

The Banjo: America\'s African Instrument

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Review

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Dubois, Laurent *The Banjo: America's African Instrument*. Harvard University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780674047846

A Transnational Look at the Banjo

“A national music is the spontaneous growth of ages of insulated life and feeling,” said Christopher Pearce Cranch to the Harvard Music Association in 1846. “It is impossible that American music can do more than reproduce the music of other ages...We are too much a nation of others.” Throughout American history men and women have sought to locate national characteristics in music. In Cranch’s Transcendentalist circle, those like Margaret Fuller upheld the music of indigenous communities and the enslaved as distinctly American. Meanwhile Cranch and famous music critic Theodore Dwight more often looked to Western musical traditions as the best standard of measure. In *The Banjo: America's African Instrument*, distinguished Atlantic historian Laurent Dubois offers a thoroughly modern take on an age-old theme. The banjo has been called “America’s Instrument” and Dubois locates such Americanism in the cultural processes of cooperation, appropriation, and transformation. He argues that a national instrument—and by extension a national sound—developed not from insularity, but from an incredible mixture of peoples and classes found within the greater Atlantic world.

Dubois traces the origins of the banjo from the variety of lutes and harps found in ancient Egypt as well as in Spain and northern, western, and central Africa in the Middle Ages. The record of such instruments is admittedly sparse, but through the use of an impressive array of visual, textual, and material sources *The Banjo* highlights a vibrant fusion of musical cultures. However the “cross-pollination” between European and African musicians was removed from many written accounts starting in the fifteenth century. (23) A market in individuals from the African continent fostered the erasure: “The belief in racial and cultural difference was both sustained and reinforced by the new interaction

between the continents...the slave trade.” (29)

In ports and cities from Cuba and Brazil to Haiti and Louisiana a cohesive African identity was forged for the first time. Enslavers were slow to recognize regional, lingual, or cultural differences among their slaves. They understood the diverse peoples from whom they profited more readily as African. The name of a continent came to represent a nationalism that had not yet developed. Enslaved individuals in search of ways to bear the traumatic dislocation and violence of the slave trade often found solace or at least forbearance in music and dance. The banjo proved central to this tradition and “it was the first African instrument.” (52)

Dubois situates the banjo as the creolized product of the Atlantic slave trade—this is a strength of the book. The reader tours the complicated force of music and dance as a means of resistance and persistence by enslaved men and women in Guadeloupe and Martinique, Jamaica, and, in North America, New York. The vivid depictions of banjo performance lead to questions on the performative aspect of enslavement. From slave ships where the crew demanded women dance and men sing to plantations where masters and mistresses commanded concerts on demand (think of the recent film depiction of fiddle playing and dance in Steve McQueen’s *Twelve Years a Slave*) the performance that accompanied human enslavement has yet to receive a full exploration. Here Dubois acknowledges the longstanding debate among white observers on whether banjo performance among the enslaved indicated contentment, disappointment, or defiance. How performance served the relationships of power between enslaver and enslaved deserves a more thorough assessment.

As one of the greatest slave societies in human history, the nineteenth-century United States was unavoidably influenced by the practice of black human enslavement. And the deeper Atlantic context provided by Dubois begins to chip away at the most complex cultural riddle in American history: the development and outsized support for blackface minstrels between 1830 and 1850. What happened when the performance of the enslaved moved to the cultural marketplace? Dubois largely turns away from the global interactions that mark the opening of the book toward more traditional explanations for the minstrel phenomenon. It was a combination of adoration and appropriation by white Americans (“love and theft” to use the words of Eric Lott). Working class men and women recognized their street culture—their street music—in the sounds of the banjo. Racism was important too. Of course no less an expert on

American enslavement than Frederick Douglass was also confused by minstrelsy. He once accused white performers who blacked their faces and played instruments such as the banjo as “the filthy scum of white society who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature.” Four years later, in 1852, he changed his mind. “We have allies in the Ethiopian songs,” he said. “They awaken the sympathies for the slave, in which anti-slavery principles take root, grow and flourish.”

Douglass, like most individuals of the antebellum United States, was torn by the fast-pace of change. The commercialization of culture, in particular music, was one such transformation. A market revolution that connected North Americans to regions and nations near and far wrought consequences that historians have yet to fully unpack. The centrality of white consumers to cultural performance profoundly shaped the sounds heard on stage. Industrialization, which altered the very process of banjo making, was important too. And what should we make of the college banjo orchestras whose players often dressed in all white? At the same time, the emancipation of slaves in the Americas in the nineteenth century no doubt had important ramifications for banjo performance throughout the Atlantic world. For the most part Dubois leaves such material for another day. He opts instead to take the reader to the twentieth century where Appalachians and Civil Rights musicians continued to change the meanings and purposes of the banjo.

In this book Dubois offers readers a rich look into an archive of instruments and performances that expands our understandings of slave culture, American music, and the processes of acculturation. It is a wonderful addition to the literature and will cultivate interest beyond the confines of undergraduate and graduate classrooms.

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