

## Hear John Henry's Hammer Ring: Moving Beyond Black and White Images of Appalachian Music

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### INTRODUCTION

Sometimes I feel that I have been put on this earth to teach people one simple fact; the banjo is from Africa. Or, more accurately, the roots of the modern American banjo are traceable back through early African American instruments to instruments from Africa. It is a simple fact about a well-known American artifact, so simple that it seems it would be common knowledge. But perhaps because the banjo is primarily associated with styles of music such as bluegrass, which are played by mostly white musicians, its origins have been shrouded from the American consciousness. In fact, I am constantly amazed as I teach college classes and travel to public schools across the heart of Appalachia how many students (and teachers!) are not aware of this fascinating and provocative piece of American history.

In my work, I am often called upon to talk about the history of Appalachian music or to perform “traditional” music from the region. These seem simple enough tasks on the surface, but simply knowing about the banjo’s origins complicates things. When I pull out my banjo or mandolin, I am often met with comments such as, “I love bluegrass. It sounds just like Celtic music. Doesn’t it?” Well, yes and no. This chapter examines how this comment misses the mark in a number of ways, so the comment is a good place to start.

Certainly, the British origins are central and must be included in any discussion of music from Appalachia. So, when I teach or perform, I often include British ballads such as “Barbara Allen,” which explore timeless topics of love and death and leave us with ancient values to ponder in our modern world. And I cannot resist the silly ballads (particularly when singing for chil-

dren) such as “Froggie Went a Courtin’,” which thrill us with their absurdity and perhaps comment on some long lost piece of history or ancient family feud. And then there are the British fiddle tunes such as “Soldier’s Joy,” which are still played at dances throughout Appalachia and are a staple of almost any bluegrass band’s repertoire.

But, again, simply knowing that the roots of the banjo are from Africa raises so many questions that a more comprehensive view is necessary. One of the voices that has been calling for a broader approach for decades is Bill Malone’s:

As I moved farther back into the pre radio sources of country music, the presumed British origins seemed increasingly less important as defining elements than I had once believed. The roots were British, in a very general and generic sense, but I could find no clear evidence that they derived from any explicit English, Irish, Scottish, or Welsh cultural soil. Romantic but enduringly popular terms like “Anglo-Saxon” and “Celtic” made even less sense as explanations for southern folk or country music styles. On the contrary, southern rural music seemed more and more to be a remarkable blending of ethnic, racial, religious, and commercial components with both Old World and American origins. “British” styles met and meshed with German, Spanish, French, Caribbean, Mexican and African-derived forms. (1983, 2)

In the remainder of this chapter, I use this lens to *briefly* examine musical styles that are part of the rich tapestry of sounds still emanating from the mountains. I end with a brief look at the style that is most often associated with Appalachia today: bluegrass.

## THE BALLAD TRADITION

In the early twentieth century, an Englishman named Cecil Sharpe came to Appalachia to collect traditional folk songs of England that were dying out in his homeland. He was surely not disappointed, as he found himself in “a community in which singing was as common and almost as universal a practice as speaking” (Sharpe 1932, xxv). More specifically, what he found was that a substantial number of *what* they were singing were songs with Old World origins. He, along with Olive Dame Campbell, documented 274 British ballads being sung to 986 tunes. In 1932 they published *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*. Sharpe did a great service in preserving these songs. But equally important to what he preserved was what he left out or glossed over. His romantic notion of the isolated, primitive mountaineer who sang some type of “pure” folk music that was rarely tainted by outside influence ignores the more complex nature of the history of music in this region. When Sharpe does admit to the “rare song” that made its way into the mountains, he characterizes it this way: “When, by chance, the text of a modern street-song succeeds in penetrating into the mountains, it is at once mated to a traditional tune and sometimes still further purified by being moulded into the form of a traditional ballad” (Sharpe 1932, xxvi). Although this phenomenon definitely occurred, the idea that this somehow purifies the song is certainly a value judgment that does not do justice to the people of this region who created their *own* music out of an amalgam of sources (including “street songs,” religious songs, bawdy songs, African American songs, and songs of various commercial origins).

### THE AMERICAN BALLAD AND “JOHN HENRY”

Although many British ballads became part of the Appalachian singing tradition, the tradition also grew and changed. Largely because these ballads existed primarily in oral tradition, the melodies varied from community to community and singer to singer. The words were also often modified to reflect more local or modern speech patterns. Sharpe and other collectors documented multiple versions of these songs.

Of course, many original ballads were also written in the new world. A large number of these ballads can be classified as “event” ballads. “These compositions chronicled such current events as train wrecks, sensational murders, mining disasters, famous crimes (and criminals), death of prominent people, and many other happenings that interested rural southerners (Wolfe 1977, 7–8).

One famous event ballad about a man who worked on the railroads is “John Henry.” Clearly this song was informed by the lyrical style of the British ballads. Just a brief comparison between a verse from the British ballad “Little Musgrave and Lady Bernard” and a verse from “John Henry” makes this clear. Compare this from “Little Musgrave and Lady Bernard” (Sharpe 1932, 1:164):

The next come down was dressed in red  
The next come down in green  
The next come down was a pretty little miss.  
Dress’d finer than any queen, queen  
Dress’d finer than any queen

with this from “John Henry” (Lomax 1960, 561):

John Henry was just a li’l baby  
Settin’ on his daddy’s knee  
He pint his finger at a little piece of steel  
“Steel gon be the deat of me.”  
“Steel gon be the deat of me.”

But although the songs share much in lyrical form, and both are typical in how they tell a dramatic story, “John Henry,” much like the story of the banjo, is truly an American tale. To begin with, it should be noted that, having been turned into something of a tall tale (particularly by more recent books and cartoons), it seems reasonable to believe that the story, which can be traced back to the 1870s, is based at least partially on the life of a real railroad worker. Nelson (2006) even claims to have discovered who John Henry was: a former Union soldier who had been imprisoned for theft and then leased out to work on the railroads. Although such details may be difficult to verify, the myth of this working-man’s hero remains strong to this day.

In almost all versions, John Henry is a black man of great strength who raced and beat the steam drill. He became a hero for black and white workers alike in

an industrial era that threatened both jobs and people's way of life. The facts that his hero status crosses racial lines and that the song can be found in the repertoire of both black and white musicians points out that musical boundaries of race and culture have perhaps never been as clear as they are often made out to be.

"John Henry" is not only a song that stands at the center of an important musical tradition; it is also a symbol of how the music of this region is complicated and has been created by forces that go well beyond typical notions of traditional rural music as "Celtic" or "Anglo-Saxon." The story of "man versus machine," particularly that of "black man versus machine," points straight to the confrontations that have formed the music of this region: confrontations between agriculture and industry, rural and urban, traditional and commercial, Old World and New World, locals and outsiders, and black and white.

### THE FIDDLE

The fiddle tradition is another that is often tied to its British origins, and rightfully so. But like the ballad tradition, the fiddle and the fiddle bands (string bands) that came later have also been deeply affected by the confrontations mentioned above. Let me begin by making clear that "fiddle," of course, is simply the name used for the violin in folk music. The modern fiddle (or violin) dates back to Europe in the 1600s. It was played from early on in both classical and folk traditions. It is the oldest rural American instrument and was the primary instrument in Appalachia from the early eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries (Abramson and Haskel 2006, 1151). It came into the mountains along with the earliest European settlers. They brought many tunes with them that are still played today. Appalachian musicians also composed tunes in the idiom of those Old World tunes (Abramson and Haskel 2006, 1152), much like in the ballad tradition.

One of the facts that contradicts many traditional images of the fiddle is that black musicians played the fiddle perhaps as early as it was common in Appalachia. "By the second half of the seventeenth century, African slaves were being trained to play the fiddle, to accompany the dancing of their masters" (Hamm

1983, 123). The result was that, as with the spirituals and work songs from the plantations, American fiddle styles are a mix of black and white (African and European) musical elements. The reverberations of this can be seen clearly in the development of bluegrass music in the 1940s.

### THE BANJO

The banjo, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, has its roots in Africa. It can easily be traced back to Caribbean and early African American instruments from the days of the slave trade. Sometimes referred to as a *banjar* or *banza*, these early American instruments were made out of a gourd with a long neck and three or four strings of materials such as hemp, horsehair, and cat gut. They were fashioned after West African plucked lute instruments (Abramson and Haskel 2006, 1121).

After studying black banjo players in the Piedmont area of North Carolina, Conway, noted that "although early descriptions of banjo playing are frustratingly scarce and vague, they are compatible with what we see in twentieth-century African-American down-stroking and up-picking and thus suggest a continuity between early and current African-American folk banjo playing" (1995, 196). She connected this style directly to early Appalachian styles known as frailing or clawhammer, quoting banjo player Steve Waring: "During a visit to Mali, I noticed that the musicians in Babko plucked (or struck) their 'ngouni' somewhat like banjos are plucked (or struck) in the Appalachian mountains. I borrowed one and began to play. They all asked me: 'Where did you learn to play the ngouni?' It was crazy [amazing] because I was 'frailing'" (Conway 1995, 198). In fact, one need only listen to modern recordings of African instruments such as the *ekonting* to hear for oneself the similarity to pre-bluegrass ("old-time") banjo styles (check out the recordings at [www.myspace.com/akonting](http://www.myspace.com/akonting)).

There is evidence of the banjo in Appalachia in the early part of the nineteenth century, but it did not become common in the region until after the Civil War (Abramson and Haskel 2006). The transmission of the banjo from black players to white players in the region seems to have happened through a number of methods.

Conway argues convincingly that the primary transmission was direct, from black to white musicians in the region (Conway 1995). The traveling minstrel and medicine shows, with white performers playing the banjo, are often pointed to as primary modes of transmission. But Conway argues that the limited contact provided by these interactions is probably less important than direct contact with black musicians who lived in the region and came through on the riverboats and railroads and during the Civil War (Conway 1995).

It is somewhat ironic, considering its history, that the banjo is not common in twentieth-century styles associated with black musicians. There are several possible explanations. Certainly, the cycle of white musicians appropriating black musical styles, and then black musicians moving on to something new, is a common American tale (other good examples can be found in the histories of jazz and rock ‘n’ roll). In this instance, the desire to move on may have been driven in part by the banjo’s association with the racist, black-faced minstrel shows. Or perhaps the availability of relatively cheap guitars in the beginning of the twentieth century also played a part. But the lack of black banjo players today also raises interesting questions about how commercial categorization affects *what* music is played and by *whom*. As radio and recordings began to blossom in the 1920s, music promoters fit different styles into categories to market to certain demographics. Early country music was called “hillbilly” music and marketed to rural, white southerners. And as blues and jazz were recorded and sold as “race” records, there seemed to be little room for black musicians who played anything else.

### STRING BANDS

The fiddle-banjo combination is documented among black musicians by the middle part of the nineteenth century. It seems logical to conclude, and there is a small amount of evidence, that this dates back even further, perhaps as much as a century (Conway 1995). The fiddle and banjo were also featured together during the middle of the nineteenth century by white traveling minstrels. As the banjo became common in the Appalachians after the Civil War, these two instru-

ments (with their roots in different cultures, pointing back to two different continents) became the heart of the mountain string band.

As mail-order catalogs became popular and transportation in the mountains easier in the early part of the twentieth century, other instruments, such as the guitar, the upright bass, and the mandolin, were added. The string bands played for dances with a repertoire that included tunes of Old and New World origins. They mixed in minstrel lyrics and popular songs and were recorded as some of the first “hillbilly” artists.

The existence of a strong Appalachian black string band tradition was largely ignored by much of the country. Black fiddle and mandolin player Howard (Louie Bluie) Armstrong from LaFollette, Tennessee, talks about this in the documentary *Louie Bluie*: “Many people didn’t know, especially in the cities, that black people, you know, black musicians, string bands, and what not, played country music too. We used to play hoedowns and all that sort of music—like ‘Ida Red,’ ‘John Henry’” (Zwigoff 1986). Armstrong played in a band out of Knoxville called the Tennessee Chocolate Drops, with Carl Martin and Ted Bogan. They played a mix of country, ragtime, and just about anything else that was popular during that time. They also recorded a few of their early songs. But as the century progressed and black musical styles became largely defined as jazz, blues, and rhythm and blues, these and other black string-band musicians found their music channeled into more narrow categories. Carl Martin, for example, moved to Chicago and recorded more straightforward, Chicago-style blues, as can be heard on *Crow Jane Blues* (Martin 1997). Still, the music of these early black string bands is well documented on a number of outstanding recordings (Durman 2008).

But the stories of musicians like Howard Armstrong are important beyond the fact that black musicians played a wide variety of music. They also point to the role that early industry, particularly coal mining, played in bringing people from different backgrounds together in small Appalachian communities. The need for workers in these lightly populated rural areas attracted both African Americans and early immigrants. Armstrong talks about how the diversity in LaFollete, Tennessee, in the early part of the twentieth century affected his childhood:

There were different ethnic groups here in the part of Tennessee where I was. And they had, of course, Jim Crow, the discriminatory practices and what not. We weren't supposed to cross over the line, but being little ol' kids and things, we did. I played with the little Italians, little Hungarians, little Polish kids, you know. (Zwigoff 1986)

Armstrong describes how he moved to Chicago and was able to perform in the immigrant neighborhoods due to his ability to speak several languages and sing songs from the different ethnic groups' own cultures (Zwigoff 1986). This particular fact about Armstrong points to his exceptional character. But the broader story, of how music cultures interacted in the rural mountain communities of Appalachia, is at the heart of how country and bluegrass were born, and further debunks any notions we have about music being purely segregated. One fact that seems clear from listening to Armstrong is that good musicians were interested in learning from good musicians, whatever their background or the color of their skin. This fact becomes increasingly clear upon examination of early commercial country music ("hillbilly") and bluegrass.

### HILLBILLY MUSIC

By the time Ralph Peer of Victor Records discovered the first big stars of country music (Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family) during the now-famous "Bristol sessions" in the summer of 1927, any perception that one might have had of country music being based on some pure ethnic heritage was absurd (though not necessarily uncommon). One need look no further than the "Father of Country Music" himself (Rodgers) to see how the complex American musical landscape contradicts the images conjured by the new name for this music, "hillbilly." Rodgers was from Mississippi, a state largely associated with the blues. And he did sing the blues. His early songs are referred to as "blue yodels" (incorporating his trademark yodel) and are very similar to songs sung by black blues musicians in lyrical content and format as well as musical style. The recording of his big hit, "Waitin' for a Train," incorporates a small jazz combo (with Louie Armstrong playing trumpet). Much of Rodgers's sound and style

points to the strong influence of both African American and commercial elements.

The Carter Family ("The First Family of Country Music") appears to be the more traditionally Appalachian of the two. They did, in fact, hail from Appalachia (Maces Springs, Virginia). And they did sing music that sounded more like the traditional folk music of the region. But by this point, "traditional folk music" had *already* incorporated many elements. One of the Carter Family's biggest hits, in fact, "Wildwood Flower," is a song with commercial origins. Referring to the process of pop songs being brought into the folk music fold, Charles Wolfe notes that:

As the song circulated through countless hands over the decades, its origins and its author were soon forgotten; it became simply an old song learned orally from an earlier generation. It became a folk song. Thus "Wildwood Flower," one of the most popular folk songs found in Tennessee, can be traced back to an 1860 song by Maud Irving and J.P. Webster, "I'll Twine Mid the Ringlets." (1977, 7)

Bill Malone expands on this idea as he moves beyond labels such as "folk," "rural," and "old-time" and gets right to the heart of things:

White rural music should be defined simply, and logically, as music and dance that white rural people accepted as their own. Rural southerners made their own music or inherited it from their forebears, but they also absorbed songs, dances, instrumental pieces, and performing styles from whatever source was available within the total context in which they lived. A good tune was a good tune, whether it wafted on the breeze by a town brass band, a militia fife-and-drum duo, a circus fiddler, a street corner evangelist, a black gospel singer, a minstrel banjoist, a piano roll, a disc or cylinder recording, or any other source that disseminated music. (1983, 9)

When A. P. Carter collected "Wildwood Flower" out in the countryside, he likely was not aware of its origins. It was already part of the folk tradition. Then, at Peer's urging, he copyrighted his arrangement of the song. And by copyrighting a "folk" song, originally written by professional songwriters, he brought the song full circle, making it folk *and* commercial, traditional *and*

original, old *and* new all at the same time. As a result, “Wildwood Flower” is it as truly Appalachian as any song out there.

It is also important to note that although the Carters’ music was not always as directly affected by African American musical styles as was that of Jimmie Rodgers, the influence was definitely present. This is evident in such hits as “Coal Miner’s Blues” and by A. P.’s association with black blues guitarist Lesley Riddle, who helped him remember the music to songs as they went around collecting them.

## BLUEGRASS

As commercial country music progressed and moved further and further away from its roots, bluegrass filled a void, with its return to acoustic instruments and older song styles. At first glance, it seems a simple return to older folk styles of the Appalachian region. And many likely perceived it this way. But, as one might imagine based on the history discussed thus far, it was not that simple.

Bill Monroe is rightfully considered the “Father of Bluegrass Music.” After all, it was his Bluegrass Boys who defined much of the sound for other early bands such as the Stanley Brothers and gave the music its name. It is often pointed out that Monroe was not from Appalachia proper, but rather from western Kentucky. But his musical experiences growing up were very much like those of musicians in rural Appalachia. His mother sang ballads as well as playing fiddle and accordion. His uncle Pen was a popular square-dance fiddler, and Monroe often accompanied him. He was exposed to the singing styles of the church (styles that, by the way, have an equally complex history as secular music). And he learned much from a local black musician named Arnold Schultz. His early informal musical education set the stage for his later style.

Bill Monroe joined the *Grand Ole Opry* radio show in 1939. He mixed the old-time sounds of earlier dance bands with his hard-driving mandolin and “high lonesome” singing style. It was not until 1945, however, that all of the elements came together in such a way that a new music was born. At the center of the transformation was the addition of an innovative banjo player named Earl Scruggs. Replacing the old-time clawhammer style

with a three-finger roll, Scruggs opened up the melodic possibilities of the instrument and added to the drive of the music. Chubby Wise added a bluesy fiddle component, and the group adopted a jazz-oriented approach to taking turns playing solos, with a heavy emphasis on virtuosity. Combine all of that with the distinctive harmony singing of Bill Monroe and Lester Flatt, the strong backbeat of the mandolin, and the use of African American blues scales and forms alongside European harmonies and tunes, and bluegrass was born.

The style was instantly influential on other bands and was popular in rural areas. But it was not clear at first that it would go much beyond that. In Bill Monroe’s words, “I thought bluegrass music would never get no further than the farmer” (Cantwell 1984, 5). But it did. It became a national phenomenon. How that happened owes as much to modern media and “outsiders” as to the down-home nature of the music. For instance, Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs (as Flatt and Scruggs), who had left the Bluegrass Boys long before, had two songs that helped boost national interest in bluegrass in the 1960s. One was “Foggy Mountain Breakdown,” used in the movie *Bonnie and Clyde*. The other was the theme song for the TV show *The Beverly Hillbillies*. In addition, urban folk revivalists in the 1960s kept the music alive with festivals and young musicians joining the scene.

In more recent years, the movie *Oh Brother Where Art Thou* acted in a similar fashion to rekindle interest in bluegrass, though the soundtrack of the movie contains very little music that is bluegrass in any strict sense of the word. In fact, “bluegrass” has come to encompass many of the styles discussed in this chapter, along with some styles of more modern acoustic music. With new bands both rehashing and reshaping the music of the past, perhaps we need some new terms to describe the changing traditions of this region and beyond.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has taken a brief look at the complex nature of music in Appalachia. Much has been left out. In particular, I have largely ignored the importance of religious music such as harp singing and gospel. However, a demonstration of harp singing and African American gospel music can be viewed on the MENC website (see video clip @ [www.menc.org](http://www.menc.org)). I’ve left out urban styles

like classic blues. For instance, we might ask ourselves if Bessie Smith from Chattanooga, Tennessee, should be considered an “Appalachian” musician.

I certainly do not want to leave readers with the impression that Appalachian music must even *be* defined by any preconceived set of standards. Instead, I am reminded of a quote from Jeff Biggers’s book *The United States of Appalachia*, in which he reminds us that “far from being an idyllic Eden of music, sequestered by mountains and preserved in a time-warp, the Southern Appalachians have been a burning ground in innovating and mixing modern musical trends” (2006, 2).

### SUGGESTED LISTENING

Following are selected songs representing various traditions from Appalachia. I’ve listed an album for each, but most also exist on other albums or as online downloads.

- “Barbara Allen” performed by Jean Ritchie—*Child Ballads in America* (Smithsonian).. British a cappella ballad from a master interpreter.
- “Soldier’s Joy” performed by Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers—*Country, the American Tradition* (Sony). A Scottish fiddle tune with minstrel-type lyrics.
- “Yes Pappy Yes” performed by Martin, Bogan, and Armstrong—*That Old Gang of Mine* (Flying Fish). An old-time tune played by one of the finest black string bands.
- “John Henry” performed by Sid Hemphill, Lucius Smith, Will Head, and Alec Askew—*Deep River of Song* (Rounder). A black string band example of a classic American ballad.
- “John Henry” performed by Roscoe Holcomb—*Friends of Old-Time Music* (Smithsonian/Folkways). Old-time solo banjo by a Kentucky legend.
- “Roustabout” performed by Dink Roberts—*Black Banjo Songsters of NC and VA* (Folkways). One of the banjo players profiled by Celia Conway.
- “Ekonting Song” performed by Paul Diatta—available as a free download at <http://www.myspace.com/akonting>. The *ekonting* is an African banjo-type instrument.
- “Waiting for a Train” performed by Jimmie Rodgers—*The Essential Jimmie Rodgers* (RCA). “The Father of Country Music.”
- “Wildwood Flower” performed by the Carter Family—*The Best of the Carter Family* (King Special). Listen to Maybelle’s innovative guitar playing.
- “It’s Mighty Dark to Travel” by Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys—*16 Gems* (Sony). From Monroe’s defining band, with Earl Scruggs, Lester Flatt, and Chubby Wise.

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