visible icon of Jim Crow and the bad old south was a black man with a banjo. As lynchings crested early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the NAACP was formed, and the struggle for civil rights began. WEB Dubois promoted the “talented tenth” and concert black music. The stereotypes of banjo-playing cabin-dwelling blacks became an anathema to those struggling for equal rights. In his prize-winning play, *The Broken Banjo*, published in 1922 in the NAACP’s *Crisis*, Willis Richardson described an urban black’s willingness to kill for his banjo. Claude McKay’s 1929 novel *Banjo*, contained this line: “Banjo is bondage. It’s the instrument of slavery. Banjo is Dixie.” By the 1950s, when black activists criticized Nat King Cole for playing to white audiences, Thurgood Marshall, chief counsel for NAACP, reportedly suggested that since he was an uncle Tom, Cole “ought to perform with a banjo.” It is clear that many African Americans found the banjo too ugly to retain, and moved away from it.
- Black banjo playing retreated to homes in Appalachia, banjos were hung up as old folks aged, to be discovered, almost too late, by ethnomusicologists like Kip Lornell and CeCe Conway in the 1970s. Thanks to their work, we know now that black banjo accompanied square dances into the 1940s, but, it was a tree falling in

a forest. What they found was a remnant, a handful of old black players, well past their prime. All of them are now dead. As Kip Lornell told me, There had to have been “scores and scores (who will) forever remain unrecorded...we’ll never know about.”

- As Earl Scruggs burst on the stage of the Grand Ol’ Opry in 1945, the “whitening” of the banjo was complete. The Anthology of American Folk Music, published in 1952, was based on existing 78 rpm records. Hootenanny and bluegrass musicians began repeating songs from that anthology. The memory of the black banjo was gone.

This paper and its conclusions would not have been possible without my Appalachian Music Fellowship at Berea College. Granted a month, with pay, to devote to the issue was a gift that this veteran journalist found invaluable in the preproduction research of a documentary film. Add a comfortable and well-endowed library in which to work, and the support of a knowledgeable staff of archivists, my understanding of banjo history grew exponentially.

Each day, after informal conversations with the staff, in which I mused or posed questions aloud, I found a new set of papers, books, catalog searches and recordings on my desk. Their interest in exploring the subject with me created an infectious team effort. Discussions with other Berea faculty and staff, including Loyal Jones and Tammy Clemons, added insights and sources beyond the college community. The prestige of Berea College and the Appalachian Music Fellowship opened doors to academics, musicians, librarians and others. I full expect it will garner support for the film.