

第5回大会シンポジウム特集「私にとってのアメリカ音楽」

The Banjo and My American Music

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The banjo occupies a unique position in American music spanning musical genres and generations. At the same time it can be associated with specific geographical locations and historical periods. One might not expect a Midwesterner from Chicago to pick up a banjo as a first musical instrument, but family and that stage of my youth had strong connections to my musical inclinations. In the following short paper I will discuss my own musical roots and various issues related to the history and development of banjo playing.

My Background

It is not unusual for someone's musical tastes to be influenced by their family background and the music that they heard in their childhood. Woody Guthrie, for example, used many Carter Family melodies for his own compositions, having heard his mother sing their songs to him as a child. My own influences include my father who played the violin since his childhood and liked jazz such as Fats Waller, two brothers who were very much into more modern jazz, and a brother who played guitar and was influenced by rockabilly and the budding folk music revival in the 1950s.

My first musical instrument came to me as a hand-me-down from the owners of the local hardware store. They had all kinds of old instruments stored up in the rafters of their shop, and one day when I was about 11 years old, which would have been in 1960, I was presented with a cute little ukulele banjo, also known as a uke-banjo or banjolele. As the name suggests, it was a ukulele with a round body and a calfskin head like a banjo. Armed with this and an instruction book with chord diagrams, I proceeded to teach myself how to play a variety of songs beginning with the only standard "You Are My Sunshine".

That was in the midst of the folk music revival that owed much to the music of Pete Seeger and the Weavers who had a string of popular music hits beginning

with “Tzena, Tzena, Tzena”, a song originally written in Hebrew, and “Good Night Irene”, a song by Huddie Ledbetter, also known as Lead Belly. Pete Seeger played a 12-string guitar like Leadbelly’s and an open back five-string banjo with a special neck that was three frets longer than an ordinary five-string banjo. He originally carved his own long neck so that he could lower the pitch enabling everyone to join the sing-alongs that he favored at his concerts. This type of banjo is often referred to as a Pete Seeger style banjo. A standard open back banjo with gut strings, my own uke-banjo, and a long neck Vega banjo can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Three banjos: five-string/ open back Vega banjo, Gold Tone uke-banjo, long neck Pete Seeger model Vega banjo.

Seeger’s banjo playing influenced many of the people who were taken up by the folk revival. Seeger wrote his own instruction book (Seeger, 1962), which he typed himself and printed using an old-fashioned mimeograph machine. He sold these at the small halls and colleges where he played after being blacklisted for his communist leanings, no longer being able to perform at more prominent venues. Dave Guard, who played a long neck banjo for the Kingston Trio in the late 1950s, picked up a copy at a Pete Seeger concert before he went on to form that group with two of his friends (Winkler, 2009, p. 91).

The Jungheims, not being immune to this movement, also started to play folk songs around the house and at family gatherings, and lured by my second-oldest brother who bought a cheap five-string banjo at an electronics store called Radio Shack, I also bought one and studied Seeger’s instruction manual with the added support of the accompanying instructional record on which Seeger himself played.

A Very Abridged History

The banjo’s roots lie in West Africa from where it was imported by Africans who were forcibly brought to America as slaves. The original instrument could be found in a variety of shapes and sizes but was most-commonly made from a gourd with an animal skin stretched over it. You can see a gourd banjo played by Cedric Watson on youtube.com (Watson, 2014).

It took some time to establish *banjo* as the common name for the instrument. During the 17th Century the instrument was variously called a banjer, banjo, banjor, banjah, banjoe, bandjo, or banjas (See Conway, 1995, pp. 304-310, for a summary of these variations). It was only around 1833 that the name banjo stuck and the roots of modern banjo styles were being established. In 1858 *Phil Rice's Correct Method for the Banjo: With or Without a Master*, the earliest known instructional book, was published (cited in Conway, 1995, p. 204). It goes into minute detail including how the right hand should be held. One description in particular shows some similarities to Pete Seeger's explanation of frailing (Seeger, 1962), otherwise known as clawhammer banjo:

...whereas in the first method the right hand (goes) "up, down, up, down", in frailing, all the notes are plucked by the back of the fingernail as the hand moves downward; thus the movements of the right hand are all "down, down, down" (p. 29).

The former is the style I first learned to play from Pete Seeger's manual as a youth, whereas the latter frailing/clawhammer style is more commonly associated with Appalachian music. This is also a style that I finally learned at Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music only a few years ago.

Although the banjo had originally been associated with minstrelsy and Black minstrels, by the late 1800s it had become gentrified and adopted by virtuous young ladies. Used to woo their beaux, it was not really necessary to be able to play all the way to the end of a tune, if you played the first part well enough.

From that point the instrument developed into different styles of banjos such as the five-string banjo with a covering on the back called a resonator. This is used in bluegrass music and is usually played with metal picks on the fingers of the right hand. There is also the four-string tenor banjo played in jazz before the guitar overshadowed it. Similar to this is something called a plectrum banjo with a longer neck than a tenor banjo and played with a pick. Guitar players can also choose 6- and 12-string banjos that are tuned like guitars. Finally, of course, there is the open back banjo favored in Appalachia and by banjo mavens of the folk revival.

Pete Seeger originally picked up the tenor banjo to play in a jazz group when he was in high school. His letters to home at the time included requests for money to buy a "big banjo" or a "good banjo" (Seeger, 2012, p. 7-8), so he could play jazz. When he heard field recordings of traditional music, he tried to play them on his tenor banjo but was stumped (Dunway, 1981). Only then did he learn that he

should be playing a five-string banjo for that kind of music. Sometime later, his father Charles Seeger, a prominent musicologist, took him to the Ninth Annual Folk Song and Dance Festival where he could experience the five-string banjo firsthand. That was the seed for the banjo's proliferation during the folk revival of the 1950s and early 1960s.

Alive and Well

Jumping to the 21st century, the banjo continues to have a vibrant presence in American music. In recent years African-American roots musicians and even blues artists have reassessed it. One striking example is the Carolina Chocolate Drops (2012) in their original configuration that included Dom Flemons, who plays a six-string guitar banjo, and Rhiannon Giddens, who plays a five-string banjo. Another is blues artist Otis Taylor's (2008) recording *Recapturing the Banjo* that includes various modern African-American artists playing different types of music on banjos. Finally, there is the influential artist Bela Fleck who sometimes performs with his wife Abigail Washburn, the former usually playing a banjo with a resonator and the latter playing an open back banjo with gut strings in the clawhammer style (listen to Fleck & Washburn, 2014, for an example of this duo). Of course, these are only a tiny sampling of Americans enthralled with the banjo.

The banjo and banjo players continue to amaze me, and I continue to work on my own banjo playing skills. The banjo is here to stay.

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