

University of North Carolina at Asheville

*Strumming on the Old Banjo:
A Dissolution of Popular Misconception*

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In contemporary American culture, both the unique sound of the banjo and its physical appearance are inextricably associated with Bluegrass music and white mountain traditions. An analysis of the banjo's history, however, reveals that well before Bluegrass matured as a style of music, the banjo was essential to the development of Jazz. Two revolutionary banjoists, Eddie Peabody and Bela Fleck, though generations removed from one another, both played historical roles in the perpetuation of the banjo as a laudable instrument, proving it to be far more diverse than their respective societal conventions allowed. Peabody plucked it out of the Jazz orchestra, popularizing it as a unique solo instrument rather than one of mere rhythmic accompaniment; Fleck continues to shatter the pervading stereotype of the banjo as a rural, hillbilly instrument belonging only to the genre of Bluegrass.

A comprehensive study of both recent and not-so-recent scholarship regarding the historical development of the banjo, as well as its role within the musical genres of both Jazz and Bluegrass, provides a narrative of the evolution of the instrument that is largely free of contention. *America's Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century*, a collaboration by James F. Bollman and Philip F. Gura, was published in 1999 and explores the physical development of the banjo during the nineteenth century. Bollman has spent thirty years accumulating rare banjos and cultural banjo material. Gura is a cultural historian and Professor of English and American studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Through a study of the variations in the banjo's form, Bollman and Gura simultaneously offer insight into the elusive history of the instrument as well as unprecedented, detailed analysis concerning its rapid rise to popularity. In the introduction, the authors state that the purpose of their book is to provide a "history of the

manufacture and marketing of... the five-string banjo”¹ as well as to “emphasize the impact of different styles of banjo playing, dictated by changing tastes in music, on the design, manufacture, and marketing of the banjo.”² Bollman and Gura conclude this text at the end of the nineteenth century, but offer a brief glimpse of the direction the banjo took in the twentieth. They argue that at the end of the nineteenth century, the advent of the Jazz Age took the American population in another direction musically, yet true to their thesis, the banjo continued to change its form to meet the new demands. The five-string banjo became almost obsolete as manufacturers produced new four-string plectrum banjos as well as tenor banjos (or tango banjos) that were more suitable for the strumming patterns of Jazz. Because of the new methods developed to play the instrument, the physical shape of the banjo itself once again evolved to accommodate those changes.³

The authors go off on a tangent in their conclusion, arguing that more historical attention needs to be paid to the crucial role of the banjo in the development of ragtime and Jazz music, since many characteristics of African banjo music were direct predecessors to these musical genres. In discussing the banjo’s role in the Age of Jazz, the authors make the important point that at the turn of the century, after its popularity faded, the tradition of the five-string banjo was only carried on by the mountain whites of Appalachia and Piedmont North Carolina.⁴ Throughout this work, Bollman and Gura utilize quantitative evidence to support their claims, as well as focus on the sociological history as an impetus for development and change.

¹ James F. Bollman and Philip K. Gura, *America’s Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 1.

² Bollman and Gura, 1.

³ Bollman and Gura, 245-246.

⁴ Bollman and Gura, 246-250.

Dr. Cecelia Conway, Professor of English at Appalachian State University, is one of the leading authorities on the history of the banjo. She focuses on the instrument in Appalachia, but also, importantly, upon the introduction of the banjo by African slaves and their fundamental role in the development of American music. Her book, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study of Folk Traditions*, published in 1995, relates her fascination with the sounds of the old mountain banjo, and also her struggle to realize that without an understanding of its African-American context, her personal American socialization would never allow her to fully comprehend the instrument's influences and impact, much less its musical products. She states that her intention is to "show that the black banjo tradition arrives at the crossroads to many important musical developments"⁵ and that her study of key black banjo players of the region "...helps us understand the history of the banjo and its significance...for their songs offer new insight into the life of the common men at the turn of this century before the particular influences and widespread commercialization generated by the mass media."⁶ This book furthermore argues that the twentieth century folk banjo tradition continued to live on in the hands of mountain whites, and that this tradition is a product of over a century of cultural interaction between African-Americans and whites.⁷

Part of Conway's book argues that the cultural interaction between Africans and whites resulted in the development by African Americans of the blues. According to Conway, around the turn of the century, social pressure on blacks increased as Jim Crow laws became more restrictive. The continuous industrial development, as well as the

⁵ Cecelia Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study of Folk Traditions* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), xxiii.

⁶ Conway, xxiii.

⁷ Conway, 287-289.

pressure of urbanization, was also stressful for the black population, although she does not expand on this concept.⁸ Finally, the guitar became cheap and readily available, and all of this led to many blacks putting the banjo down and picking up the guitar to express their indignance and frustration. The guitar was more suitable for lyrical songs than the banjo, which was not easily transformed into a backup instrument. When African Americans dropped the banjo, they left it in the hands of mountain whites, which is why the instrument has been misconstrued in popular culture as a white Southern development.⁹ Bollman and Gura corroborate this in their conclusion.

Alyn Shipton's *A New History of Jazz*, published in 2001, focuses upon Jazz as the most important musical genre to develop in the last century. In his book he argues that the foundations of Jazz are based in nineteenth century musical traditions and entertainment, which, he writes, "is the antithesis of the view proposed by some Jazz historians, namely that the new music was somehow a spontaneous reaction to emancipation."¹⁰ In this study, he traces the development of Jazz all the way from the plantation to contemporary "postmodern" Jazz. His research regarding the banjo's role in the development of the musical genre not only supports that of the banjo scholars, but at times serves to provide more extensive conclusions regarding their conjectures.

Scholarship concerning the two banjoists of this study, Eddie Peabody and Bela Fleck, is practically nonexistent. Currently, interestingly enough, only one biography of Eddie Peabody has ever been written. This biography, written by the late Lowell Schreyer, was compiled from newspaper articles and self-published. It is only available by personal request from his surviving relatives, and I have been unable to obtain it.

⁸ Conway, 119.

⁹ Conway, 294.

¹⁰ Alyn Shipton, *A New History of Jazz* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), 12.

Biographical information on Bela Fleck is more abundant, yet the most accurate available comes from Fleck's internet website and consists of only a few paragraphs. The vast majority of information provided here regarding these two figures has been compiled through primary sources.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the rhythmic and percussive nature of the banjo crucially lent itself to the development of the musical styles of blues, ragtime and Jazz.¹¹ Scholarship has historically regarded the creation of blues, ragtime and Jazz music in the context of the end of the Civil War and as an African-American reaction to emancipation. Recent studies, however, have contended that approximately fifty years before the introduction of these musical genres, their foundations were being laid through the manner in which enslaved Africans were playing and popularizing music on plantations.

Throughout the nineteenth century on Southern plantations everywhere, generally three types of African music were being sung and played. These may be classified as a) secular songs concerned with toil and leisure; b) religious, highly-energized songs; and c) instrumental songs performed for slave owners and their families. Of these, the banjo and the violin were utilized to create and perform the third, instrumental type. By the end of the century, these performances by slaves for plantation owners had graduated into the formation of string bands involving the usage of the mandolin as well as the banjo or violin.¹² As a result of this genesis, by 1895 there was a conspicuous, unique quality to the African-American music that was being performed.¹³ Most importantly, the method

¹¹ Shipton, 6. Modern scholarship across the board corroborates this information.

¹² Shipton, 24.

¹³ Shipton, 22.

of banjo playing itself was a pivotal and unique component of this distinct African-American style, primarily due to syncopation.

Syncopation may be defined as “the technique of moving the emphasis of a phrase away from the main beats of the measure,”¹⁴ and is notated as early as 1855 by *Briggs' Banjo Instructor*, written by white banjoist Thomas Briggs. This banjo instructional presented music “which the author learned when in the South from the negroes, which have never before been published.”¹⁵ Moreover, in his instructional Briggs himself “gave hints at a more subtle layer of syncopation to be found in banjo playing through the additional emphasis given to certain notes by using the fingers to pick the notes.”¹⁶

It is precisely this syncopation as well as popular string band rhythms that laid the foundations for later blues, Jazz and ragtime music. Early twentieth century recordings of string band performances, as well as analyses of early musical notation, reveal telling evidence of the existence of ensembles utilizing banjos, mandolins, violins and guitars that were playing ragtime, blues and Jazz.¹⁷ Based on research of documentation regarding early banjo notations and tunes, scholars have inextricably related the syncopation and rhythm of plantation banjo songs with the rhythmic characteristics of ragtime and Jazz. Moreover, based upon the same logic and analyses, recordings of early twentieth century musicians “give a strong hint that Jazz rhythms and the mixture of improvisation and ragtime themes was much more advanced by 1916 than historians have

¹⁴ Shipton, 8.

¹⁵ Shipton, 8.

¹⁶ Shipton, 8.

¹⁷ Shipton, 26.

generally supposed.”¹⁸ All of this proves that “the history of Jazz has now been extended backwards. It does not begin with ragtime, Negro spirituals, or the songs of the early popular theater but with a few dozen banjo tunes which have the flavor of the plantation.”¹⁹

Though the banjo played a fundamental role in the development of Jazz, the instrument itself underwent a physical transformation when Jazz became more fully developed. The five-string instrument utilized in the blues and ragtime was dropped in favor of four-string, plectrum and tenor banjos that more effectively lent themselves to rhythmic background music instead of melodic lines. Though Jazz had been born on the five-string banjo on African plantations, “by the 1920s four-string banjos were the rage and supplanted the five-string instrument in the popular imagination.... by 1920, when Jazz came into its own, its rhythm sections all had large-rimmed banjos with heavy wooden resonators and only four strings.”²⁰ Due to this evolution of the banjo’s role from melodic dance beats to rhythmic accompaniment, the solo characteristics of the banjo were lost and forgotten.

In the hands of musician and entertainer, Eddie Peabody (a.k.a. “King of the Banjo”), the banjo was internationally repopularized as a melodic Jazz instrument. Beginning in the 1920s, Peabody played the banjo as a solo instrument for four decades, during which time his name became synonymous with the instrument.²¹ Because scholarship and sources concerning the life of Eddie Peabody are starkly lacking, we

¹⁸ Shipton, 27.

¹⁹ Hans Nathan, “Early Banjo Tunes and American Syncopation,” *The Music Quarterly* 42, No. 4 (1956): 471.

²⁰ Bollman and Gura, 249.

²¹ See Appendix A-1.

have to rely on forty years of newspaper articles to provide telling insight into his life story and accomplishments.

Born in Massachusetts in 1903, Eddie Peabody was handed a violin by his father on his ninth birthday. It was the first musical instrument he had ever had the opportunity to play, yet “from the moment he clasped it tenderly in his arms it was evident he was to be the master.”²² In 1917, when World War I broke out, Peabody enlisted in the Navy at the age of fourteen as a mandolin and violin player.²³ It was while on-duty in New London, Connecticut that the musician bought a banjo, because he “thought the boys on the boat would like it.”²⁴ Peabody gained much practice time with the banjo through entertaining his fellow shipmates for hours,²⁵ and it was “From this setting the great banjo player sprang into show business.”²⁶

After World War I, Peabody was discharged from the Navy, and he embarked on a musical career that “was destined to make him one of the all-time greats of the banjo.”²⁷ Though he incorporated other instruments into his acts, he soon found that “the banjo was the one that stopped the show every night. It had the sound that caught on.”²⁸ Right before the turn of the century and well into the twenties, banjos were widely used as

²² “Boyhood Gift,” *The Van Nuys News*, February 6, 1933, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

²³ “Eddie Peabody Lured Out of Retirement for Two Weeks,” *The Van Nuys News*, December 8, 1967, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

²⁴ “Eddie Peabody Lured Out of Retirement”

²⁵ Phil Peters, “Many Ex-Sailors Know Eddie – That Man With the Banjo,” *The Albuquerque Tribune*, January 22, 1964, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

²⁶ “‘King of Banjos’ Started on Subs During World War I,” *Anderson Daily Bulletin*, October 20, 1956, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

²⁷ George Laine, “Eddie Peabody Will Play When ‘America Sings,’” *Independent Press-Telegram*, July 13, 1969, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

²⁸ Vernon Scott, “Eddie Peabody back of the banjo, still strumming at 69,” *The Lowell Sun*, August 7, 1969, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

rhythmic backup in orchestras.²⁹ Exploiting his “gifted knack of mastering the most difficult of chords with no trouble at all,”³⁰ Peabody soon broke with societal conventions and innovatively became “one of the first to make it a lead instrument.”³¹ This significantly contributed to the exposure of the banjo’s vast capabilities, ensuring its survival as a viable instrument in American culture.

By 1926, newspapers across the country began to cite Eddie as “The Banjo King,”³² a nickname that has continued to stick until the present day. As Eddie’s career progressed, his act became more entertaining, his performances more in the spirit of vaudeville.³³ Eddie, “the famous West Coast ‘Banjomaniac’” who has “brought all his roguishness and smiling ways with him,”³⁴ fascinated the world with “odd stunts” such as “a banjo duet with each man plucking the strings of the others’ instrument”³⁵ that he performed with Jimmy Maisel in that year.

In 1928 newspapers record the story of a sensational performance by Eddie Peabody that secured his (and the banjo’s) future decades of fame. An article in the *Marion Star* reads: “Eddie Peabody... was a Cleveland boy who was struggling along, appearing here and there at entertainments and theaters” until “one night he was out on one of the WTAM programs and made such a hit with radio listeners he became a regular

²⁹ “‘King of Banjos’ Started on Subs”

³⁰ “‘King of Banjos’ Started on Subs”

³¹ “Eddie Peabody back of the banjo”

³² “The First Annual Syracuse Herald Radio Exposition,” *The Syracuse Herald*, February 10, 1926, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

³³ A video clip from 1932 depicting Eddie playing “St. Louis Blues” provides an excellent visual of his unique form of entertainment, and may be found at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=g3XrFvU2Pn0>.

³⁴ “Moscow Art Ensemble and Eddie Peabody on Vitaphone at State,” *Be Morning Herald*, September 24, 1927, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

³⁵ “Moscow Art Ensemble”

and most popular entertainer at the big Cleveland station.”³⁶ The article continues, “Eventually he went to New York and turned out a flock of records for several recording companies and then accepted a handsome contract in Los Angeles.”³⁷

Eddie Peabody must have made quite a performance on that WTAM program, because he finally began to make headlines. In 1929, the *Fresno Bee* announced him as the “famed banjoist.”³⁸ The *Oakland Tribune* ran a headline across the top of the page, accompanied by a full-length photograph of Peabody, announcing that the “world famous banjo boy” as well as the “national banjo champion” and “musical star” would be giving a “notable” performance because for the first time in history a “star of Peabody’s proportions has been permitted to make a radio appearance while appearing at the local theater.”³⁹

The following years document the rise to international fame of the “world’s greatest banjo boy.”⁴⁰ Eddie was applauded wherever he played while touring throughout Europe⁴¹. It is by this time that Peabody is comfortably referenced as “the King of the Banjo in the entertainment world, a musician who could “literally make a banjo talk.”⁴²

So it was that “Banjo King” Eddie Peabody made an enormous name for himself as banjo solo artist and entertainer in the years between World War I and World War II.

³⁶ “WTAM Specialty is Developing Banjoists,” *The Marion Star*, November 6, 1928, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

³⁷ “WTAM Specialty”

³⁸ “Studio Features Prominent on Bee Radio Bill,” *The Fresno Bee*, May 31, 1929, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

³⁹ “Eddie Peabody, Banjo Star, Play for KLX Today,” *Oakland Tribune*, June 19, 1929, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

⁴⁰ “Welcome Eddie Peabody,” *Fresno Bee*, May 31, 1929, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

⁴¹ “I’ll Take U.S.A. Verdict of Banjo King After He Completes European Tour,” *The Fresno Bee*, February 20, 1933, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

⁴² “Eddie Peabody, Famous Banjoist, Visits Town,” *McKean County Democrat*, September 20, 1934, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

He had successfully pulled the instrument out of the orchestra and placed it back into the spotlight. Then, in August 1941, “the banjo man and veteran of World war submarine service, [was] back in the Navy again – with gold braid on his uniform.”^{43, 44} During this round of service in the Navy, Eddie popularized the banjo as a melodic instrument throughout the world, flying 300,000 miles to perform a string of 6,000⁴⁵ shows, with the express purpose “to personally entertain the eager audiences at the Pacific ‘summer resorts’” which were strung out from Guadalcanal to the Philippines. Even though far from home and living amongst military personnel, Eddie Peabody’s banjo performances continued to contribute to his fame. In 1943 the *Wisconsin State Journal* published several reviews from servicemen regarding troop entertainment and morale. Though these quotes are anonymous, they are a testament to the work of Peabody during these years. One reviewer declared “it was the greatest night of entertainment I ever witnessed,” while another reads: “Lieut. Eddie Peabody, he is the world’s greatest banjo player... Man alive, you talk about banjo playing, he made other banjo players look as if they had a dishpan and nail instead of a pick.”⁴⁶ A final review aptly summarized the general sentiment, reading “Lieut. Peabody has such marvelous use of his fingers such timing and spirit in his banjo I never seen before. It was art and perfection in all its glory now you can say that again.”⁴⁷

⁴³ “Peabody Leads Band,” *The Capital Times*, August 21, 1941, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

⁴⁴ See Appendix A-2.

⁴⁵ “Eddie Peabody Lured Out of Retirement”

⁴⁶ “Roundy Says:,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, October 2, 1943, www.newspaperarchives.com (accessed February 11, 2008).

⁴⁷ “Roundy Says:,”

