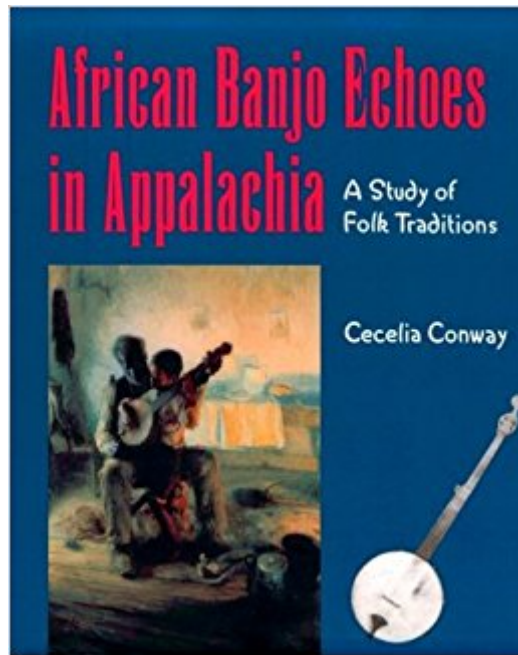


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African Banjo Echoes In Appalachia: Study Folk Traditions (Publications Of The American Folklore Society)



Synopsis

Throughout the Upland South, the banjo has become an emblem of white mountain folk, who are generally credited with creating the short-thumb-string banjo, developing its downstroking playing styles and repertory, and spreading its influence to the national consciousness. In this groundbreaking study, however, Cecelia Conway demonstrates that these European Americans borrowed the banjo from African Americans and adapted it to their own musical culture. Like many aspects of the African-American tradition, the influence of black banjo music has been largely unrecorded and nearly forgotten—until now. Drawing in part on interviews with elderly African-American banjo players from the Piedmont—among the last American representatives of an African banjo-playing tradition that spans several centuries—Conway reaches beyond the written records to reveal the similarity of pre-blues black banjo lyric patterns, improvisational playing styles, and the accompanying singing and dance movements to traditional West African music performances. The author then shows how Africans had, by the mid-eighteenth century, transformed the lyrical music of the gourd banjo as they dealt with the experience of slavery in America. By the mid-nineteenth century, white southern musicians were learning the banjo playing styles of their African-American mentors and had soon created or popularized a five-string, wooden-rim banjo. Some of these white banjo players remained in the mountain hollows, but others dispersed banjo music to distant musicians and the American public through popular minstrel shows. By the turn of the century, traditional black and white musicians still shared banjo playing, and Conway shows that this exchange gave rise to a distinct and complex new genre—the banjo song. Soon, however, black banjo players put down their banjos, set their songs with increasingly assertive commentary to the guitar, and left the banjo and its story to white musicians. But the banjo still echoed at the crossroads between the West African griots, the traveling country guitar bluesmen, the banjo players of the old-time southern string bands, and eventually the bluegrass bands. The Author: Cecelia Conway is associate professor of English at Appalachian State University. She is a folklorist who teaches twentieth-century literature, including cultural perspectives, southern literature, and film.

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Customer Reviews

Today, there is a greater awareness of the fact that the banjo, so often identified as an American original, is in fact of African descent. Yet, with the exception of Dena Epstein's and Paul Oliver's pioneering research, there's has been little in the way of literature devoted specifically to the subject of the banjo's African and African-American heritage. Cecelia Conway's *AFRICAN BANJO ECHOES IN APPALACHIA* fills this frankly embarrassing void in banjo literature. Ms. Conway is a folklorist who, back in the 1970s, had done field work in the North Carolina Piedmont documenting some of the last bearers of the centuries-old African-American folk banjo tradition. In the beginning of the book, she introduces us to venerable African-American traditional musicians, whose music predates the blues and jazz, such as Dink Roberts, John Snipes and Joe and Odell Thompson (of all the aforementioned, fiddler Joe Thompson is the only one left to carry on the tradition, which he still does with great vigor and determination). From there, Ms. Conway launches into a fascinating, scholarly exploration of the history and evolution of the banjo. This leads to the thorny issue of just how the banjo-- now considered, along with the fiddle and mountain dulcimer, to be the quintessential musical manifestation of white Appalachia-- was introduced and absorbed into the folk culture of the European-American communities of the Southern Mountains. Ms.

i HAD JUST handed in my MFA thesis to be published. I realized library priviledges I had had for 12 years would be gone in a couple weeks, I went to the music section of the FIU library and bumped into this book. I loved it, it loved me. I read it straight through--didnt go to work the next day. I have been studying and playing traditional American music for 40 years, and this is one of the best books on any level I have ever read. Ater talking about picking up the banjo for 40 years, I bought one right after I read this book and have bought another since. So much of history and opinion about popular

music is just congealed prejudice and wishful thinking. This is science and real life. The banjo is an African instrument, the traditional way of playing it is the African way of playing it. Not to speak of the non traditional post WWII guitar influenced Bluegrass way which simply adds as many blue and blues notes into the music as can be found. What romanced me in this book is her interviews with African American banjo players from North Carolina and Virginia--some of whom have passed on since the book came out. The Photographs in there are great too. Cece Also made a movie of these guys that was shown back when the book first came out. While it has been out of circulation for years, she will be showing it at the April 7-10 2005 Black Banjo Then and Now Gathering at Appalachian State College in Boone North Carolina. You see that scene in the library was 6 years and three banjos ago. The book and the recordings and other development have brought many African American artists back to the banjo and back to the roots players that inspired Cece's book.

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