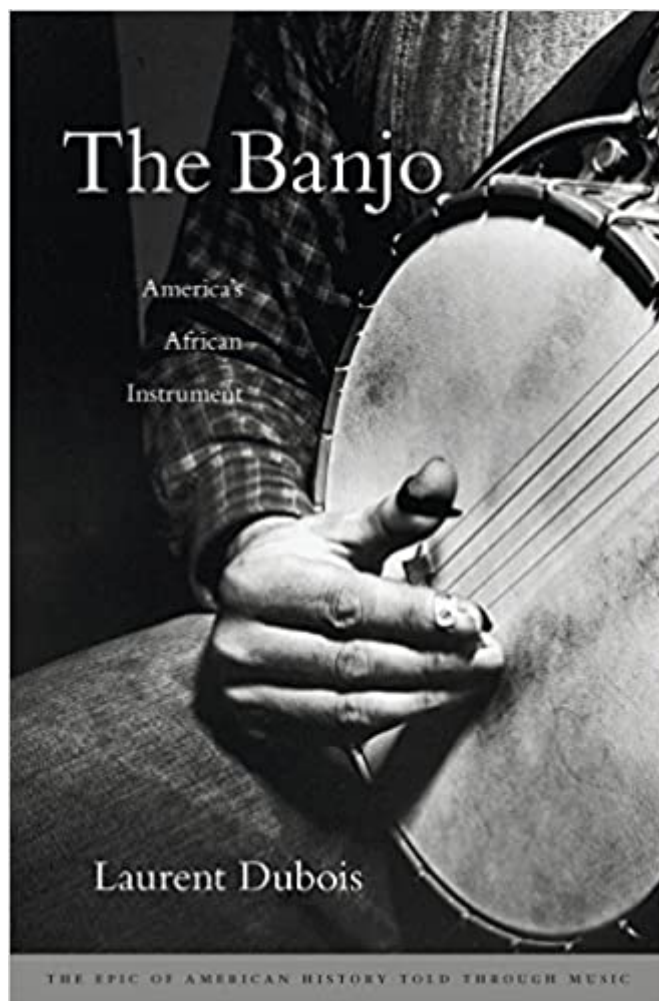


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The Banjo: America's African Instrument



Synopsis

The banjo has been called by many names over its history, but they all refer to the same sound—strings humming over skin—that has eased souls and electrified crowds for centuries. *The Banjo* invites us to hear that sound afresh in a biography of one of America's iconic folk instruments. Attuned to a rich heritage spanning continents and cultures, Laurent Dubois traces the banjo from humble origins, revealing how it became one of the great stars of American musical life. In the seventeenth century, enslaved people in the Caribbean and North America drew on their memories of varied African musical traditions to construct instruments from carved-out gourds covered with animal skin. Providing a much-needed sense of rootedness, solidarity, and consolation, banjo picking became an essential part of black plantation life. White musicians took up the banjo in the nineteenth century, when it became the foundation of the minstrel show and began to be produced industrially on a large scale. Even as this instrument found its way into rural white communities, however, the banjo remained central to African American musical performance. Twentieth-century musicians incorporated the instrument into styles ranging from ragtime and jazz to Dixieland, bluegrass, reggae, and pop. Versatile and enduring, the banjo combines rhythm and melody into a single unmistakable sound that resonates with strength and purpose. From the earliest days of American history, the banjo's sound has allowed folk musicians to create community and joy even while protesting oppression and injustice.

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History & Criticism

Customer Reviews

Dubois attempts to trace the evolution of the modern instrument from its African antecedents to the present day, prudently noting that a linear account is likely to be misleading. There is enough anecdote and lore to satisfy both the casual and the specialist reader. (Lou Glandfield Times Literary Supplement 2016-04-01) Dubois relates here a history of the instrument that is both learned and entertaining. His enthusiasm shines through every page. (John Check Weekly Standard 2016-03-14) [A] riveting history of the banjo. While the story Dubois tells is primarily historical and sociological, it is also musical, and he never lets us forget the magical hum that distinguishes the banjo from the guitar and other stringed instruments. Dubois combines erudition with obvious enjoyment. His limpid prose easily bears the weight of his impressive research. (Tom Gilling The Australian 2016-04-09) This is one of the very best books on the banjo published to date. It is also one with a grand scope of the life of the banjo. If you are interested enough in the banjo to understand the instrument and its uses more fully, you cannot do better than to read this lively, superb account. (Wayne Shrubsall Banjo Newsletter 2016-06-01) A wonderful offering, and a fascinating and illuminating read. This is the most comprehensive book yet about the history of the banjo. The instrument's story is told here with such depth and detail that it comes alive. I loved reading this. (Bella Fleck, banjoist) Following the strings of the banjo from Africa across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and then to the United States, Laurent Dubois provides a new perspective on the African diaspora. The Banjo: America's African Instrument is a rich, original view of our sonic landscape. It is impossible to follow Dubois's trail without a smile and the satisfaction of hearing the world anew. (Ira Berlin, author of Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves) Dubois reveals the banjo as a vital medium for the ideas and struggles of the people who make it, play it, and hear it. Combining storytelling and scholarship as seamlessly as the banjo condenses rhythm and melody, this special book is a melodious read by an extraordinary writer of Atlantic history. (Vincent Brown, author of The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery) Dubois illuminates the banjo's complicated cultural history. This lively account is not without surprises. (New Yorker 2016-05-23)

Laurent Dubois is Marcello Lotti Professor of Romance Studies and History at Duke University.

Begin reading this book with the acknowledgements pages (351-355), where you will find the most succinct statement of its thesis: "Banjos have an amazing capacity to bring people together, in laughter and song." The trouble with this thesis is that it is not only too obvious, but that it also

applies to all other musical instruments, dance, and song, as well as to many other cultural phenomena, such as games. In the context of the book, it also requires the author, an eminent historian of the Caribbean, to speculate about the gathering capacity of the banjo on the basis of very little documentation, forcing him to substitute his thesis for a conclusion – a foregone conclusion. While *The Banjo: America's African Instrument* does not use the ugly theoretical jargon in which most academics like to dress up their ideas, Dubois's prose is gummy, viscous, making for a slow, tiring read. He prefers "imbrication" to "complexity," "filiation" to "relationship," and because he lacks hard evidence to prove his thesis, he often employs the adjective "evanescent" to lend his speculation a rainbow aura. I tell you, when I came across the phrase "vertiginous sedimentation," I almost put the book down for good. Such absurdities aside, however, Dubois provides a chronological summary of the spread of banjo-like instruments from West Africa to the Caribbean and thence to America. The strength of the book is his academic strength: the history of Haiti. Its weakness is fragmentation due to scarcity of documentation. His chapters often seem quilted together out of patches of articles, as in Chapter 6, "Rings Like Silver, Shines Like Gold," which narrows with minutiae rather than expanding towards generalization. *The Banjo: America's African Instrument*, as a whole, ends with a chapter summarizing the career of Pete Seeger, as though that highly political public life should speak for itself. The question remains: why is the banjo different from other instruments that create communities? Summarizing the racial tensions of black-face minstrelsy does not penetrate to the explosiveness of the paradox Dubois recognizes: an African instrument has been largely usurped by white musicians. Instead of concluding with Pete Seeger, he would have done better to explore fully the paradox of Bill Monroe and the influence of the blues on bluegrass music, perhaps focusing on the politics of The Grand Ole Opry. There's some really good semiotic analysis in the book, starting with an eighth-century illumination in a commentary on the Apocalypse, in which sixteen saints are depicted playing lutes with extremely large skin heads instead of wooden bodies. But as long as you're analyzing the picture, why not speculate about why medieval Western Europeans failed to take to skin-covered instruments while their descendants in the New World a thousand years later did. Why did the banjo spread south and west, but not north. And while you're at it, say something about the multitude of skin-covered plucked instruments in the east: Iranian tar, Mongolian shang, Chinese sanxian, or Japanese shamisen, to name but a very few. Did these instruments also originate in West Africa? Why do almost all people in the world except Western Europeans groove to the music of instruments covered with sheep, snake, goat, dog, or even cat skin? I am sympathetic to Dubois: he's trying to make a case for an "evanescent" cultural phenomenon, one which we intuitively

recognize and understand, but for which historical evidence is thin. He and I own the same brand of handmade banjo, and we both enjoy playing the instrument. I suppose *The Banjo: America's African Instrument* goes some way toward clearing up confusion about the banjo's origin, but in the end it substitutes a historical summary for a thorough analysis and a truism for a conclusion.

I just finished this book. It isn't your typical banjo book. There are many good books about the instrument, but none about the cultural context in which the banjo evolved, from a gourd instrument first made by African slaves on Caribbean sugar plantations to the fancy instrument of the bluegrass, old time and folk musicians of today. It's very well written and researched. If you are interested in the history and cultures that gave us the banjo, this is the book you want to read. It covers early African origins, the banjo on the plantations and it's used by enslaved Africans, The Civil War, blackface minstrelsy, the bluegrass banjo, Pete Seeger and the folk revival, and the African American string bands. Good book!

I finished Laurent Dubois's "The Banjo - America's African Instrument" yesterday. I have to say, if you're a fan of the banjo, no matter the kind of music played on it or the number of strings, I think this is a must read. It's not heavy in the photo department, so if you like looking at books for the photos (there are some photos, and I think they're valuable), this may not be the book you'll enjoy to the ends of the earth. But if you enjoy some VERY interesting information, covering many centuries, about your favorite instrument. This book is for you. It's full of information, as we move around the world, through many years of history rarely associated with the banjo. I really enjoyed it. It had me thinking about things I don't usually reflect on, and has me respecting the banjo, on it's long long twisted path even more. I give this book five stars.

A great book on the history of the only all American instrument. A wonderful and insightful read. Recommended for all banjo players.

I really enjoyed reading this. The depth of the history of the banjo, and of the slave trade (which goes hand in hand with the history of the banjo) is pretty amazing. My only issue with this book was that when it got to the early 1900s, and talked about artists who had actually recorded their work, I had to stop every couple of minutes to look up someone else, and listen for a while. It made for enjoyable, but very slow, reading.

It is a very good book. The perspective is quite illuminating. I recommend this to all folks that love the banjo.

This is a more technical piece that would appeal to an ethnomusicologist more than to the casual banjo player. It goes into a fair amount of history of similar skin headed instruments to trace the possible origins of the banjo.

Very detailed, very in-depth history of the banjo. This is not a light read, but it is an informative one. Should go on your shelf next to all your other banjo books.

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