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# Book Review: That Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo In American Popular Culture

William Jolliff

George Fox University, [wjolliff@georgefox.edu](mailto:wjolliff@georgefox.edu)

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## BOOK REVIEWS

by William Jolliff

*That Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo In American Popular Culture*, by Karen Linn. Univ. of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL, 1994.

*African Banjo Echoes In Appalachia: A Study Of Folk Traditions*, by Cecelia Conway. Univ. of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, TN, 1995.

These two recent studies demonstrate the growing academic interest in the history and development of the banjo, and both make intriguing—if sometimes difficult—reading for banjo devotees.

In the years just before the Civil War, the banjo was popularly associated with African-American slaves and with their black-faced imitators, professional minstrel show players. But it was also a popular instrument among white amateur musicians—so popular, in fact, that a single banjo tournament in New York City in 1857 drew over 3000 fans to support their neighborhood favorites. Beginning at this point, Karen Linn's *That Half-Barbaric Twang* studies the public perception of the banjo—its complex and changing image in American culture.

Her first focus is the late 19th-century movement to "elevate" the banjo. Convinced that its African origins and minstrel "ham" associations limited the banjo's future, visionaries like S. S. Stewart roasted the minstrel performers in their publications. They argued for a more serious approach to banjo music, and even attempted to attract a "better" social class of players by creating banjos that were themselves works of art—and by giving them names like "Electric,"

"Imperial," and "Thoroughbred." Naturally they championed both the banjo fad among society women in the 1880s and the college craze of the 1890s—when banjo clubs became more popular on campus.

For all of their apparent success, Stewart and the rest did not succeed in propelling the banjo into what Linn calls the "official" cultural of modernism and progress. On the contrary, Linn maintains that the banjo playing in these sophisticated circles was nothing more than a socially safe reaction against the dominant culture. Banjo playing among the elite was their expression of what Linn calls the "sentimental" culture, opposed to and yet subsumed within the values of the "official" culture. The dominant image of the banjo remained Southern, African, and primitive; and it persisted as the image of choice for sophisticates who wanted mild rebellion, or for artists and advertisers who wanted to evoke the mythical Old South.

Another attempt to improve the image of the banjo resulted in what Linn calls its "modernization" in the early 20th century. During this period, the 5-string was modified into the very popular mandolin-banjo, the plectrum banjo, and, ultimately, the "tango" or tenor banjo. Manufacturers dropped their notions of "elevating" their instruments into society and instead presented the banjo as a great way for working class musicians to make money. Indeed, the sound of the modified instruments projected and recorded well, and as a result, the banjo became a mainstay of the jazz age—but, given the popular perceptions of jazz, that popularity added yet another set of rebellious associations.

Linn's final chapter addresses how popular culture came to perceive the banjo as a southern white instrument. When folklore scholars and popularizers began to characterize Southern Highlanders as existing in a kind of Elizabethan time warp, the banjo became one of the images of the mythical white mountain south. With its moral edges already questionable, the banjo's image developed as the instrument of the "wild boys and men—the antithesis of the genteel, feminine dulcimer. And while this may have put off popularizers looking for Elizabethan Edens, it created a type of image which would contribute to the persona of such pickers as Charlie Poole and even Uncle Dave Macon. This chapter is a heady piece

of historical analysis—suffice it to say that once again the banjo stood outside the "official values" of mainstream culture.

As the study reaches into the present, Linn's commentary on the current state of the banjo is compelling, though too brief. She analyzes, among other things, Earl Scrugg's separation of the banjo from the minstrel image and Pete Seeger's use of the banjo as a metaphor for the common man. Of particular interest, too, is her analysis of a situation that many of us have felt: the apparent social distance between contemporary bluegrass and old-timey banjo players. Linn suggests that while both groups nurture images of the banjo that are "oppositional"—that suggest identification with the "sentimental" instead of the "official" culture—they do so in very different ways—and by way of different histories.

Linn's explanations strike a resonant chord with me, and it is encouraging to see a scholar doing some serious thinking about the things that many of us wonder about on the way home from a festival. It's hard to imagine banjo players reading this book without gaining new understanding of themselves, of where they fit in this culture, and maybe even of what makes them pick.

Folklorist Cecelia Conway's *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia* is also an historical study, but its thesis is a musical one: she argues for the preeminence of the African tradition in the development of American banjo playing. To do so, she analyzes the written history of the banjo in African-American traditions. She studies the impact of slaves' banjo playing on white professional entertainers, primarily minstrels, and charts the avenues of cultural exchange—the circuses and medicine shows and everyday interaction—which allowed the transmission of the banjo from black folk to mountain white folk. In addition, she studies the banjo as an artifact—from African gourd instruments to more modern, durable creations. Of special interest to pickers, she demonstrates the stylistic influence of black playing on the white mountain banjo styles of the present and outlines a distinct genre of "banjo songs," which she demonstrates in the work of one particular banjo man, Dink Roberts.

Throughout the book, Conway's more traditionally academic descriptions of African-American banjo playing are studied in light of her field work with three



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players in the tradition—Roberts, John Snipes, and Odell Thompson. As she explains, "Their traditions and practices [provide] a means for reaching beyond the written records to an understanding of a continuous strand of African-American musical culture, its impact upon white tradition, especially in the Southeast and in Appalachia, and its contribution to American folk music" (p. 285). What results from her study, then, is not only a convincing argument about the dominant African-American influence, but an engaging portrayal of a living, pre-blues banjo tradition and a saga of the evolution of banjo styles and song genres.

Possibly the most intriguing thread in Conway's argument is that of the transmission of banjo technique from black folk to white folk. Conway asserts the view that white minstrels learned the craft from black players, and that white mountain players, in turn, learned what has become old-time mountain banjo from the minstrels. She concludes that much of

the influence once attributed to minstrel sources is in fact a direct influence of African-American playing on the mountain style. More musical contact, she argues, occurred between mountain whites and blacks than between mountain whites and minstrels. Her analysis reveals that the playing styles of white mountain folk are closer to black folk than to those of the minstrel entertainers.

Conway's contribution here is considerable. She changes the way we value the African-American tradition in the evolution of banjo playing. In addition, she makes available a wealth of first-hand banjo material—a gift made all the more poignant by her Epilogue, in which she recounts the deaths of the last three black banjo players in the tradition. But most of all, she demonstrates the degree to which banjo playing—"an emblem of white mountain folk"—is in fact a marriage of black and white musical traditions. In spite of all constraints, banjo-picking forbears crossed the boundaries of class and race, creating a democratic, non-commercially mediated, highly sophisticated art form.

—5-SQ—William Jolliff