



The Banjo: America's African Instrument

By Laurent Dubois

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The banjo has been called by many names over its history, but they all refer to the same sound—strings humming over skin—that has eased souls and electrified crowds for centuries. *The Banjo* invites us to hear that sound afresh in a biography of one of America's iconic folk instruments. Attuned to a rich heritage spanning continents and cultures, Laurent Dubois traces the banjo from humble origins, revealing how it became one of the great stars of American musical life.

In the seventeenth century, enslaved people in the Caribbean and North America drew on their memories of varied African musical traditions to construct instruments from carved-out gourds covered with animal skin. Providing a much-needed sense of rootedness, solidarity, and consolation, banjo picking became an essential part of black plantation life. White musicians took up the banjo in the nineteenth century, when it became the foundation of the minstrel show and began to be produced industrially on a large scale. Even as this instrument found its way into rural white communities, however, the banjo remained central to African American musical performance.

Twentieth-century musicians incorporated the instrument into styles ranging from ragtime and jazz to Dixieland, bluegrass, reggae, and pop. Versatile and enduring, the banjo combines rhythm and melody into a single unmistakable sound that resonates with strength and purpose. From the earliest days of American history, the banjo's sound has allowed folk musicians to create community and joy even while protesting oppression and injustice.

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The Banjo: America's African Instrument By Laurent Dubois Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #155578 in Books
- Published on: 2016-03-14
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.30" h x 1.40" w x 6.10" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 384 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

Dubois attempts to trace the evolution of the modern instrument from its African antecedents to the present day, prudently noting that a linear account is likely to be misleading...There is enough anecdote and lore to satisfy both the casual and the specialist reader. (Lou Glandfield *Times Literary Supplement* 2016-04-01)

Dubois relates here a history of the instrument that is both learned and entertaining. His enthusiasm shines through every page. (John Check *Weekly Standard* 2016-03-14)

[A] riveting history of the banjo...While the story Dubois tells is primarily historical and sociological, it is also musical, and he never lets us forget the magical hum that distinguishes the banjo from the guitar and other stringed instruments...Dubois combines erudition with obvious enjoyment. His limpid prose easily bears the weight of his impressive research. (Tom Gilling *The Australian* 2016-04-09)

This is one of the very best books on the banjo published to date...It is also one with a grand scope of the life of the banjo. If you are interested enough in the banjo to understand the instrument and its uses more fully, you cannot do better than to read this lively, superb account. (Wayne Shrubbsall *Banjo Newsletter* 2016-06-01)

A wonderful offering, and a fascinating and illuminating read. This is the most comprehensive book yet about the history of the banjo. The instrument's story is told here with such depth and detail that it comes alive. I loved reading this. (Béla Fleck, banjoist)

Following the strings of the banjo from Africa across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and then to the United States, Laurent Dubois provides a new perspective on the African diaspora. *The Banjo: America's African Instrument* is a rich, original view of our sonic landscape. It is impossible to follow Dubois's trail without a smile and the satisfaction of hearing the world anew. (Ira Berlin, author of *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves*)

Dubois reveals the banjo as a vital medium for the ideas and struggles of the people who make it, play it, and hear it. Combining storytelling and scholarship as seamlessly as the banjo condenses rhythm and melody, this special book is a melodious read by an extraordinary writer of Atlantic history. (Vincent Brown, author of *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*)

Dubois illuminates the banjo's complicated cultural history...This lively account is not without surprises. (*New Yorker* 2016-05-23)

About the Author

Laurent Dubois is Marcello Lotti Professor of Romance Studies and History at Duke University.

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Clifford McDaniel:

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