

A DOCUMENT GUIDE TO THE BANJO PLAYERS 1900 -2008

The banjo is a little like corn-licker; you either love it or loathe it – but you can't ignore it. Since its gradual evolution across the centuries the sound of the banjo, in its various forms, has permeated into folk, jazz, blues, country and gospel music and made stars of many of those who chose to play the instrument.

According to master banjo player Earl Scruggs, the banjo had its origins in Arabia thousands of years ago: it consisted of a skin 'head' stretched over a hollow body and strung with three strings. This instrument was carried to the East with the spread of Islam. Negro slaves brought it to the United States from Africa.

Other instruments similar to the banjo have existed in India (the ravenastron) and Egypt (where it was known as a banit) but other names associated with it include bangie, banza, banjer and banjar. In general terms the four and five-string banjo has found most favour with folk musicians and one Joel Walker Sweeney is usually credited with 'inventing' the true American banjo but this now seems doubtful. In 1830 Sweeney, a native of Appomattox, Virginia, supposedly made a revolutionary modification by adding a fifth string, or chanterelle, higher in pitch and next to the lowest pitched string and secured by a peg halfway up the neck. This 'new' instrument became extremely popular throughout the United States, where it held a place in the affections of ordinary people throughout the nineteenth century.

Although Joel Sweeney's name is legendary and he will be forever linked with the five-string banjo, watercolour paintings executed long before his time depict the fifth string on plantation banjos.

Earl Scruggs, of course, is credited with inventing the celebrated three-finger style of banjo playing now such an integral part of Bluegrass music but Scruggs merely honed to perfection an already familiar method of finger picking.

The names of great banjo players literally pepper the annals of folk, blues, jazz and other idioms and we can look to such as Banjo Ikey Robinson, Charlie Poole, Walt Koken, Uncle Dave Macon, Gus Cannon, Ralph Stanley, Dock Boggs, Pete Seeger, Bela Fleck, Doc Walsh, Snuffy Jenkins, John Hartford and Smith Hammed for immortalising this once humble instrument. Uncle Dave Macon was the doyen of early country banjo pickers but his playing probably owed more to flamboyant showmanship than dextrous fingerwork. Nevertheless, Macon became a Grand Ole Opry superstar and is honoured in the Country Music Hall of Fame.

The five-string banjo has become synonymous with Bluegrass and old-timey country music, the latter employing the clawhammer-style of playing in the manner of Grandpa Jones and Rik Palieri, but the four-string instrument was the preferred choice of minstrel bands, dance ensembles, jazz orchestras and solo blues artists. The early banjos used hemp or gut for strings and produced a 'dull' but rhythmic sound but once wire strings had been perfected and adapted for use with the banjo, this ancient instrument took on a whole new dimension and elevated status.

Much as Larry Adler had given credibility to the harmonica (or mouthorgan) and through his masterful playing had taken the instrument from the toy cupboard to the concert hall, the likes of Harry Reser and Earl Scruggs gave respectability to the much-maligned banjo. Even to this day anti-banjo jokes abound but seem mostly confined within Bluegrass circles. In the hands of a novice or ham-fisted picker the banjo can sound somewhat tedious but when artists like Gus Cannon, Banjo Ikey Robinson, Dave 'Stringbean' Akeman, Little Roy Lewis, J.D. Crowe and Doc Watson hit the vellum, any doubts are instantly swept away.

In terms of commercial success the banjo has suffered its ups and downs and by the turn of the twentieth century the five-string fell from favour. Musicians gradually eliminated the fifth string, the neck was shortened and the head enlarged. This modified instrument became known as the 'tenor' banjo and was a popular feature of jazz bands. Even the popularity of the tenor-banjo waned and by the end of the 1930s, no banjos at all were being manufactured in America.

Earl Scruggs (as part of Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys) revived the five-string banjo on the Grand Ole Opry in 1945, when he introduced 'his' dynamic three-finger style of picking but elsewhere the four-string tenor-banjo held its ground as the mainstay of jazz and dance bands and a select number of highly acclaimed soloists, among whom must be included Michael Gaffney, Neil Nolan, Jimmy Kelly and Barney McKenna.

Various movies and television series, including 'Deliverance', 'Bonnie & Clyde', 'The Beverly Hillbillies' and 'O, Brother, Where Art Thou?', have all enhanced the overall image of the banjo with catchy themes and cameos but these productions span a modest fifty years. The aforementioned kicked the five-string banjo into high-gear but Document's 'Guide' is much more eclectic and puts the instrument's unique diversity into focus. It was the late Grandpa Jones who sang 'The Banjo Am The Instrument' and who could possibly argue with that sentiment?

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