



## Extension Activity - How the Banjo Became White

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*Below are excerpts from a keynote address she gave at the 2017 International Bluegrass Music Association Conference, where she discusses the erasure of African Americans in the history of bluegrass, a genre that predominantly features the banjo.*



So more and more of late, the question has been asked: how do we get more diversity in bluegrass? Which of course, behind the hand, is really, why is bluegrass so white??? But the answer doesn't lie in right now. Before we can look to the future, we need to understand the past. To understand how the banjo, which was once the ultimate symbol of African American musical expression, has done a 180 in popular understanding and become the emblem of the mythical white mountaineer—even now, in the age of Mumford and Sons, and Béla Fleck in Africa, and Taj Mahal's "Colored Aristocracy," the average person on the street sees a banjo and still thinks *Deliverance*, or *The Beverly Hillbillies*.

In order to understand the history of the banjo and the history of bluegrass music, we need to move beyond the narratives we've inherited, beyond generalizations that bluegrass is mostly derived from a Scots-Irish tradition, with "influences" from Africa. It is actually a complex creole music that comes from multiple cultures, African and European and Native; the full truth that is so much more interesting, and American.

When I first got into string-band music I felt like such an interloper. It was like I was "sneaking" into this music that wasn't my own. It's a weird feeling—I constantly felt the awkwardness of being the "raisin in the oatmeal" in the contra dance world, in the old-time world, and in the bluegrass world. Whenever I brought out my fiddle or banjo, or my calling cards to call a dance, no matter where I was, I still felt like the "other."

I remember so vividly the first time I saw one of Marshall Wyatt's superb compilations called *Folks He Sure Do Pull Some Bow* and seeing a picture of a black fiddler and freaking out—I had stumbled upon the hidden legacy of the black string band and I wanted to know more. Shortly after, I met Joe Thompson and realized that by picking up my banjo and by calling a dance I had joined an enormously long and almost forgotten line of black dance band musicians who helped create an indigenous American music and dance culture; of barn dances, corn shuckings, plantation balls, and riverboat and house parties.



In countless areas of the south, usually the poorer ones not organized around plantation life, working-class whites and blacks lived near each other; and, while they may have not have been marrying each other, they were quietly creating a new, common music. The Reverend Jonathan Boucher, who emigrated to England after the Revolutionary War, wrote a definition of the banjo in his dictionary published in the late 18th century. It says the banjo is “a musical instrument, in use chiefly, if not entirely, among people of the lower classes.”

So there’s this incredible cultural swirl going on here, [but] this was not the picture I was painted as a child! I grew up thinking the banjo was invented in the mountains, that string-band music and square dances were a strictly white preserve and history, that while black folk were singing spirituals and playing the blues, white folk were do-si-do’ing and fiddling up a storm—and never the twain did meet—which led me to feeling like an alien in what I find out is my own cultural tradition. But by 1900 this cross-cultural music was all over the South, not just the Appalachians, and a common repertoire was played by black and white musicians, not to mention regional styles, which often cared nothing for race. My own mentor Joe Thompson constantly talked about white musicians who lived in his area who he learned tunes from, and there was a constant stream of local white musicians who learned from and played with him, in what turns out is the great American tradition.

So what happened to change the paradigm so quickly between the turn of the century and the advent of bluegrass? Well, to begin with, there was the Great Migration. Six million Black southerners like my Great-Aunt Ruth decided to leave an economically depressed and racially depressing South for the mythical better life up North—and they took their families, food, and folkways with them—but in most cases they left that old-time string-band music behind. Newly arrived folks to New York, Chicago, and other Northern cities suddenly found that their lives were shaped by a totally different rhythm—an urban rhythm—that precluded corn shuckings and other rural events that would have required the familiar string band sounds they were used to.

in addition, in the early 1900s the black community had shifting musical tastes—it was a time of great innovation and a proliferation of styles that would greatly affect the American cultural landscape. African American culture began a pattern of always innovating, always moving on to the next new sounds. The five-string banjo became, up North, a dazzling urban instrument that played jazz and ragtime, and, with its cousin the tenor banjo, became a mainstay of the dance orchestras until it was eventually replaced by the guitar by the 1930s, only to be eventually forgotten in the memories of urban blacks.

What is often left out of this story, however, is that not everybody left the South: there were plenty of black folk who remained behind, and there were still black players of string-band music, despite the burgeoning popularity of the blues guitar. By some accounts, half of all string bands at the turn of the century were black. So why does it take a diving mission to find them? Were they recorded? It turns out they were—far less than we’d like, but more than people know—but never to be a mainstay of the body of recordings that form the basis of commercial country music and a foundation for bluegrass.



Before the invention of the phonograph and the attendant records, the music industry consisted of sheet music—popular songs of the day to be played yourself, and they chiefly consisted of patriotic and sentimental songs, minstrel songs, and orchestra pieces. But when the record industry was born, a whole new way of consuming American music was invented that was intended to make this new product easier to sell. Ralph Peer led the vanguard of A&R executives who would have a big hand in transforming how we think of our music; in his hands (and others) the musical genre was born. They saw that black consumers were loving the blues, and in 1920 the first “race” records were put out. Two years later they created the “hillbilly” market for rural Southern whites. In a musical market that had previously been dominated by professional compositions, it was a triumph for the working man that music “of the people,” vernacular music, began to be recorded.

One can celebrate this shift in the music industry while grieving the fact that in instituting these artificial categories, even if based on observed contemporary trends and assumptions, these record companies had a huge hand in the rapid segregation of American music. Columbia, Vocalion, and others would set up recording sessions, after advertising in local papers, where on one day they would record white musicians, and on the next, black musicians. If a black string band walked up to a session only knowing fiddle tunes, even if, as often was the case, they pulled from a common Southern repertoire that both black and white musicians knew, they’d more often than not be sent away if they didn’t play the blues. The record companies had the power, and they wielded it at will—as Ralph Peer himself was quoted saying in 1959, “I invented the Hillbilly and the Negro stuff.” Except, of course, that he didn’t say “Negro.”

These promotional efforts reinforced a simultaneous nationwide movement towards creating a mythic white American history. A 1927 newspaper advertisement said that Columbia’s hillbilly series Familiar Tunes Old and New were for those who “get tired of modern dance music—fox-trots, jazz, Charleston—and long for the good old barn dances and the Saturday night music of the South in plantation days.” Seems that everybody ignored the irony that the players for these blessed events would have uniformly been black in the “good old days.” Noted xenophobe Henry Ford founded fiddle competitions, but forbade blacks to enter; likewise White Top and Bascom Lamar Lunsford’s Asheville Folk Festivals in the twenties were off limits to the melanin. There was an effort to repaint Appalachia as this completely homogenous society that was a direct unsullied line back to the old country, whether England, Scotland, or Ireland. This is a region that has always historically had a black population, in some places as high as 20 percent before the Great Migration, and is clearly a place where musical and cultural exchanges have been going on for a long time.

Folklorists and song collectors at the time also had a huge hand in the creation of this myth; Cecil Sharp, founder of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, was one of the first to brave the Appalachian mountains in search of it. With Maud Karpeles he spent three years in the Appalachian mountains, recording families and making much of what he found there—but only the white folks. Now by the time they got to western North Carolina, the black population wasn’t as high as it was, but that’s only part of the reason there’s no black representation in his collections, which influenced everyone who came after; they just plain didn’t like black people. This abounds in their writings. My favorite



quote is this one; after a long hard hike looking for the most isolated homesteads to record, they caught sight of some likely looking log cabins. Sharp says: “We tramped, a very hard and warm walk, mainly uphill. When we reached the cove we found it peopled entirely by negroes!! All our trouble and spent energy for naught.” Except of course, he didn’t say negroes.

My goal here, today, is to say that what makes this bluegrass, old-time, and other forms of music so powerful is that there is room for everyone to explore these incredible traditions. I want people to understand—that recognizing the African American presence within these traditions does not come at the expense of trying to erase all of the other tradition bearers who have already received so much of our attention. I want to celebrate the greater diversity of the people who have shaped the music that is so much a part of my identity. I want the public to appreciate this string band music, this bluegrass music, as a creole music that comes from many influences—a beautiful syncretization of the cultures that call this country home. I don’t want to minimize, trivialize, or ignore anyone’s passion to explore this music. I just want them to understand, as fully as possible, the entire picture! If we are going to embrace greater diversity in bluegrass music, then we must be willing to acknowledge the best and worst parts of tradition.

It is important to what is going on right now to stress the musical brother- and sisterhood we have had for hundreds of years; for every act of cultural appropriation, of financial imbalance, of the erasure of names and faces, of the outside attempt to create artificial division and sow hatred, simply to keep us down so that the powers-that-be can continue to enjoy the fruits of our labor, there are generous acts of working class cultural exchange taking place in the background. These exchanges are indelible parts of this music. It’s not about the “influence” of African Americans; we didn’t “shade” the tunes with some contributions of syncopations and flatted sevenths; in actuality the great stream of string-band music that stretches back to hundreds of years ago, and that reaches forward to that great moment in 1945, is part of the foundation of what truly makes America great. It’s not just Washington, Lincoln, Douglass, and King. It’s also the untold thousands of ordinary folk playing banjos, fiddles, guitars, mandolins, basses, and everything else they could get their hands on—to make life a better place.

#### Questions:

- 1) Why might have Giddens felt like an “interloper” when playing banjo or fiddle?
- 2) What reasons does Giddens give on why Bluegrass and the banjo became more associated with whites than blacks?
- 3) Giddens suggests many who traveled North during the Great Migration left the banjo behind. What might the instrument have represented that some wished to shed when moving from a rural to an urban environment?
- 4) What were “Race” and “Hillbilly” records?
- 5) What is Giddens’s ultimate message in this speech?