Book traces the bango’s journey from plantation to Grand Old Opry

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler, Special to The Florida Courier

Accompanied by a ragtag group of men from Senegal, the Caribbean and the United States, Lincoln Agrippa Daily made his living playing the banjo. Caressing the instrument, Daily declared that it was “more than a gal, more than a pal; it’s myself.”

Originating in Africa, the banjo made its way across the Atlantic along with millions of slaves.

According to Laurent Dubois, a professor of romance studies and history at Duke University, they made it an American instrument “that provided a sense of rootedness in the midst of displacement.”

In “The Banjo,” Dubois takes on “the difficult, even oxymoric” task of understanding the meaning of this iconic folk instrument since the 17th century. Drawing on a wide array of sources, including memoirs, journals, travel accounts, slave narratives, engravings, paintings, and plays, he provides a fascinating account of the role of the banjo in plantation life; blackface minstrels; hillbilly and bluegrass music; and the trenchant political lyrics of folk singer Pete Seeger.

A joyful diversion

For centuries, Dubois reminds us, accounts of banjo playing “were refracted through the lens of debates about slavery.” The banjo gathered African-Americans together, gave them moments of solace and joy, and at times a vision of what freedom might be like.

For Southern Whites, banjo performances “proved” that Blacks were “a gay, harmless, unthinking race,” freed by slavery from life’s burdens. Indeed, traders used music so often when they presented slaves for sale that the auction block became known as “the banjo table.”

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Black and white abolitionists, of course, maintained that the banjo’s music was a sign of “any uncommon degree of happiness,” but rather of “an uncommon depression of the spirits” which drove them to “sacrifice their rest for the sake of experiencing for a moment a more joyful oblivion of their cares” and the brutality of “the peculiar institution.”

Cultural change

In the mid-19th century, Dubois reveals, White music aficionados attempted to “elevate the banjo.” They distanced the instrument from its African and African-American origins; moved from loud stroke-style playing to what they regarded as more sophisticated fingerpicking; altered the banjo’s construction, adding a modern metallic sound; and changed its musical repertoire.

By 1900, mass-produced banjos appeared in “all corners of the culture and landscape of North American and beyond.”

A mainstay at the Grand Old Opry in Nashville, in recorded “hillbilly” tunes; in the bluegrass music of Earl Scruggs, who wowed audiences with his three-finger Carolina picker style (and in time his metal finger picks); a central symbol in the 1972 movie “Deliverance”; and Pete Seeger’s favorite instrument, the banjo, Dubois points out, was increasingly coded as “white.”

Still vital

This development, Dubois writes, was “a remarkable, almost surreal, act of historical silencing.”

And yet, he hastens to add, the origins of the banjo “at the center of the experience of slavery remained vital and alive.” After all, that origin has “made the instrument capable of finding new homes everywhere it went and creating a sense of home along the way.”

These days, Dubois concludes, the banjo is everywhere. It backs up Taylor Swift, is featured in Mumford and Sons and Old Crow Medicine Show and the solos of Bela Fleck. And, of course, it remains a staple for street musicians.

The musicians to come, Dubois predicts, “will keep it living, twisting, and spiraling through our cultural and sonic landscape.” They will know – or should know – that the banjo was invented by African artisans who grew, harvested, and dried gourds, and attached skins to them with tacks or chords. And that the sounds of string humming over skin “crossed cultural boundaries and created new solidarities.”

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