RING THE BANJO!

In popular folklore the banjo is often recognized as "the only indigenous American musical instrument," but that is not strictly true. Americans did standardize it as a five-string instrument of certain typical specifications, but the concept of the banjo as known today is not American, but African, and even there probably derivative of Asian instruments brought by Arab traders. It is unlikely that any tribal banjos came to North American shores with slaves, but where music was allowed these designs quickly reappeared from memory, varying considerably in size, construction, stringing, and also in methods of tuning and playing.

Banjos were strictly black instruments before about 1820, but the popularity among white audiences of the minstrel show, which peaked from 1820 to 1870, changed all that. Initially the minstrel show remarked topically on the popular music and storytelling of plantation blacks. Its lighthearted humor and rhythmic melodies caught the attention of audiences across America and, by 1860, all over the English speaking world from England to Australia. And no minstrel show was complete without a banjo player who could second the fiddle and accompany musical comedy skits like "The Arkansaw Traveller":

Farmer (holding banjo): "Not much 'tween you and a fool, is there?"

Traveller (wittily): "That there banjar is all I see!"

Unfortunately, whites could not easily accept black musicians performing their own entertainments. The corks-face sham which minstrelsy became in American society disregarded the reality of plantation life, and established the happy-go-lucky buck-toothed black song and dancer as a primary "nigger" stereotype. The tragic result of this charade was that blacks immediately abandoned their own instrument. At the turn of the century very few were proficient on the banjo—at least in public—and virtually all of the traditional playing styles were lost or irretrievably mixed with mongrel minstrel techniques.

As a result of increasing numbers of white musicians, more music, and more banjo makers, the instrument gradually became standardized. By 1875, if not before, the format of The Banjo had been set: a five-string instrument, including four melody strings and a drone string, or chanterelle; a "pot" or body measuring eight to fourteen inches in diameter; the vibrating string length, or scale, of twenty to thirty inches; a skin

1. From the French chanter, "to sing," the same etymology as proposed for the singer's expression "sea chantey." Joel Walker Sweeney, a black banjoist of the mid-1800's is often credited with the addition of the chanterelle, but it is more likely that Sweeney added a low melody string to a previously existing four-string design which included the drone string.

CFB 31
head, fastened with tacks; fingerboard of planed wood without raised fret wires; strings of gut or silk cord tuned to various pitches depending on the size of the instrument and the local standard, but most commonly \( \text{EAEGB} \) (or some derivative). Other banjo designs gradually disappeared, including the apparently popular seven-string banjo. In three decades, 1880 to 1910, the banjo evolved from a rough, limited instrument to a mature, sophisticated vehicle for performing all the great music of the Western world. "Society" accepted it, playing clubs were established, periodicals founded, tutors published, and sheet music of all kinds both classical and popular printed by the thousands. Most American cities (and many Canadian, and English) could display some sort of banjo orchestra and some frontier towns likewise became centres of banjo activity. The instruments themselves were made larger and smaller and tuned higher and lower in order to reproduce the parts of all orchestra instruments, from the cello and bass banjos to the tiny piccolo banjos and banjaurines. As many as thirty or forty banjoists might crowd a single orchestra, and the "best" parlours in any city could be expected to have a banjo on hand. Fret wire was added to the fingerboard to insure correct notation, and bright steel strings began to erode the dominance of frail gut and silk. Sometime around 1890 modern "C notation" tuning (based on \( \text{GCGBD} \))

Continuation of Tradition: Nineteenth Century fretless banjo (rear) marks the beginnings of banjo making techniques in the American South. Banjo in foreground was made in 1968 by Homer Ledford of Winchester, Kentucky.
Nineteenth Century banjo on display at the Centennial Museum in Vancouver, showing the early method of connecting the resonator to the tension hoop which secures the skin head. Underside of tailpiece is stamped “JB” and other marks on the neck suggest that it may be from the J.H. Buckbee banjo manufactory of New York.

was acknowledged superior to “A notation” (the aforementioned EAEGB), and this higher tuning brightened the sound of the banjo, though it made obsolete all of the fine “A notation” sheet music which could no longer be performed without laborious transposition into the new keys.

This era of sophisticated, moneyed sponsorship led to the creation of the classic American art banjos that are so revered by collectors and players today: the Stewarts, Fairbanks & Coles, Dobsons, and later the Fairbanks “Electric” and “Whyte Laydie,” the Orpheum banjo, the Bacon “Professional” and “Grand Concert,” the Cole’s “Eclipse,” and the Farland banjo. These latter instruments were considered superior to earlier models because of improvements in the construction of the “pot” and the addition in most of a brass “tone ring” which rested under the skin head on a narrow ledge constructed for that purpose. The tone ring amplified and beautified the vibrations set into the head by the plucked strings.

After 1910 the banjo diversified to meet changing musical taste. The four-string plectrum and tenor banjos gained popularity and the five-string fell into obscurity, so that even today there are many who believe the now-revived five-string to be a recent spinoff of the four-string design—just the opposite of truth! The development of the orchestral banjo from 1910 to 1930 paralleled a demand for high volume and more bell-like tone quality. The closed back, or “resonator,” first built in the 1860’s or earlier, came into its own as the best method of forcing outward the sound waves that would otherwise be lost the player’s body mass. Tone ring improvements culminated in the patenting of several designs whose trade names stand yet as the ultimate in craftsmanship and tone: the Vega “Tu-ba-phone,” the Bacon & Day “Silver Bell,” the Gibson “Master-tone,” and unnamed designs by Paramount, Weymann, Epiphone, Clifford Essex (an English firm), and Stromberg.

This volume and clarity was needed by musicians of the new “jazz” bands. The sedate dance orchestras that had waltzed their listeners to violin and mandolin melodies suddenly found themselves besieged by requests for the snappy
new syncopations. The banjo provided a perfect rhythm when played with a plectrum (lately called a "flat pick"), but the regular banjo was hampered by its own hallmark; the drone string. Playing loudly and briskly with a flat pick, even the best players could not avoid the unwanted chanterelle, since it was the first string contacted by the pick on its downward flight. About 1920 the plectrum banjo came into being, and it was identical in every respect to the five-string banjo, except that it had only the four melody strings.

The tenor banjo, developed at the same time for the same use, became a mainstay for orchestral violinists and mandolinists who could quickly adapt to its short neck (17 or 19 instead of 22 frets) and violin/mandolin tuning. Tenor and plectrum banjos caused a new wave of public interest in America's "own" instrument, and the four-string banjo was as much at home in the hoopla of the Twenties as the raccoon coat and the "Charleston."

And in this decade also the oddball hybrids were born—banjos with guitar necks, mandolin necks, ukelele necks; guitars with banjo necks; mandolins with banjo necks—even at least one 12-string fretless guitar-banjo! None of these curiosities proved very successful, though the 6-string guitar-banjo is still heard on occasion.

During the Great Depression the banjo gave way to the smooth, cautious rhythm of the "f-hole" or orchestra guitar, whose tone dovetailed perfectly with the blended orchestrations of the emerging "big band" era. By 1945 the tenor and plectrum banjos belonged only in polka bands and the occasional Dixieland jazz group, and the five-string had been forgotten altogether... except in the southern mountains of the United States.

The original fretless five-string design had entered tradition there before 1870, brought to the isolated rural hamlets of Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee and neighboring states by returning Civil War veterans, itinerant travelling musicians (many of whom were newly-freed black slaves), and by the occasional minstrel troupe. The banjo made a perfect foil for the fiddle, complementing its melody rhythmically and adding a high droning sound that appealed to rural musical values. The banjo-fiddle combination catalyzed the development of string band music and many locally respected banjoists made broad reputations when the infant recording industry took to the hills in the 1920's looking for regional business. These players became the source for much of what is now known about folk banjo styles, and some of their names, among them Wade Ward, Bascom Lamar Lunsford, Buell Kazee, Charlie Poole, Tom Ashley, and Uncle Dave Macon are considered heroic today.

String band music led directly to bluegrass, a finely-honed performance style developed in the 1940's to reinvigorate the stagnating state of mountain music. The innovative three-finger picking of Earl Scruggs, Snuffy Jenkins and others filled an important role in reaffirming the tradition of the five-string banjo, and bluegrass in turn played a major part in captivating urban audiences who first heard the
banjo during the folk music revival of the 50’s and 60’s. Initial interest in bluegrass or the older playing style of Pete Seeger led these urban banjoists back to the mountains where they discovered the American five-string banjo tradition at least alive, if not well.

Since that revival began, and since the 1948 publication and subsequent reprintings of Seeger’s *How to Play the 5-String Banjo*, the popularity of the instrument is once again assured. Currently popular playing styles include bluegrass (patterned finger-picking using two fingers and thumb), old-time fingerpicking (one or two fingers and thumb and less patterned), and frailing or “clawhammer” banjo (a combination of note-picking and brushing in a characteristic “rump-tiddly-rump” rhythm). Irish musicians also make great use of the plectrum and tenor banjos as melody instruments in performing the speedy jigs, reels, and hornpipes traditional to Irish dance.

A particular banjo will suit one style perfectly and others less well. A bluegrass banjo, for instance, equipped with a ringing brass tone ring, wooden resonator and a tight mylar head is most suitable to the punchy, staccato fingerpicking styles of bluegrass. Its tone generally would be considered too “bright,” its light strings too “bouncy” to be an effective frailer. Old-time banjoists prefer an open-back banjo with heavier strings (less bright but steadier when frailed or picked loudly), and a calfskin or slightly loosened mylar head. Irish melodies virtually demand a flat pick approach, so the four-string banjos are preferred for that music. Steel strings are used for all types of folk playing, though nylon strings are available and are making modest headway, together with an equally modest revival of the “classical” banjo stylings of seventy-five years ago, perpetuated by members of the American Banjo Fraternity. The ABF counts among its enrollment a number of older musicians who learned classical banjo in their youth.4

The banjo will suit any purpose. It’s the most raucous of all the North American folk instruments, and yet the most gentle and meditative, as well. The banjo befriends the banjoist in solitude and loneliness, on leaving and on being left, in confusion, anger, or joy, and it can be picked over the top of thirty rowdy musicians just to make some noise! It’s the most cheerful instrument in the world, and in the hands of a skilled musician, there’s power and expression and plenty of haunting beauty too, in among those four and a half strings.

*Robert Webb*

**Instruction Books**

These are just three of about 50 available, which may get a new picker started in the right direction:

*Clawhammer Banjo*, by Miles Krassen, Oak Publications, 33 W. 60th St., New York. (the tastiest frailing tunes yet in tablature, with emphasis on the Virginia/North Carolina style of picking)

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4. For membership information contact Beatrice I. Kentner 2665 Woodstock Rd., Columbus, Ohio 43221
Old Time Mountain Banjo, by Art Rosenbaum, Oak. (covers old-time frailing and fingerpicking styles, with good basic tablature)

Starting Bluegrass Banjo From Scratch, by Wayne Erbsen, Pembroke Music, 62 Cooper Square, New York 10003 (Wayne's a fine picker and teacher and gets you off on the right foot)

There's a hundred others, including Scrugg's, John Burke's, and so on. And don't forget the American monthly publications like Pickin' (1 Saddle Road, Cedar Knolls, NJ 07927), Frets, (Box 615 Saratoga, CA 95070) and the excellent Banjo Newsletter (1310 Hawkins Lane, Annapolis, MD 21401).

I would be remiss if I did not also include an erudite, whimsical volume of newly-composed banjo tunes by Curt Bouterse of San Diego, California, which includes among its beautifully hand-lettered pages his infamous "Nixon's Farewell" which has become a cause celebre among west coast string band musicians. It's called Nixon's Farewell & 10... and is available from the author, 4676 Florida St., San Diego, CA 92116 at $3 US each.

Nylon Strings

Inquire about the availability of "Senorita" brand nylon strings made by E & O Mari, Inc., 38-01 23rd Avenue, Long Island City, NY 11105.

Note: The author would be happy to answer specific queries about the banjo not covered in this article, and may be reached by writing c/o CFB, 337 Carrall St., Vancouver, B.C. In addition, he would like to obtain information concerning banjos and banjo history in Canada.