

# The Banjo, Slavery, and the Abolition Debate

## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What is the relationship between the banjo and slavery, and how did music making by enslaved people influence the abolition debate during the 18th and early 19th century?

### OVERVIEW

In many ways, the story of the banjo is the story of America. For two centuries, the plucking of banjo strings has accompanied the evolution of American popular music, from Minstrelsy to Blues to Dixieland Jazz. Then, just as these sounds began to fade before the electrified sounds of Rhythm and Blues and Rock and Roll, there was a banjo revival. In the hands of Bluegrass virtuoso Earl Scruggs and Folk Songster Pete Seeger, the banjo reasserted itself as the instrument of the common man. Today, the banjo remains essential to the sound of groups from Mumford and Sons to the Band Perry, who like musicians of the past, make the instrument their own.



Photo: Alan Lomax

But the significance of the banjo to American culture goes far deeper than its presence in popular music styles: it goes back to the tragic foundations of the New World. For the banjo was not invented in America, nor did it come in the hands of colonists and settlers. It arrived upon America's eastern shores through enslaved Africans.

Between 1500 and 1900, an estimated 10.7 million enslaved people arrived to North America, South America, and the Caribbean. Bought or simply taken from West Africa, they were delivered like livestock to the Americas. Packed into hulls of ships built to transport goods rather than people, many Africans reached the shores of America still shackled to the bodies of people who had succumbed to disease or starvation. Those that managed to escape from their bonds often jumped into the sea, preferring a watery grave over a life in servitude.

Upon reaching the shores, the enslaved Africans were sent to an auction block where, in the words of ex slave Fountain Hughes, "they would bid on you just the same as you bid on cattle." Their lives were thereafter determined completely by the temperament of the slave master. Some of the enslaved would be treated decently, even sent to school. Others would experience immeasurable cruelties, punishments, and tortures. But all lacked the rights engraved into the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Perhaps the only comfort that was available to enslaved people was memories of their homeland, embodied through song and dance. Stripped of everything, enslaved people did what they could to rebuild the instruments of Africa using the materials available to them. Thus, the banjo was reborn in the Caribbean from a similar Ghanaese instrument called the Akonting. In addition to playing the banjo and other instruments, enslaved people also continued to dance traditional dances, and sing work songs and spirituals intimately connected with their physical bondage and spiritual endurance.

This music making led to considerable consternation among colonists and settlers. The justification for slavery was often predicated on the idea that Africans were subhuman, and therefore not entitled to the same rights of freedom endowed to Europeans. But how could such a claim be made in the face of evidence of so much ingenuity, creativity, and humanity revealed through music making by enslaved people?

In this lesson, students discover how the banjo and music making more generally among enslaved people contributed to debates on the ethics of slavery. They listen to slave narratives, examine statistics, and read primary sources to better understand how slavery was conceptualized and lived through in the 18th and 19th centuries. Throughout the lesson, students return to videos created by Alan Lomax of pre-blues banjo player Dink Roberts as a way to imagine what music among enslaved people in the United States may have sounded like.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The African origins of the banjo
- The numbers of slaves imported to North America by region
- First-hand accounts of slavery by former slaves
- The functions music played for slaves according to the accounts of former slaves
- How the banjo and slave music making informed debates over the morality of slavery in the 18th and 19th century
- Banjo player Dink Roberts

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to better comprehend the institution of slavery in America by listening to music, hearing slave narratives, analyzing statistical data, and discussing historical documents that advocated for or against slavery.

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Tell students that for this lesson they will be taking on the role of ethnographers—social scientists who study people in their own environments. They will be watching a video of a musical performance, and as ethnographers they should take notes that describe the setting of the performance, as well as the performers' age, attire, body language, and anything else they notice.
2. Play **Clip 1, "Dink Roberts: Fox Chase/Old Rattler,"** and ask students:
  - What general observations did you have while watching the video?
  - Where does it seem like the video was shot?
  - How would you describe the singing? Does it seem more planned, or spontaneous?
  - What kind of audience might Dink Roberts play for?
  - Based on what you saw in the video, what generalization might you make about Dink Roberts' life?
3. After discussing the video in general, focus on the instrument Roberts is playing. Ask students:
  - Does anyone know the name of the instrument Roberts is playing?
  - Do any of you have any preconceptions of the banjo? What do you think of when you think of the banjo?
  - Where do you think the banjo might have come from? What instrument is does it look similar to?
4. Show **Image 1, "Stringed Instruments in America."** Tell students that one of the four lutes on the right hand side of the image is the ancestor to the banjo. Ask students to examine each instrument and write on a scratch piece of paper which instrument they think the banjo evolved from. Guide students to observe the shape of each instrument in the image, the materials used, the number of strings, etc.
5. By a show of hands, ask students which instrument they wrote down. Have students volunteer to explain their reasoning: what similarities did you see between the banjo and the instrument you wrote down?

6. Tell students the answer: the banjo is the direct descendent of the *Akonting* from Ghana. Point out that both instruments have a circular body covered with a skin-like membrane, and on the membrane is a piece of wood called a bridge that holds up strings.
7. Ask students:
  - How might have an African instrument like the Akonting come to North America?
  - Who might have been the first types of people to play the Akonting in the Americas?

## PROCEDURE

1. Tell students that in this lesson they will be looking at the origins of the banjo, and the ways the banjo and music making by enslaved people in general informed debates on the morality of slavery.
2. Pass out **Handout 1 - “First Accounts of the Banjo in North America.”** Ask students to only read the headings (in italics) of each of the three pages, then ask:
  - According to the historic evidence presented in the handout, when might have the banjo first appeared in North America?
  - Based on the titles alone, what might these historic documents be about?
  - Based on the titles alone, what part of the world do these documents discuss?
  - Why might have the earliest accounts of the banjo occurred in the Caribbean, rather than the United States?
3. Show **Image 2, “Slave Disembarkment Statistics.”** Ask students:
  - What does this chart show?
  - In the time period during which the accounts in the handout were written (approx. 1650-1750), about how many enslaved people arrived in Mainland North America? How many in the British and French Caribbean?
  - In total, what three regions did enslaved people arrive to at the highest numbers? How does Mainland North America compare?
  - What does this chart reveal about the Slave Trade, especially as it concerns the United States specifically?
4. Have students return to **Handout 1 - “First Accounts of the Banjo in North America.”**, and ask them to read each account. Warn them that they are looking at primary sources from hundreds of years ago, so some of the grammar and spelling may seem off.
5. Ask students:
  - According to the documents, when did enslaved people during this time play and dance to music? For what purpose?
  - From what you can tell, what were the author’s opinions of this music? Did they appreciate it or were they dismissive of it?

- How did the slave masters and overseers respond to this music making? (*If necessary, remind students of the third document, which notes that slave masters tried to keep enslaved people from dancing.*)
  - How is the life of an enslaved person described in these accounts? Do you think life as a enslaved person was different for those in the United States versus those in the Caribbean?
6. Tell students they will now be moving from the Caribbean to the United States. Explain that in the 1930s, the U.S. Government created the Federal Writers Project, which began collecting narratives from Americans who experienced slavery. Tell students they will be watching videos that feature audio recordings of people recalling what slavery was like for them.
7. Play **Clip 2, “Voices Remembering Slavery: The Workday.”** Ask students:
- What kind of work are the people in this video describing?
  - What kind of work was done by enslaved people working outside in the fields?
  - What kind of work was done by enslaved people working domestically, in the house?
  - Was there a gender labor divide? According to these interviews, did enslaved women and enslaved men do different kinds of work?
8. OPTIONAL: Play **Clip 3, “Voices Remembering Slavery: Treatment”** (Warning: the video contains accounts of violence and racist language. Teacher discretion is advised). Ask

students:

- According to these various accounts, how did slave masters treat their enslaved people? Is it possible to generalize on how enslaved people were treated at this time?
  - How were enslaved people educated, or learn to read and write?
  - What were some ways enslaved people were punished?
  - How did the people being interviewed conceptualize their slavery? (*If necessary, remind students of Fountain Hugh’s comparison of enslaved people to cows and dogs.*)
9. Play **Clip 4, “Voices Remembering Slavery: Music.”** Ask students:
- According to these interviews, when did enslaved people perform music?
  - What were some of the functions music might have served for enslaved people?
  - How did some of the lyrics of the songs sung by enslaved people reflect their environment or position?
10. Tell students that next they will be looking at how music making by enslaved people entered into larger political discussions at the time, especially involving the question of abolition, or the ending of slavery.
11. Play **Clip 1, “Dink Roberts: Fox Chase/Old Rattler”** once again. Tell students that the musician in the video, Dink Roberts, plays a very old style of music, one that might be in some ways similar to the music enslaved people performed. Ask students to keep this music in mind as they pursue the next activity.

12. Split the students into 4 groups and pass out **Handout 2 - “The HIPPO Technique for Analyzing Documents”** and **Handout 3 - “Historical Accounts of Slavery and Slave Music”** to each group. Assign each group one of the four documents in Handout 3, and ask students in the group to analyze their document using the HIPPO technique outlined in Handout 2. (Note: teachers might want to warn students that these documents were written centuries ago, and have some anomalies - for instance, letter “s” in some documents looks more like an “f”).
13. Have student groups share their analysis with the rest of the class. Then ask the class:
  - Which documents seem to be degrading to the enslaved people? (*Documents 1 and 3*). What arguments do these authors make about music making by enslaved people that supports their conclusions?
  - Which documents seem more sympathetic to the enslaved people? (*Documents 2 and 4*). What arguments do these authors make about slave music making that supports their conclusions?

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Show **Image 3, “Writing Prompt,”** and have students follow the prompt given. Collect responses, or have students present their responses to the class.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Read **Extension Activity - “How the Banjo Became White,”** and answer the provided questions.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

### Books:

- Laurent Dubois, *The Banjo: America's African Instrument*
- W.E.B. Dubois “The Sorrow Songs” in *The Souls of Black Folk*
- Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*

### Films:

- Sascha Paladino, *Throw Down Your Heart*
- Tommy Thompson, *Dink: Pre-Blues Musician*

### Records:

- *Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia*, Various Artists
- *American Negro Slave Songs*, Alex Foster and Michel Larue

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)*

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Reading 8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

Reading 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take. College and Career Readiness

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)*

Writing 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Writing 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Writing 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)*

Speaking and Listening 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

### SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity



Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 9: Global Connections

## **NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION**

### Core Music Standard: Responding

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

### *Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.





## RESOURCES

### VIDEO RESOURCES

- *The Association for Cultural Equity* - "Dink Roberts: Fox Chase/Old Rattler"
- "Voices Remembering Slavery: The Workday"
- "Voices Remembering Slavery: Treatment"
- "Voices Remembering Slavery: Music"

### HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - "First Accounts of the Banjo in North America"
- Handout 2 - "The HIPPO Technique for Analyzing Documents"
- Handout 3 - "Historical Accounts of Slavery and Slave Music"

# Lesson Materials



# Image 1, “Stringed Instruments in America.”



**Banjo (The Americas)**



**Ukelele (Hawaii)**



**Mandolin (Italy)**



**Akonting (Ghana)**



**Guitar (Spain)**

# Image 2, “Slave Disembarkment Statistics.”

## Slave Disembarkation Estimates by Region, 1501-1900

	Europe	Mainland North America	British Caribbean	French Caribbean	Dutch Americas	Danish West Indies	Spanish Americas	Brazil	Africa	Totals
1501-1550	452	0	0	0	0	0	44,457	0	0	44,909
1551-1600	188	0	0	0	0	0	124,913	29,275	0	154,376
1601-1650	85	100	27,206	545	0	0	179,191	320,406	172	527,705
1651-1700	2,896	15,047	283,270	38,140	124,158	18,146	46,313	464,050	2,950	994,970
1701-1750	4,126	145,973	637,620	294,471	126,464	12,574	55,291	891,851	516	2,168,886
1751-1800	1,113	149,509	1,175,703	700,662	168,751	56,034	90,242	1,097,166	1,801	3,440,981
1801-1850	0	77,704	194,452	86,397	25,355	22,244	588,558	2,054,726	132,132	3,181,568
1851-1900	0	413	0	0	0	0	163,947	6,899	17,998	189,257
Totals	8,860	388,746	2,318,251	1,120,215	444,728	108,998	1,292,912	4,864,373	155,569	10,702,652

Statistics from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Database  
([www.slavevoyages.org](http://www.slavevoyages.org))

# Image 3, “Writing Prompt”

*Provide a short response to the following prompt:*

Since the Colonial Era, slavery in America has been a contentious issue. Drawing upon historic sources, discuss the arguments made for and against the institution of slavery, and the evidence writers drew upon to support both perspectives.

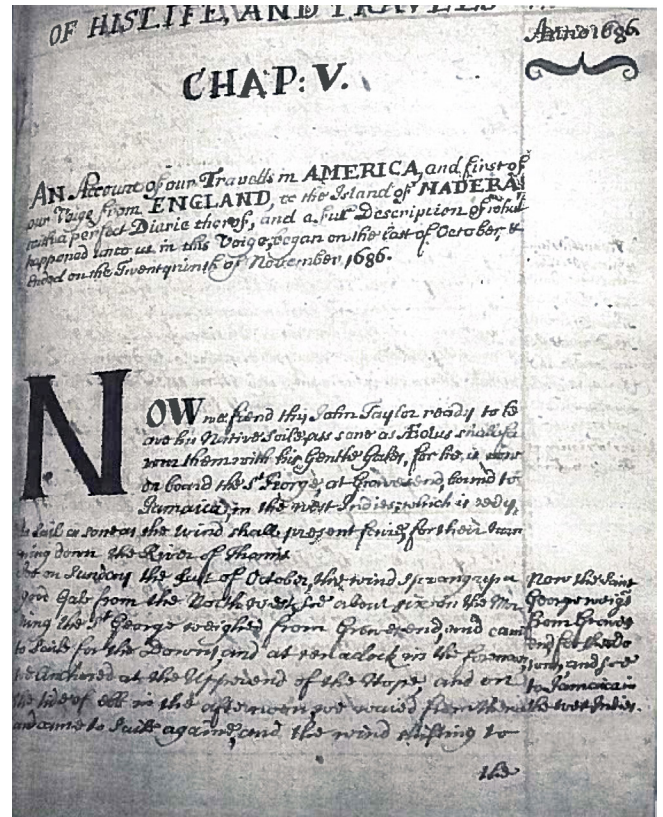


## Handout 1 - First Accounts of the Banjo in North America

Document 1 - Manuscript on Jamaica by John Taylor, 1687

Now these slaves are committed to the government of the overseer, who hath other whit servants under him, as drivers to keep them under the overseers. These slave thus disciplin'd are called to their work about fouer a'clock in the morning, at which time the overseer sound his horn or shell, and then all hands turn outt to labour both men and women together, where they all work at the hough etc., and are followed on by their drivers, which if they loiter some quickens their pace with his whipp, and soe keeps'em to their work till eleven a'clock before noon; then the overseer sounds his shell, and they all leave work and reparaire to their wigwams to diner and to rest untill two a'clock, at which time the overseer sounds his shell, and they turn out to work and continues all their labours as long as light will permitt.

Then those pore slaves leave off work and reparaire to their houses, where they gett their suppers, make a great fier, and with a kitt [banjo] (made of a gourd or calabash with one twine string) play, sing and daunce according to their own country fashion, making themselves all mirth, men and women together in a confused manner; after they have thus sported as long as they thinck fitt, they lay themselves naked on the ground all round their fier, the whole family together in a confused manner to sleep; for th' country is soe hott, yett they can't sleep without a fier, and thus these ignorant pore souls spend away their time.



From John Taylor's Manuscript



Document 2 - Hans Sloane, A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica, Vol. 1, 1707:

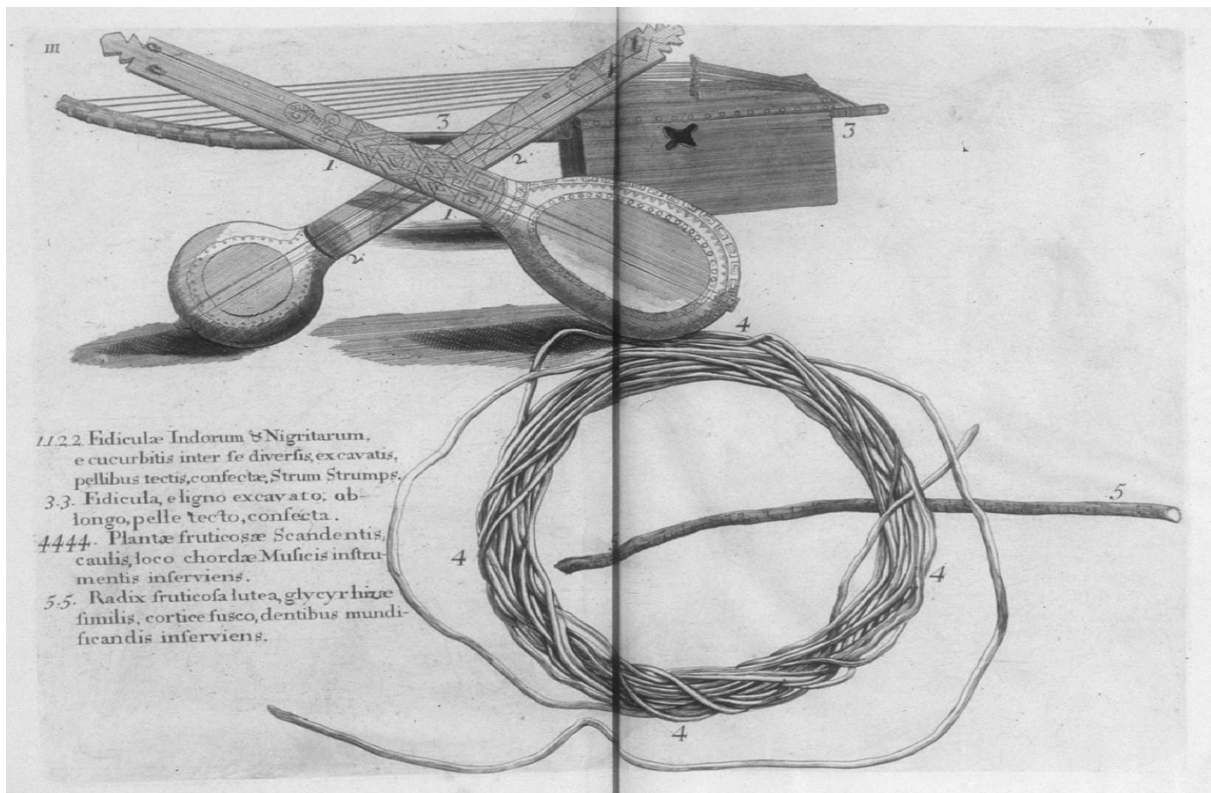


Illustration from A Voyage to the Islands. . .

The Negroes are much given to venery, and although hard wrought, will at nights, or on feast days, dance and sing; their songs are all bawdy, and leading that way. They have several sorts of instruments in imitation of lutes, made of small gourds fitted with necks, strung with horse hairs, or peeled stalks of climbing plants. Their instruments are sometimes made of hollow'd timber covered with parchment or other skin wetted, having a bow for its neck, the strings ty'd longer or shorter, as they would alter the sounds. The figures of some of their instruments are hereafter graved. They have likewise in their dances rattles ty'd to their legs and wrists, and in their hands, with which they make a noise, keeping time with one who makes a found answering it on the mouth of an empty gourd or jar with his hand. Their dances consist in great activity and strength of body, and keeping time, if it can be. They very often tie cows tails to their rumps, and add such other odd things to their bodies in several places, as gives them a very extraordinary appearance.



Document 3 - Jean-Baptiste Labat, *New Voyages in the American Islands*, 1742:

Dancing is their preferred passion, and I do not know any other people in the world who are more attached to it. When their masters do not let them dance within the house, they will go three or four leagues away. . .to find someplace where there is a dance.

The dance they like the most, and the one that is most regularly danced, is the calenda. It comes from the coast of Guinea, from all appearances from the Rada Kingdom.

Because the postures and movements of this dance are very indecent, the masters who live in a settled way keep them from dancing it. This is not easily done, because [the Africans] are so accustomed to it.

To accompany this dance, they use two drums made from two tree trunks carved out in unequal sizes. One side is open, and the other is covered by a scrap of hairless sheep or goat skin, formed like a parchment.

There are some among them who play the violin well, and who make money playing with groups, and for wedding feasts. They almost all play a kind of guitar, which is made from a half a calabash covered with leather scraped into the shape of parchment, with a long neck. On it they only put four strings made of silk, pitre or dried bird intestines. These cords are elevated a good inch above the skin that covers the calabash by a bridge. They play it by pinching and hitting the strings. Their music is unpleasant, and they have little understanding of it. However, there are people who compare their harmonies to those of Spanish and Italian peasants who also play guitar very poorly. I do not know if they are right.

66  
**VOYAGE**  
DU

**CHEVALIER  
DES MARCHAIS  
EN GUINÉE,  
ISLES VOISINES,  
ET A CAYÈNNE,**

Fait en 1725, 1726 & 1727.

Contenant une Description très exacte & très étendue de ces Pais, & du Commerce qui s'y fait.

Enrichi d'un grand nombre de Cartes & de Figures en Tailles-douces.



M. DCCXXX.

Avec Approbation & Privilège du Roy.

Cover of *New Voyages in the American Islands*

I do not know if they are right.





## Handout 2 - The HIPPO Technique for Analyzing Documents.

**H**istorical Context

What was happening at the time when the author wrote this document? How does it help you understand it?

**I**ntended Audience

What audience might have the author wanted to inform or influence? How does this impact the author's message?

**P**oint of View

Who is the author? How might their background (race, gender, socioeconomic class) impact their perspective?

**P**urpose

Why did the author write this? What might have been their motivation?

**O**utside Information

What specific historical information outside of the document can you connect to the document? How does it help you better understand it?



## Handout 3 - Historical Accounts of Slavery and Slave Music

Document 1 - Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 1807:

BOOK  
IV

Of those imitative arts in which perfection can be attained only in an improved state of society, it is natural to suppose that the Negroes have but little knowledge. An opinion prevails in Europe that they possess organs peculiarly adapted to the science of music; but this I believe is an ill-founded idea. In vocal harmony they display neither variety nor compass. Nature seems in this respect to have dealt more penuriously by them than towards the rest of the human race. As practical musicians, some of them, by great labour and careful instruction, become sufficiently expert to bear an under-part in a public concert; but I do not recollect ever to have seen or heard of a Negro who could truly be called a fine performer on any capital instrument. In general they prefer a loud and long-continued noise to the finest harmony, and frequently consume the whole night in *beating on a board with a stick*. This is in fact one of their chief musical instruments; besides which, they have the *Banja* or *Merriwang*, the *Dundo* and the *Goombay*; all of African origin. The first is an imperfect kind of violincello; except that it is played on by the finger like the guitar; producing a dismal monotony of four notes. The *Dundo* is precisely a tabor; and the *Goombay* is a rustic drum; being formed of the trunk of a hollow tree, one end of which is covered with a

sheep's skin. From such instruments nothing like a regular tune can be expected, nor is it attempted.

CHAP.  
III.

Their songs are commonly *impromptu*, and there are among them individuals who resemble the *improvisatori*, or extempore bards, of Italy; but I cannot say much for their poetry. Their tunes, in general, are characteristic of their national manners; those of the Eboes being soft and languishing; of the Koromantyns, heroic and martial. At the same time, there is observable, in most of them, a predominant melancholy, which, to a man of feeling, is sometimes very affecting.



Document 2 - Thomas Clarkson, An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, 1786

With respect to their *dances*, on which such a particular stress has been generally laid, we fear that people may have been as shamefully deceived, as in the former instances. For from the manner in which these are generally mentioned, we should almost be led to imagine, that they had certain hours allowed them for the purpose of

joining in the dance, and that they had every comfort and convenience, that people are generally supposed to enjoy on such convivial occasions. But this is far from the case. Reason informs us, that it can never be. If they wish for such innocent recreations, they must enjoy them in the time that is allotted them for sleep; and so far are these dances from proceeding from any uncommon degree of happiness, which excites them to convivial society, that they proceed rather from an uncommon depression of spirits, which makes them even sacrifice their \* rest, for the sake of experiencing for a moment a more joyful oblivion of their cares. For suppose any one of the *receivers*, in the middle of a dance, were to address his slaves in the following manner: “*Africans!*” “I begin at last to feel for your situation;” “and my conscience is severely hurt, when—” “ever I reflect that I have been reducing

“those to a state of misery and pain, who  
“have never given me offence. You seem  
“to be fond of these exercises, but yet you  
“are obliged to take them at such unreasonable hours, that they impair your  
“health, which is sufficiently broken by  
“the intolerable share of labour which I  
“have hitherto imposed upon you. I will  
“therefore make you a proposal. Will  
“you be content to live in the colonies,  
“and you shall have the half of every week  
“entirely to yourselves? or will you choose  
“to return to your miserable, wretched  
“country?”—But what is that which  
strikes their ears? Which makes them motionless in an instant? Which interrupts the festive scene?—their country?—transporting sound!—Behold! they are now flying from the dance: you may see them running to the shore, and, frantick as it were with joy, demanding with open arms an instantaneous passage to their beloved native plains.

Such are the *colonial delights*, by the representation of which the *receivers* would persuade us, that the *Africans* are taken from

their country to a region of conviviality and mirth; and that like those, who leave their usual places of residence for a summer’s amusement, they are conveyed to the colonies—to bathe,—to dance,—to keep holy-day,—to be jovial.—But there is something so truly ridiculous in the attempt to impose these scenes of felicity on the publick, as scenes which fall to the lot of slaves, that the *receivers* must have been driven to great extremities, to hazard them to the eye of censure.



Document 3 - James Kirke Paulding, Letters from the South, 1835

### LETTER XI.

DEAR FRANK,

THE blacks form a distinguishing feature in the lowlands of the south; but diminish in numbers as you travel towards the mountains. They are of a great variety of shades,—from jet black to almost white. Indeed I have seen some of them who were still kept in bondage, whose complexions were rather lighter than their masters. I was much puzzled to account for these apparent caprices of nature in bestowing such singular varieties of complexion; but I soon found that she had good reasons to justify her.

The Negroes are in general a harmless race, although they are more apt than their masters to transgress the laws, partly I suppose because a great many things which are lawful to white men, are forbidden to the blacks. Being, in general, more ignorant than the whites of the poorer classes, they are of course more given to petty vices, and are, perhaps, not so honest. They seem, indeed, a gay, harmless, and unthinking race; for those who are likely to have few agreeable subjects for their thoughts, Providence seems kindly to divest, in some degree, of the capacity to reflect long on any thing. They are by far the most musical of any portion of the inhabitants of the United States, and in the even-

ing I have seen them reclining in their boats on the canal at Richmond, playing on the *banjo*, and singing in a style—I dare say, equal to a Venetian gondolier. Then they whistle as clear as the notes of the fife;—and their laugh is the very echo of thoughtless hilarity.

How would it mortify the pride of the white man, and humble his lordly sense of superiority, if it were indeed found, that these poor fellows were happier than those who affect to pity their miseries. And yet it is possible,—and, from my soul, I hope it is so; for then I should be relieved from certain doubts about the equal distributions of Providence, that confound me not a little. They certainly are exempt from many of the cares that beset their masters,—and instead of being in bondage to the future, and slaves to their offspring, have every assurance, that the sons of their old masters will be the masters of their sons, and keep them, at least, from want. Then they dance with a glee, to which the vivacity of French peasants is nothing; and indeed enjoy, with a much keener zest than we, all those pleasures that spring from thoughtlessness of the past, and carelessness of the future. Their intervals of leisure are precious; for to those who labour hard, idleness is perfect enjoyment; and to swing upon a gate all day, is a luxury of which people who have nothing to do can form no conception. After all, indeed, the great distinction between the very idle and the very laborious is, that the first lack leisure and luxuries,—the last, appetite and employment. Don't mistake, and suppose that I am the advocate of slavery. But yet

I am gratified when I can persuade myself, that a race of men which is found in this situation in almost every Christian land, is not without some little enjoyments, that sweeten the bitter draught of slavery, and prevent its being all gall.

Until they can be freed, without endangering the community, infringing the established rights of property, and rendering themselves even more wretched, it is some comfort to see them well treated by their masters. And wo, wo to the man who adds one feather to the weight they are destined to bear. He shall assuredly meet the vengeance of the Being who is all mercy to the weak and the ignorant,—all justice to the wise and the strong. Wo to those who, tempted by avarice, or impelled by vengeance, shall divide the parent from its offspring, and sell them apart in distant lands! A cruel and inhuman act;—for it is seldom we see the ties of kindred or of conjugal affection, stronger than in the poor negro. He will travel twelve, fifteen, or twenty miles, to see his wife and children, after his daily labour is over, and return in the morning to his labour again. If he becomes free, he will often devote the first years of his liberty to buying their freedom;—thus setting an example of conjugal and parental affection, which the white man may indeed admire; but, it is feared, would seldom imitate. Farewell.



Document 4- William Dickson, Letters on Slavery, 1784

But, besides the conviction forced on my mind, by arguments from analogy and by the general behaviour of the negroes, it may be proper to mention some particular facts which have had their weight with me, and may have their weight with others, in proving the natural equality of the Africans to the Europeans. Many similar facts, I must have witnessed, which have slipped from my memory, though the conviction they worked remains; just as a man may forget the demonstration of a mathematical proposition, but may retain and be convinced of the truth of the conclusion.

It cannot be denied that the negroes, when put to a trade which happens to coincide with the bent of their genius, become as good, and, sometimes, better artificers, than white men. I have seen a white carpenter drudging with the saw, jacking-plane, &c. and who could not lay off his work properly, while a black one was employed in making panel-doors, sash-windows, &c. I have known the carpenter's work of a good house of two stories, with a pavillion-roof, king-posts, &c. planned and conducted,

by a black carpenter.—On the doors of some of the negro huts, I have observed wooden locks, at once simple and well contrived, and which it was impossible to open, without the wooden key, which had two or three square, polished prominencies, adapted to the internal parts of the lock, which I have also seen, but it cannot be explained without a model.—In the learned Dr. Burney's History of Music, there are figures of several ancient musical instruments, by a comparison with which, the banjay or coromantin drum would lose nothing. This last is a most ear-piercing instrument; but, being prohibited, is but seldom used, by the negroes, in Barbadoes. The black musicians, however, have substituted, in its place, a common earthen jar, on beating the aperture of which, with the extended palms of their hands, it emits a hollow sound, resembling the more animating note of the drum.—As silver-smiths and watch-makers, the negroes shew no want of genius. I have employed a black watch-maker who was instructed in the art, by a most ingenious mechanic and natural philosopher, in Bridgetown. That worthy person (now deceased) was bred a mathematical instrument maker, in London; and I knew him to be a person of too strict probity to have put people's watches into improper hands.—But, without enumerating such instances, I might, at once, have appealed, for a proof of African ingenuity, to the fabric and colours of the Guinea cloths, which most people must have seen.—By the word *mechanic* is generally meant a person who makes but little use of his rational faculty; but it must be remembered that *mechanical contrivance* is one of the highest departments of reason. Nor can this be otherwise; since, the science of mechanics depends entirely on mathematics, and hath exercised the genius of an Archimedes, of a Galilæo, of an Emerson, of a M'Laurin, and, above all, of that great ornament of this island, and of the human species, the immortal *Newton*.

The fondness of the negroes for music, and the proficiency they sometimes make in it, with little or no instruction, is too well known to need support, from particular instances. This their taste for melody and harmony, if it does not demonstrate their rationality, ought, at least, to be admitted as an argument in proving their *humanity*.





## Extension Activity - How the Banjo Became White

*Rhiannon Giddens is a multi-instrumentalist, singer, and founding member of the old-time music group Carolina Chocolate Drops. In 2017 she was awarded the Macarthur “Genius” Grant.*

*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?