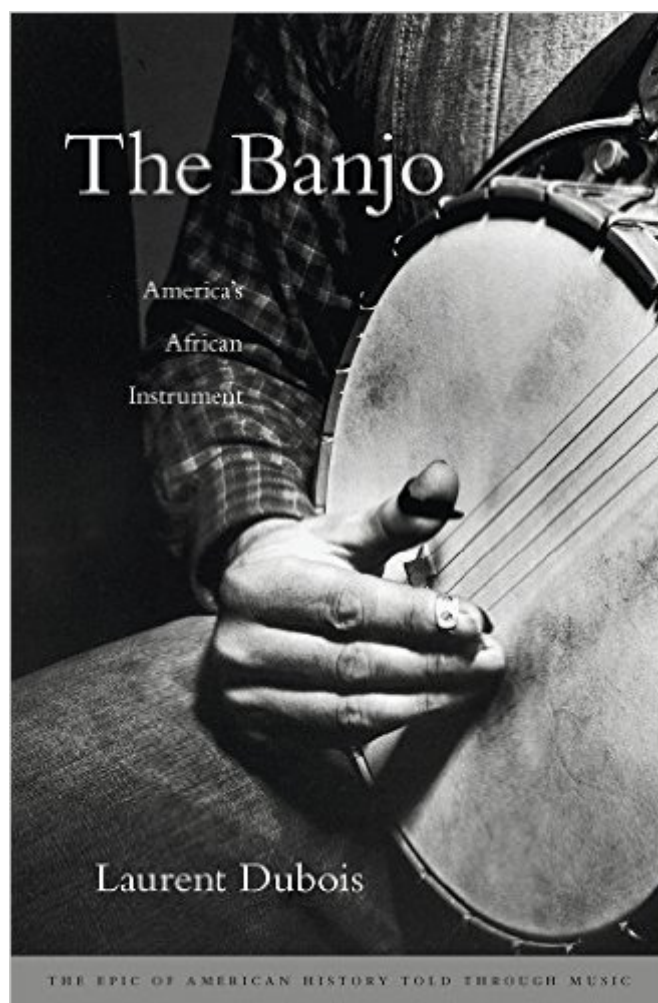


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The Banjo: America's African Instrument



Synopsis

The banjo has been called by many names over its history, but they all refer to the same sound—strings humming over skin—that has eased souls and electrified crowds for centuries. The Banjo invites us to hear that sound afresh in a biography of one of America's iconic folk instruments. Attuned to a rich heritage spanning continents and cultures, Laurent Dubois traces the banjo from humble origins, revealing how it became one of the great stars of American musical life. In the seventeenth century, enslaved people in the Caribbean and North America drew on their memories of varied African musical traditions to construct instruments from carved-out gourds covered with animal skin. Providing a much-needed sense of rootedness, solidarity, and consolation, banjo picking became an essential part of black plantation life. White musicians took up the banjo in the nineteenth century, when it became the foundation of the minstrel show and began to be produced industrially on a large scale. Even as this instrument found its way into rural white communities, however, the banjo remained central to African American musical performance. Twentieth-century musicians incorporated the instrument into styles ranging from ragtime and jazz to Dixieland, bluegrass, reggae, and pop. Versatile and enduring, the banjo combines rhythm and melody into a single unmistakable sound that resonates with strength and purpose. From the earliest days of American history, the banjo's sound has allowed folk musicians to create community and joy even while protesting oppression and injustice.

Book Information

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History & Criticism

Customer Reviews

I just finished this book. It isn't your typical banjo book. There are many good books about the instrument, but none about the cultural context in which the banjo evolved, from a gourd instrument first made by African slaves on Caribbean sugar plantations to the fancy instrument of the bluegrass, old time and folk musicians of today. It's very well written and researched. If you are interested in the history and cultures that gave us the banjo, this is the book you want to read. It covers early African origins, the banjo on the plantations and it's used by enslaved Africans, The Civil War, blackface minstrelsy, the bluegrass banjo, Pete Seeger and the folk revival, and the African American string bands. Good book!

I really enjoyed reading this. The depth of the history of the banjo, and of the slave trade (which goes hand in hand with the history of the banjo) is pretty amazing. My only issue with this book was that when it got to the early 1900s, and talked about artists who had actually recorded their work, I had to stop every couple of minutes to look up someone else, and listen for a while. It made for enjoyable, but very slow, reading.

Very detailed, very in-depth history of the banjo. This is not a light read, but it is an informative one. Should go on your shelf next to all your other banjo books.

This is the most thorough history of the instrument that I've seen, and it goes fairly deep into the history of the music that the banjo is known for. It's detailed, but not pedantic. The author is a professor, but his book isn't written in the dry tone of a research paper that I've seen in other books on this subject. I got it from the library, and I'm half tempted to purchase it outright. I'd like it on my bookshelf.

A great book on the history of the only all American instrument. A wonderful and insightful read. Recommended for all banjo players.

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