Banjo Perceptions: The Cultural Trajectory of America's Instrument

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the intersectionality of culture, imagery, and public perception through the trajectory of a specific artifact, the banjo. At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, If you were to ask the average person about their perception of the banjo, the likely answer may come with associations to cowboys or hillbillies, country/bluegrass music, and rural, working-class Caucasian people. The absence of associations with ragtime, jazz, and blues music, as well as with African American culture is in stark contrast to how the banjo would have been perceived a hundred years earlier. Thus, this study begins by establishing the premise that within mainstream society, the banjo remains largely misunderstood. The absence of the banjo's associations with ragtime, jazz, and blues, as well as African American culture, is conspicuous considering the banjo's origins within the community. The following analysis aims not only to correct misperceptions, but to uncover how, and perhaps more importantly, why they did occur.

Scholarship on the interplay between imagery and sound has explored many aspects of this inter-dependant relationship. However, serious attention has not yet been spared where imagery of the banjo is concerned. The unique story of the banjo has a potential to deepen understanding of the larger cultures with which it is articulated, how these cultures are perceived and how perceptions developed over time. By employing existing theories on critical image analysis in the interpretation of symbolism, I aim to contextualize the image within its social environment. The banjo, I submit, is unique among its peers as an object of study providing insight into other important artifacts and phenomena associated with America's folk culture. The banjo ultimately acts as an access point to understanding various aspects of American culture.

Résumé

Cette étude vise à explorer l'intersectionnalité de la culture, de l'imagerie et de la perception publique à travers la trajectoire d'un artefact spécifique, le banjo. À la fin du XXe siècle et au début du XXIe siècle, si vous demandiez à une personne moyenne quelle était sa perception du banjo, la réponse plus probable serait celle des cow-boys ou des habitants des montagnes, de la musique country/bluegrass, des communautés blanches et ouvrières. L'absence d'association avec le ragtime, le jazz et le blues, ainsi qu'avec la culture afro-américaine, contraste fortement avec la façon dont le banjo aurait été perçu cent ans plus tôt. Pour cette raison, l'étude commence par établir le principe selon lequel, dans la société dominante, le banjo reste largement mal compris. L'absence d'association du banjo avec le ragtime, le jazz et le blues, ainsi qu'avec la culture afro-américaine, est évidente en considération des origines du banjo au sein de la communauté. L'analyse suivante vise non seulement à corriger les perceptions erronées, mais aussi à découvrir comment, et peut-être plus important encore, pourquoi elles se sont produites.

Bien que les études sur l'interaction entre l'image et le son aient exploré de nombreux aspects, l'imagerie associée au banjo reste encore peu abordée. L'histoire unique et fascinante du banjo offre pourtant un potentiel pour approfondir notre compréhension des grandes cultures auxquelles il est lié, ainsi que de la manière dont elles sont perçues dans leur évolution à travers le temps. En m'appuyant sur les théories existantes de l'analyse critique de l'image et du symbolisme, je cherche à contextualiser cette image dans son environnement social. Le banjo, à mon avis, est unique parmi ses pairs en tant qu'objet d'étude. Sa puissance en tant qu'artefact permet d'éclairer d'autres objets et phénomènes importants liés à la culture populaire américaine,

et devient finalement un point d'accès précieux pour comprendre divers aspects de la culture américaine.

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Introduction

Initiation

My entry into the world of the banjo and banjo music was atypical, or so I thought. As a professional musician, I was already a veteran having plied my trade as a guitarist and singer. For many working musicians, a mid-career adoption of a new instrument, such as in my case with the banjo, is not uncommon. However, what I believed to be unique to me were my own feelings surrounding the banjo as a person of colour. Being a Canadian of Afro-Caribbean and Jewish diasporic communities, and it may be fair to say my Afro-Caribbean status has had greater impact on my life experiences, I found this puzzling. Nevertheless, when I began playing banjo, I wasn't fully conscious of this; in my mind, there was no relation between myself and the banjo or the music associated with it beyond the desire to learn and play the instrument.

In 2012, I worked as a freelance songwriter for a music publishing house. The company mainly provided original works for television advertisements. Acoustic music had surged in popularity, which spurred the success of groups such as Mumford and Sons, The Lumineers, and Grammy award winner Bon Iver.[1] Their music invoked the past and was labelled folk-pop and Americana. With this type of music broadcasting over both TV and radio, dominating the popular sphere, advertisers were keen to emulate the sound for their commercials, attaching the currency of its perceived "hipness" to their products. Facing a deadline, I sought inspiration along those lines. And so, I was inclined to pick up the banjo owned by the studio.

Now there I was, tentatively picking out melodies and their appropriate harmonies. After years as a guitarist playing mainly soul, RnB, jazz, blues, gospel, rock, reggae, and hip hop this

[1] B. E. Cohen, *I've Always Been a Rambler: An Exploration of Authenticity in Contemporary Folk Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 11.

represented a marked departure from my comfort zone. The sound of the strings resonating over the membrane began to captivate me. There was something special about this instrument, something that called to me, that made me want to explore the instrument further than what was required to score 30 to 60-second television commercials. Professional pressure had led me to the banjo; however, it quickly became clear this instrument offered much more than an additional revenue stream. I struggled with mixed feelings about the banjo, the music I was making, and my mixed, Caribbean identity. My newfound passion was tempered by apprehension. Will this be accepted by my own music community? Will I be accepted by the country/americana/folk music community? Will I be ridiculed? Will I be seen as an imposter? To some degree, I certainly felt like an imposter. I took note of these feelings, resisted them, and forged ahead.

My apprehension wasn't completely unfounded. Among those who knew me, there was the odd crack about the banjo sounding awful, or comments tinged with a hint of derision, the likes of "I didn't know you were going country". And, as anticipated, while my skills improved, I did not receive calls for banjo work from either the community of musicians I knew or the country/folk/americana community. I created my own work, and the banjo helped set me apart from the crowd. That said, there was mostly support from people within my entourage and I gradually became accustomed to what was once a marked departure from my comfort zone. Over the following eight years, the banjo was an increasing part of my artistry and career. I was not particularly interested in its origins. I was preoccupied with improving my playing, composing banjo-based music, and incorporating it into my live performances. Typically, the origins of an instrument one has chosen to play are not the prime concern among musicians, and initially, it was not a particular concern of mine. Had someone asked, I perhaps would have had a vague, unclear sense of the banjo's connection to Africa, however, I would not know how to reconcile

this vague notion with the clearer notion that the banjo's origins and its music were aligned with white, southern, mountain dwellers.

Epiphany

During pandemic isolation, I came across Walter Isaacson's October 18th, 2019, PBS interview with Rhiannon Giddens about the history and origins of the banjo.[2] According to the account given by Giddens, I learned the banjo was invented by enslaved Africans, firmly established in the Caribbean, and subsequently introduced to mainland America via the intra-American slave trade. Having been a banjo player the previous nine years, a working musician the past 20 years, and a person of Caribbean descent my whole life, I was flabbergasted. My mind whirled. How did I not know this? How many more people didn't know this? What more don't we know? Giddens herself expressed these very sentiments. Then I heard something in the interview that caught my attention. A graduate of Oberlin Conservatory, where she studied opera, Giddens spoke of mixed feelings about the banjo and its music when she first began to play.

Giddens spoke of her mixed heritage. Being black, white, and indigenous, she drew natural parallels with the music she was presenting. Like her own heritage, the music was mixed, and in similar fashion, where one element of this mix ended, and another one began was fluid and intangible. Giddens, along with millions of other American youths, was taught square dancing as a part of her middle school education. As she recalls, it was presented as "America's dance. By America we mean white America," she clarifies, "I never thought it had anything to do with me. So, when I started calling contra [square] dances I kind of felt like, you know, we like to say, I was the raisin in the oatmeal, you know. I was used to being the only one, and I kind of

[2] Walter Isaacson, interview with Rhiannon Giddens, *Amanpour & Co.*, (October 18, 2019): S2019, E2080, PBS, https://www.pbs.org/amanpour-and-company/watch/rhiannon-giddens.

felt like I was sort of inserting myself into somebody else's tradition." Giddens describes the revelations she inevitably encounters regarding African American involvement in this tradition in the same terms one might describe an epiphany.

> I got into it because I loved it, I loved the banjo and I loved the sound, and then when I started to find the history, I went wow! And then I found out black people probably invented [square dance] calling, wow! That we played for these dances, wow! We had a huge piece of creating what has been set aside as this ethnically pure white thing, and I'm like this is a problem. Because the actual truth is a lot more interesting, and it's more indicative of who we are as a people. (Walter Isaacson, *Amanpour & Co.*, October 18, 2019, E2080, PBS)

This resonated strongly with me, recalling my own thoughts about my identity as a person of mixed ethnic backgrounds, of colour, and the culture surrounding the banjo.

I was coming to the realization that what I had thought was a personal experience unique to me was in fact a shared experience. In the first chapter of her book Black Country Music, Francesca T. Royster echoes these sentiments while attending a country music festival. "Why is it that listening to country music is so loaded for so many Black listeners like me? Country music performance spaces can be places of community and alliance over racial lines, but they can evoke and memorialize visceral memories of racialized violence; lynchings; the indignities of Jim Crow; gender surveillance and disciplining; and the continued experience of racial segregation in urban, suburban, and rural spaces in the North and South."[3] (Royster, F. T. 2022, 5). As if to punctuate this, on the album *Songs of Our Native Daughters*, songstress Amythyst

[3] Francesca T. Royster, *Black Country Music: Listening for Revolutions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022), 5.

Kiah sings “I pick the banjo up and they stare at me, cause I’m Black myself.”[4] I admit, the realization of this shared experience came with some surprise. What I assumed were my own private insecurities surrounding my love of the banjo and the music associated with it was not at all unique. A spectrum of very different people shared these sentiments with the common threads of being black and having a love for country music.

Going forward I read, watched, and ingested information about the banjo’s origins and its place in history. I set the objective to build and learn to play a modern replica of a fretless gourd banjo. Additionally, within my limited sphere of influence, I endeavoured to do what I could to change popular knowledge and perception of the instrument. However, the feelings described earlier surrounding race and identity, and the questions they raised remained and nagged at my curiosity. Considering its origins and how deeply associated with the African diaspora the banjo was, how did the banjo, and the bulk of the music associated with it, become so disassociated from its origins? How did it become associated with notions of whiteness? How was this concept disseminated? Who, if anyone, was responsible? And more importantly, to what extent there is a reason, why did this happen? The answers seem to lie in a tangled mess of history, and the banjo appears key to its unravelling.

La Raison d’Être

My primary concern is with the five-stringed banjo. It acts as an access point to a more accurate and fascinating story of cultural transmission which happens between cultures when they meet in unprecedented circumstances. The work therefore is to challenge prevailing notions while being attentive to the cultural tapestry that includes all stakeholders. The questions that

[4] Rhiannon Giddens, Amythyst Kiah, Leyla McCalla, and Allison Russell. *Songs of Our Native Daughters.* Smithsonian Folkways, 2019.

immediately arise pertain to how the dominant narrative took shape, and how did the more accurate story become obscured. I had an awareness that I was far from being alone in my misperception of the banjo's provenance. Indeed, a cursory survey of friends, colleagues, and music professionals fortified my suspicion that many, perhaps most people shared the same misperception I once did.

The banjo must be regarded within the context of an overarching American folk culture. It is a culture that is difficult to define. It is fluid, shapeshifting, replete with various, at times contradictory meanings, uses, and articulations. As an important part of American folk culture, the banjo shares with its companion instruments, such as the fiddle, many similar articulations. This American folk culture intersects with itself over and over, with varying sub-genres of music articulated with dance and theatre. It does not seem to care for typical cultural boundaries, adopting musical influence from wherever seems fit, all while signalling the sound of convention. The banjo on its own, as well as the overarching culture, invoke characters such as the blues musician, the cowboy, the travelling entertainer, the labourer, and the 'hillbilly' to mention a few.[5]

Additionally, the banjo invokes spaces that become relevant to our understanding of both the instrument and the greater folk culture. Settings articulated to this culture include the farm or plantation, the Appalachian Mountains of Virginia and the Carolinas, or the bayous and lowlands of Louisiana, settings which signal the American South. Sometimes these spaces hold contradictory meanings, such as the banjo's invocation of the home versus its attachment to spaces associated with itinerancy, or the instrument's association with upper-class society while

[5] C. W. Ellison, *Country Music Culture: From Hard Times to Heaven* (1995), xvii.

maintaining a working-class identity. These contradictions betray the complicated, nuanced nature of American folk culture in general, and banjo culture in particular.

There is a vast collection of peripheral phenomena associated with American folk culture. For instance, it will be necessary to address the dances, such as square dancing, that accompany this music. Indeed, the banjo has been a part of a rich culture that includes everything from fashion, attire, and lifestyle, to articulated values and principles. Often the attitudes that shaped perception of the banjo are reflected in similar attitudes toward fiddle music, square dancing, mountain folk, westerns, and cowboy hats, to name a few examples. We can examine the shifting tides of these perceptions and attitudes through representations in art, literature, and other cultural phenomenon over time. Inevitably, the work will require analysis of elements adjacent to the banjo. References to the banjo from music publishing, commercial art, cartoon animation, theatre, film, and television all play their respective roles in advancing a perceived mainstream identity for the instrument.

It may be argued that the cultural industries are powerful influencers on how we perceive a great many things, and our instrument of focus, the banjo, can't be excluded. Certainly, much of the analysis emerges from this premise. Simultaneously, it's conceivable that the manner in which cultural industries portray society is primarily a reflection and product of the greater social environment. Through post-civil war reformation, the upheaval of Jim Crow, World Wars, prohibition, economic depression, civil rights movements and into the new millennium, we can detect attitudes toward art and entertainment shifting in accordance with each historical moment. Indeed, the dual role of art and entertainment as both reflector and influencer of society and how the power to manipulate these roles is engaged and negotiated is revealing how notions, such as that which surrounds the banjo, get established. Through this point of view, we also attain a

better understanding of the evasive question, “does life imitate art, or does art imitate life?” The answer emphatically “yes!”

Sources and Methodology

The thinking behind this analysis is greatly influenced by Mieke Bal’s book *Material Image-Thinking*. Bal expands on Sigmund Freud’s concept of “theoretical fiction”, applying the idea beyond Freud’s purely theatrical application into other realms of literature and visual arts. “This Freudian theoretical fiction is one “genre” of what I call “image-thinking”. Freud’s narrative interprets the fictional space of the theatrical stage as image. “Others can be visually compelling, cinematic, or poetic, such as some concept-metaphors.” (Bal, M. 2021, Introduction). In doing so, Bal frames image making and image consumption as a form of thinking fashioning an analytical approach that has been a useful tool for contextual analysis of imagery. The theory is employed in the following analyses to the extent one is distilling an image down to thought or message.

Images for the analysis were selected by prompt using ChatGPT and the standard Google search engine. Prompts were limited to simply “banjo” or “the banjo” with a filter set to imagery, as well as “images of the banjo”, “images of the banjo in fine art”, “images of the banjo in commercial art”, and “images of the banjo in sheet music”. Prompts for images of the banjo from specific periods in time also provided some of the data for our analysis. Race, age, gender and class considerations were not included in any prompts or searches to produce the sample imagery. Each image is verified by publisher, as well as publishing location and date. A total of 299 images from the 19th century to the present were collected for use in a quantitive analysis. There must be taking into account the exaggerations and distortions caused by the limited sample

size while acknowledging the patterns which reveal the grander picture made clearer by the analysis.

When applied to images of the banjo, Bal's image thinking forces us to engage directly, as well as peripherally with its history. For example, the overarching folk culture with all its intertwining articulations, constructs and associations presents a textured layout, essentially affecting perceptions of the banjo, as the banjo in turn affects perception of the overarching culture. Politics, identity, and culture intermingle, again affecting perceptions as they are in turn affected by perceptions. Capitalism, market forces, and the commodification of music both draw on and drive these perceptions. Any image presents us with effects on the image creator's perception, as well as how the image affects public perception. The back-and-forth nature of affect and effect creates an environment where thematic material tends to repeat, and it is through repetition that perceptions harden. Bal's theories on image-thinking and perception form the methodical backdrop for our contextual analysis.

To further contextualize our findings, we turn to Alan Lomax and Richard Middleton. Tempered by Middleton's critiques, Lomax's theories on ethnography and styles of music (which led him to develop his system of "cantometrics") are a useful tool for understanding the intermingling of identity and music. Middleton sees value in such theories in a qualified sense, and it is this qualified sense the analysis will employ. (Middleton, R. 1985). To understand the influence of capitalist endeavours, market forces, and the commodification of sound we draw on the work of David Brackett and Karl Hagstrom-Miller on genre and the fledging recording industry. The incredibly powerful force of the market indelibly marks perceptions of culture, including the banjo.

In 2024 Beyoncé announced her upcoming album *Cowboy Carter* with the release of two singles, “16 Carriages” and “Texas Hold’em*”,* featuring Giddens on banjo. Although many have categorized the album as country, she herself classified it as “country-infused” when she announced it at *Super Bowl LVIII*. Still, the album gives Beyoncé the honour of being the first black woman to top *Billboard’s Top Country Album* chart. The previous year, country singer Luke Colmes released his cover of Tracey Chapman’s 1988 hit *Fast Car*. Chapman became the first black woman to have a number-one song on Billboard’s Country Airplay chart with a solo composition. Other recent developments have ignited a furry of interest surrounding African American involvement in country music in a moment that seems tailor made for the discussion at hand. What was once relegated to specialized message boards, online groups, academics, and enthusiasts is currently enjoying the attention of being relevant to the mainstream. As these developments occur, recent works such as *Black Country Music: Listening for Revolutions* by authors, Francesca T. Royster and others are useful for placing this moment in context with its past.

Keystone Artefact

Considering these developments, more attention is being turned to country music’s past where race and the industry’s perceived exclusiveness are concerned. An effort is being made to highlight black involvement in country music, both historically, and present day. Considering this, one may wonder, why such importance is placed on the banjo. Attempting to set aside my own biases, it is my conviction the banjo is a unique instrument, sharing characteristics with only a handful of comparable artifacts. It is one of the only surviving artifacts of African origin whose progenitors can be traced to specific African places and peoples. It shares this with certain folk stories, dances, and a small number of other musical instruments, such as the marimba. Ever

since the 19th-century speeches of Frederic Douglas it has been argued the African American community has been denied a sense and claim of its own history. (Douglass, F. 2016). There is a sense the past has been too often neglected, obscured, misrepresented, and forgotten. In 1926 historian Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History announced the 2nd week of February as Negro History Week, which President Gerald Ford extended to a month in 1976.[6] Efforts such as these have yielded positive outcomes, and ought to be applauded. However, there are those, such as actor Morgan Freeman, who feel segregating black history from American history dooms the former to continued obscurity.[7] Whatever the case, despite these efforts, it appears there remains a deficit where understanding of African American history is concerned, one the banjo has the power to reduce.

The banjo, as will be demonstrated, is a keystone artifact threading through pre-colonial times to the modern era. Its early creolization in the Caribbean is evidentiary of a consolidation of disparate peoples from the West African coast. Born out of creolization, the banjo contributes to the bringing together of varied African groups. A survival tactic, the banjo becomes a tool for this very purpose. The instrument became associated in popular imagination with the plantation and the enslaved African, despite the fiddle enjoying greater popularity among blacks generally. (Epstein, D. J. 2003, 130-135). As previously mentioned, the banjo, and the various signifiers that have been attached to the instrument, are intertwined with artifacts such as the fiddle, and other folk instruments, along with the canonized musical repertoire of the culture, and dances associated with this music, such as square dance. (Jamison, P. A. 2003, 26-29). The banjo allows access to other cultural phenomena, such as attire, venue, and stage props among other elements,

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[6] Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933), 67-72.
[7] J. R. Lemar, "Morgan Freeman and 'Black History Month,'" *IBLOGalot*, February 3, 2013, https://iblogalot.com/2013/02/02/morgan-freeman-and-black-history-month/.

which all come into consideration and can be treated as artifacts in their own right. Since they share many of the attached signifiers with the banjo, they will be useful to illustrate the construct of cultural idioms, and further our understanding of the banjo's place within these idioms. As we shall see, the banjo represents a unique access point to a wider culture, occupies a unique place within that culture, and offers a unique perspective which illuminates underexplored aspects of the culture.

Chapter 1: A Walk Through the French Quarter:

Nostalgia

[Sule Heitner][8] "I was in New Orleans, just days before the opening of the 2024 New Orleans Jazz Festival. The city was beginning to fill up with the tourists and jazz fans one might expect. Being a college town, there were also a fair number of people there to tour potential schools or attend convocation as finals were winding down. I took a walk down Royal Street in the French Quarter and decided to take in the local art galleries. The majority of the paintings consisted of works by locally based artists depicting New Orleans life. As one might expect, images representing musical themes featured highly. My initial impression of New Orleans' art world was of an active and robust scene. Royal Street is dotted with several small galleries displaying works by artists with both local and international credentials.

Upon walking into the first gallery, I noticed the many musically themed paintings. The vivid reds, blues and gold leaf were dazzling. I wondered how the artist would depict the banjo. I looked around the shop among the depictions of horn ensembles, rhythm sections, with gleaming brass and cymbals, but to no avail. There was no rendering of a banjo. I found this curious, so I asked the attendant, an older gentleman, if there were any such offerings in the shop. He lamented, no, there were no paintings representing the banjo in the collection. Without prompting, he explained the importance of the banjo to New Orleans' cultural history, and yet, few modern depictions of New Orleans' musical culture include the instrument. He, a retired professional musician formally based in Nashville TN, displayed a knowledge of the subject. He mentioned that the banjo was rarely seen on the bandstand, and thus it was rarely portrayed in

[8] [New Orleans, LA. April 24, 2024]

these artist depictions. He alluded to the instrument having been relegated to certain music that relates to specific points in time. The somewhat subtle reference to the banjo's nostalgic appeal was familiar to me. Was the banjo today simply a relic of the past? Was the cultural work done by the banjo all about conjuring up memory? I felt instinctively that although this may be a major element of the banjo's cultural work, it was an over-simplification. The banjo surely does more cultural work than simply triggering recollection.

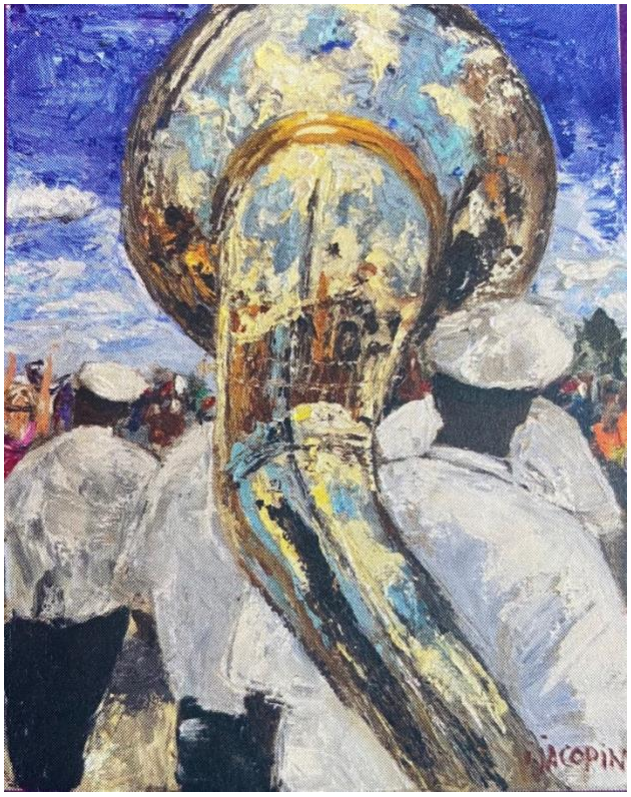

Figure 1: Isabelle Jacopin oil on canvas.

Questions surrounding the banjo's attachments to class, gender, community, geography, national identity, and of course race abound. Furthermore, these attachments intertwine with each other as well as with the instrument's appeal to nostalgia. Therefore, what is truly happening with this back-and-forth between past, present and future?[9]

Next, I walked into the gallery of local artist Isabelle Jacopin. Jacopin is a perfect example of the type of artists one finds along Royal Street. Born, raised, and trained in France, Jacopin fell in love with and relocated to New Orleans in the early 2000s. Her paintings are vibrant, colourful, and lively, reflecting the vivid reality of the city. She has an attraction to the 2nd line parades famous in New Orleans for their impromptu funeral celebrations. One can feel the vibration of such an event coming through the canvas. Brass instruments dominate the space,

[9] See footnote 8

reflecting sky, clouds, and crowds of parade-goers. These images paint a stunningly iconic picture of New Orleans' musical culture, the 2nd line parade, but again, there is no banjo to be found. [Figure 1: Isabelle Jacopin oil on canvas.]

Perusing through more than two dozen galleries, one after the other, there were no depictions of a banjo. There were plenty of paintings depicting music being played, surprisingly none had a banjo. The absence of this instrument in these artist depictions of New Orleans' musical culture had begun to seem more than conspicuous. Why, in a city and region that was so important to the banjo, and where the banjo was so important, is it absent now. I wandered into a few more galleries, until finally, there it was, the sole painting depicting a banjo player that I found after several hours. The artist, Peter O'Neill, depicts many of the busking street musicians who work in the French Quarter. The painting in question is of a group that commonly sets up across the street from his gallery.[10] [Figure 2: Peter O'Neill "Tuba Skinny", oil on canvas]

As far as paintings go, I find this one rather pleasing. Seven men set up to play around a table where they have CDs for sale. You can imagine the sound as it bounces off cobblestone streets, the camaraderie between the musicians, and the music itself. But what does the image say about the banjo? Firstly,

Figure 2: Peter O'Neill "Tuba Skinny", oil on canvas

[10] See footnote 8

this image tells me the banjo may be seen less often, but it is still here. The instrumentation, clarinet, trombone, trumpet, guitar, banjo, washboard, and the titular tuba, suggests a sound and a genre. This is somewhat reinforced by the musician's attire, which I would describe as ambiguous, and could range from the 1920s to the 2020s. When I see this painting, I hear Dixieland jazz, perhaps zydeco, or some of those 2nd line rhythms. Here, the banjo, along with its peers, is signalling the past. "CDs for sale" certainly breaks the continuity, letting us in on the fact that this is indeed a more recent moment. However, even the table, its display and the sign itself have a timeless feel. The sign could say "Hot Tamales" or "Peanuts for sale", or any of the fare a late 19th, early 20th century vendor might have sold. This feels like nostalgia.

As the afternoon waned and foot traffic began to tick up, street performers such as those in the painting set up their makeshift stages to play to the crowd. One ensemble, a sextet, featured a trombone, clarinet, trumpet, double bass, guitar, and low and behold, a banjo. This was of the four-string variety known among Dixieland jazz and swing players. The group was channelling a sound heard on recordings from the likes of John Lomax, his son Alen, and Mack McCormick. The music had the quality of a sonic primordial ooze where blues, jazz, country, and folk swam within waters of vaudeville and travelling shows. The sound of the banjo coupled with the technique of the banjoist played its part in creating the illusion and achieving the inevitable time warp. It would appear the banjo is still an important part of New Orleans' cultural history, but not so much its present. It conjures up images of an earlier time, of ragtime, and Dixieland jazz. It doesn't appear to live as much in the New Orleans of the 21st century but seems to act more as a conduit to its past."[11]

[11] See footnote 8

Off to the Races

There is another important factor to take into consideration; in both the painting and the live representation of the banjo, the musicians are all Caucasian. This would not have been the case a hundred years earlier. I do not want to suggest that colour segregation in music is somehow modern. However, it may be interesting to take a look at imagery over time and compare how artists conveyed race in relation to the banjo, taking note of how attitudes surrounding race may have changed, and how they may have stayed the same. For that matter, a comparative study may be enlightening for other issues concerning the banjo, such as gender and class associations. Indeed, the banjo has graced the canvas countless times over the years, and with only four physical artifacts in existence, it is these images that often inform researchers on the banjo's history. Some paintings, like "The Old Plantation" are famous and have been studied in depth.[12] It would not be an overstatement to say that images have been an important primary source for banjo researchers since scholarly study of the instrument began. Still, a comprehensive bank of images representing the banjo is yet to be curated.

As far as imagery goes, there are many categories to consider. There is the fine art of the likes I witnessed in New Orleans' French Quarter. Many of these older works of fine art representing the banjo are on display at museums such as the Metropolitan in New York City or the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. In some cases, they have been repurposed as cover art for sheet music, instructional pamphlets, and books. On its own, this is revealing. However, cover art for sheet music provides yet another large set of images to compare over a long period of time. These images, so tightly bonded to the music associated with the banjo, also tell a

[12] R. B. Winans et al., *Banjo Roots and Branches* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018):172–175.

compelling story. Other categories of art include graphic satire and comic strips, which graced the daily newspapers since the 1800s. These grow in popularity around the Great Depression of the 1930s. In addition to the artwork, the work involved in creating a comic strip intertwines with both literature and animated film and plays another important role in how we perceive the banjo. Portraits, posters, advertisements, and other promotional material for banjos provide another large set of images for analysis.

These images refer and defer to each other and work in tandem with their literary, music, film, and television counterparts to create the overall effect. Each category will require its own analysis; however, it is how these categories interact together over time that will be truly revealing. It will be interesting to note how a detectable shift in attitude toward the banjo in one medium is reflected in others. I will limit the still images for comparison to, fine art, artwork for sheet music, album art, advertisement, show posters, and comic strips. Sheet music art and album art can be considered a sub-division of one condensed category, same as advertisement and show posters. In both cases they are far too similar in how they engage with the banjo and the viewer, however, they will still each merit their own separate comparative analysis. As they say, a picture tells a thousand words, so the challenge will be to limit the scope to the banjo, and how it intersects with notions of gender, class, age, ethnicity, and race.

Folklorists and song collectors

The methods and practices of folklorists and song collectors has been instrumental in shaping our understanding of country, americana, and folk music, as well as the fiddle, slide guitar and banjo, to use a few examples. Perhaps attempting to define the contours of these musics is as good a place as any to begin. The music we're concerned with eludes labels. Those applied to this music shift with time, as do definitions. For the nascent recording industry,

descriptors such as old-time, mountain music, eventually gave way to country, or country and western, and Americana, among others.[13] However, it is important to note the connection to previous popular genres, such as coon songs, vaudeville, and minstrelsy, lending and borrowing repertoire from each other. When attempting to pin down the dizzying array of labels as they're applied to sound, one cannot escape the notion that understanding of these labels is incumbent on the concept of a people or "folk" to whom this music is attributed.

It is important to note that this concept of a folk was a development in and of itself, a product of enlightenment thinking. The people referred to as the folk were previously thought of as the unwashed masses or rabble. Under the feudal systems that governed European societies of the time, these people were the peasantry, subjects of a Lord or King. Their stories, songs, dances, and craftwork were generally not considered worthy of study, received little scholarly inquiry, and went largely undocumented. With the advent of modernity, industrialization, and mass migration, and the perceived threats to society they presented, these cultural artifacts gain currency, increasing in social value. The concept of a peasant class shifts to notions of the people, or folk, with some important caveats. According to Benjamin Filene, "not just anyone counted as 'folk'". Quoting German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder in his book *Romancing the Folk*, Filene observes the following. "Herder distinguished between true *Volk* (primarily rural peasants) and the urban 'rabble in the streets,' who 'never sing or rhyme but scream and mutilate.' To Herder and other early collectors, true peasants were pure and artless and usually exotic."[14]

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[13] David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 113-114.
[14] Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2-3.

The folklorist in music and song collecting is heavily influenced by early 19th-century developments in the field of philology and the work of the Brothers Grimm. This work helped ignite intense interest in the scholarly practice of folklore collection. Not only did their work inspire the transcription and collection of what had been orally transmitted stories; it also inspired collection of other cultural phenomena, such as folk art, dance, and ultimately music. From early on, folklorists expressed a sense of urgency around their work, claiming that in the face of modernity, preservation of folk cultures is now or never. In his 1911 article *British Ballads in the Cumberland Mounta*ins, Hubert G. Shearin writes "The folklore of the British Isles yet lingers here untouched and unchanged." He goes on to "make an emotional plea for collectors to hurry and track down other British ballads 'before they have faded into the shadows of the past.'"[15] This sense of urgency is reiterated over time, being a motivator for collection activities late into the 20th century. The urgency to preserve a perceived music of the people leads collectors to seek authentic representations of the culture, and the impulse to ignore, overlook and disregard what are characterized as modern incursions into the culture. This would include representations of popular music, music considered low-brow or vulgar, and music originating from outside the "folk" community. Many collectors admitted to making "corrections and additions" to the ballads they found. These editorial liberties did provoke expressions of outrage among peers. However, the practice continued unabated long into the nineteenth century. "From the start, 'discovering' folk cultures involved reimagining them. Herder, the Grimms, and their followers romanticized and transformed the cultures they sought out."[16] These approaches and

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[15] Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2-3. Filene discusses the romanticization and transformation of cultures by early folklorists in *Romancing the Folk*, 22-23.

[16] *Journal of American Folklore* 24 (1911): 123-125. The sense of urgency expressed by folklorists is addressed by Hubert G. Shearin, in "British Ballads in the Cumberland Mountains,"

methods of collecting arguably create false perceptions of purity. Under this model, the collector is placed as the authority over what is authentic and what isn't, leading to interesting results, especially when viewed in practice. Examples might include the collecting of "authentic" Negro spirituals that overlook those elements that modified it from its original West African song forms, or a field recording of an "authentic" English ballad from the US that ignores its banjo accompaniment. With modernity and industrialization driving mass migration, bringing disparate peoples from far afield into close proximity, cultures change. The purity sought by collectors only exists as a construct. In its place are music changed by the human contact and experiences shared between migrant peoples.

This may seem like shaky ground on which to build concepts of folk cultures, notions of tradition, and the foundations of how we understand and integrate the various styles that contribute to American popular music. However, it is important not to underestimate this ideal for purity. It is a common thread running through the discourse surrounding traditional musics; a filter through which we observe, and a template to organize our understanding of folk cultures. The template resembles something like this; cultures were once "pure". Modernity begins to infiltrate and contaminate cultures, rendering them impure. Collectors descend on a culture to document, record and "collect" it before it ceases to exist. One must accept the supposed purity before one can accept its contamination, necessitating its preservation. The paradox for collectors is that from the perspective of any given moment in the present, the past has already been contaminated.

Consider this scenario. A mid-20th-century folklorist is collecting English and Scottish ballads in Appalachia. They are looking for what is considered authentic Anglo-Saxon culture, transported to the Americas, and untouched by modernity by way of mountain isolation. The

folklorist locates a woman who sings such music, and they set up to record her. The song is English, but the delivery sounds distinctly American to the ears. There is the use of sliding notes, rhythmic syncopations, and melisma in ways that no English performer would sing. Furthermore, the song is accompanied by banjo, an instrument indigenous to the Americas. The folklorist presents this as pure Anglo-Saxon culture found in the Appalachian Mountains. They take superficial note of the distinct singing style, while simultaneously downplaying it, making little mention of outside influence. This is exemplified by the observations of Cecil Sharp in his writings. "They have one vocal peculiarity, however, which I have never noticed amongst English folk singers, namely, the habit of dwelling arbitrarily upon certain notes of the melody, generally the weaker accents. This almost universal practice, by disguising the rhythm and breaking up the monotonous regularity of the phrases, produces an effect of improvisation and freedom from rule which is very pleasing."[17] Sharp may mention the influence of African American traditions at some point; however, he does not do so here. In like fashion, there is little attention paid to instrumental accompaniment. In the case of the banjo, it is likely such attention would weaken articulations supportive of Anglo-Saxon national identity. Likewise, the 19th-century collector may hear the Negro spiritual, or work song sung by enslaved or newly emancipated Africans and be tempted to ignore European influence, overlooking more than a century of African American engagement with European and Indigenous musics in the Americas. The purity sought by these collectors never truly existed, yet these concepts of purity permeate discussions surrounding traditional music. And, as we will see, this ideal of purity holds currency within folk and country music culture, as well as with our specific understanding of the banjo.

[17] Sharp, C. J., Campbell, O. D., & Karpeles, M. (1932): "English folk songs from the southern Appalachians."

The predicament I describe, that of the collector or folklorist aiming to preserve a pure example of folk culture before it is made impure by the forces of modernity, leaves an indelible mark on our understanding of music. Today, much is made inside the industry and among audiences, of the notion of artistic authenticity. For example, one often finds claims of "authenticity" when scrolling through artist biographies. Furthermore, industry, press, and audiences alike often applaud artists for this elusive quality. Discussions between performers and listeners, around record stores, open jams, rehearsal halls and performance spaces unconsciously engage in this concept. This notion of purity opened a heated debate over Bob Dylan's decision to go electric. It appears again in topics on whether the Beatles produce disposable "bubble-gum" pop, or "real," authentic art. A similar argument erupts in the late 80s, with Pete Townshend of *The Who* arguing on behalf of Prince, against his own fans.[18] The concept of authenticity, wrapped up in the notion of purity, leverages ideas about who performs what music, what instruments "belong" to which genres, and what repertoire belongs to which tradition. These are but a few examples of questions that hinge on notions of authentic versus inauthentic, or pure versus impure. Indeed, the concept acts as a filter, perhaps one of many, through which we discern the value of art.[19]

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[18] Polcaro, B. "Pete Townshend's Opinion on Prince." *Rock And Roll Garage*, June 2, 2024. https://rockandrollgarage.com/pete-townshend-opinion-on-prince/. In a 1990 interview with Guitarist Magazine, Pete Townshend praised Prince's music and artistry. The interview sparked an exchange in the letters section between himself and fans over several months. (Polcaro, 2024)

[19] Anthony Shay, *Folk Dance and the Creation of National Identities: Staging the Folk* (Springer Nature, 2023), 103–107.

Chapter 2: Imagery

The Banjo as Icon

Imagery is an essential factor for examining perceptions and evolving attitudes on a given subject, particularly in the context of music. As Leppert notes, it is "precisely because musical sound is abstract, intangible, and ethereal; lost as soon as it is gained," that "the visual experience of its production is crucial for both musicians and audience alike to locate and communicate music's place within society and culture."[20] Film scholar Isabel Machado further asserts that for an image to qualify as an "important cultural text," it must meet three criteria: (1) reinforce or rework past ideas, images, and stereotypes; (2) capture the sociocultural spirit and anxieties of the present; and (3) establish a legacy that shapes future representations and perceptions. Machado explains that studies of the South in film, for example, often either focus on a specific period to examine how films express particular views or survey broader timeframes to track shifting images and perceptions.[21] In this analysis, I prioritize a broader timeframe, guided by Machado's three criteria.

With a sample of 299 banjo-related images from various sources, the first analysis, a quantitative approach, organizes these images chronologically. Since these images interact across contexts, they are only categorized by their publication dates, allowing a view of how the collective chronology of images might reinforce or challenge popular ideas, ultimately shaping public perception. In a second analysis, images are grouped by type—fine art, graphic art, posters, sheet music, album covers, advertisements, promotional materials, and cartoons—and

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[20] Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), xxi.
[21] Ian Machado, "Revisiting *Deliverance*: The Sunbelt South, the 1970s Masculinity Crisis, and the Emergence of the Redneck Nightmare Genre," 2017, 4.

then organized chronologically within each category. This approach allows for a progression to emerge within each category, offering insights into evolving portrayals of the banjo. To further support the findings from these analyses, additional contextual information on the artists, subjects, and artworks is included, helping to substantiate conclusions drawn from both the chronological and genre-specific analyses.

As mentioned earlier, images don't exist in their own exclusive, hermetically sealed compartments or categories. They interact with each other, collectively creating a narrative. They exist within a culture. To examine these images as they interact within the culture requires an alternative way for them to be organized. The 299 images were collected using the standard Google search engine and AI using prompts such as "banjo images", or "banjo images" affixed to one of the aforementioned categories, or to one of the specific time periods. This was done in a deliberate attempt to curate a collection of images representative of the popular culture of their time as uninfluenced by preconceived notions as possible. All things considered, the sample size of 299 mixed images representing the banjo is admittedly small, and the decision to place them by decade was made to condense both the analysis and its results. Yet, in spite of the caveats, the quantitive approach appears to yield results which reflect and reinforce conclusions suggested by other observations and analyses.

A Quantitive Method

For this analysis, the 299 images were divided by publication date into decades. This is with the exception of the 1800s, which is established as a starting point for the analysis. Of course, we expect the sample size to vary from decade to decade. The total number of images for each decade would be divided and counted by certain criteria. Is the banjo pictured alone or held by a player? If held by a player, is the player a human or non-human character, (frog, cat, foul-

mouthed, thieving robot etc.) If human, is the player black, white, or other, (images where human players are neither black nor white are notably uncommon), male or female, adult, or child. The final criteria are class with working, middle, and ruling class designations. To further break down the data, we count how many portrayals of black banjo players are male, female, adult, child, working class, middle class, and ruling class. We count the same for the portrayals of both white and, where applicable, other banjo players. After converting the raw data into percentages against their respective totals per decade, the data was entered into a graph generator. The resulting graphs reveal fascinating changes in how the banjo has been presented over time.

The method as it has been executed here has its flaws. As mentioned, at 299 images, the image bank is small. A larger sample size and decreasing the time increments from a decade to five, or two years could sharpen focus on the change in presentation. Furthermore, while most criteria were easily classified, there were those criteria which required a more interpretive eye due to some ambiguity. For example, I categorized images of blackface minstrels as 'other' since the image clearly depicts black people, yet most viewers understand the actors under the makeup are white, thus complicating the question of identifying the person who holds the banjo in these images. When considering an image where the banjo is portrayed alone, but is personified, possessing a face, hands, and feet, is it alone or is it a non-human character? In such cases, I elected to classify the image as both the banjo alone and as non-human character. For this last set of criteria concerning class, there is something to consider. Class is not always obvious. It can be more difficult to read from the raw image and requires taking subtle cues from aspects such as the setting, or the subject's attire. Deliberately excluded was any consideration of whether the image signalled rurality or urbanity. This decision was made to keep the data from becoming too

cumbersome and overbearing as it was already overcrowded. In any case, the question of rurality or urbanity will likely be better addressed in a more context-driven analysis.

Establishing a Baseline

We begin with the 1800s, a period of time known for shifting attitudes toward culture in general and the banjo in particular. Nonetheless, the social phenomenon we're looking to analyze seems to be a 20th-century one, since the banjo was firmly attributed to the African American diaspora at the turn of the 20th century. Therefore, the images collected of the 19th century are intended for the setting of a baseline, giving us a snapshot of where public perception of the banjo was at the start of the 1900s. The sample size for the 1800s is by far the largest as it covers greater than a decade of time. The images are mainly from the latter decades of the century, with a smaller percentage of pre-civil war images.

The majority of the subjects in these images, that is the person holding or playing the banjo, are black, suggesting that both the producers and the consumers of these pictures associated the banjo with the black population. However, the images, particularly those from the latter 1800s, reflect a surprising level of diversity and inclusiveness. Represented among these images is a large minority of white subjects playing the banjo. It must be noted that where the subjects of these images are human, they are either black or white, which in itself is suggestive of how the banjo was perceived and concerns America's preoccupation with race. As counterintuitive to diversity and inclusiveness as this may seem, a deeper look into the data is very revealing. Among the images there are many representations of women and children, and class associations are well dispersed between them. White, black, men, women and children subjects are portrayed as both working and middle class. Portrayals of ruling-class subjects are

exceptions and outliers. These consist of caricatures of Lord John Russell for defending the Extension of Suffrage[22], and Edward, Prince of Whales practicing banjo.

Taken as a whole, these images produce a picture of the banjo as enjoyed by both black and white players of all ages, genders, and classes. The default subject is certainly male, black, adult and working class. However, the number of outliers exposes a more open attitude toward who we expect to see holding a banjo. There are, of course, those images caricaturising and stereotyping black players, even some apparently meant to disparage and dehumanize. However, there are a great many of them that contradict this message and seem to intentionally humanize and sensitize their subjects. This is particular to, but not exclusive to those images classified under the category of fine art. Indeed, the 19th century, like all time periods, is a complicated time with its own set of competing ideas and values. Therefore, to take it in as a whole for the purpose of establishing a starting point for the 20th century may seem like a daunting task. Suffice it to say, one can argue these images produced a nuanced, multi-faceted and diverse picture of the banjo. By the beginning of the 1900s, 80% of images depicting a banjo player portrayed them as a black person and 20% portrayed them as white.

During the first two decades of the 20th century, the banjo seems to enjoy the same mainstream popularity as it did in the 19th. There is an increase in the portrayal of white banjo players and a decrease in portrayals of black banjoists. Still, by 1910, a plurality of images portray black players at 44.4%, while white players are close behind comprising 38.8% of the images. While the images suggest a diversity in the identity of the banjo player, they also reflect a diversity in the music associated with the banjo. With its heavy association with minstrelsy,

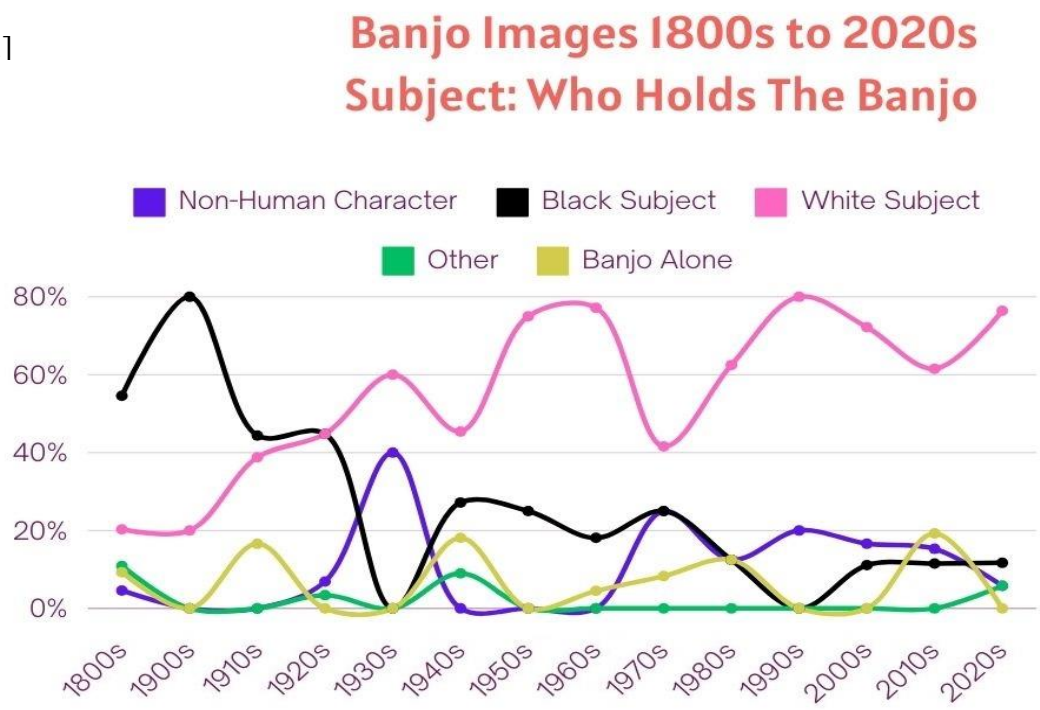
[22] A cartoon from Punch magazine (1850): Wood engraving and letterpress

efforts were made in the latter part of the 19th century to "elevate" the instrument from its perceived lowly status. Promoting the instrument as a parlour instrument and promoting it to women, in particular, are two characteristics of this effort. Promoting a musical style called classic banjo, heavily influenced by European art music, is another. The banjo repertoire of the 20th century's first decade included this music, along with proto-jazz, blues, "coon" songs, rags, marches, polkas, reels, as well as the string band music which so heavily influenced minstrelsy. According to the image record, banjo players between 1900 and 1910 were not exclusive to select genres of music, they participated in a wide range of popular styles. This could be interpreted as a reflection of diversity in player identity.

By the Numbers

Take the first five categories identifying the subject of an image. Within these categories, we begin to see some patterns. [Table 1.] The banjo alone category is represented by the yellow

[Table 1.]



line, note how as of 1930 it moves counter to the pink line representing white subjects. The relatively low numbers reflect a preference for depicting the banjo in the hands of a player, yet the banjo alone as the subject remains fairly consistent image at an average of 6.25% from 1930 to the present. I suspect a larger image sample size would further establish the consistency of banjo alone images while sharpening focus on the converse nature of its movement compared to the line representing white subjects.

The use of a non-human character as a subject in these images seems to intertwine with portrayals of both black and white banjoists. Represented by the purple line it is inconsistent, spiking in the 1930s at 40%, up from 6.9 in the 1920s. The spike coincides with an increase in portrayals of white subjects and a dramatic dip in black subjects. In the 1940s, 50s, and 60s the use of a non-human character in depictions of the banjo drops effectively to 0%. Its resurgence in the 1970s at 25% happens along with a decrease in the white subject category, as well as a slight increase in the black subject category, and the banjo alone category. Note the inverse correlation occurring between other criteria during the last spike in the 1930s. This could suggest an interconnectedness between these images. Further analyses may prove fruitful toward explaining the phenomenon.

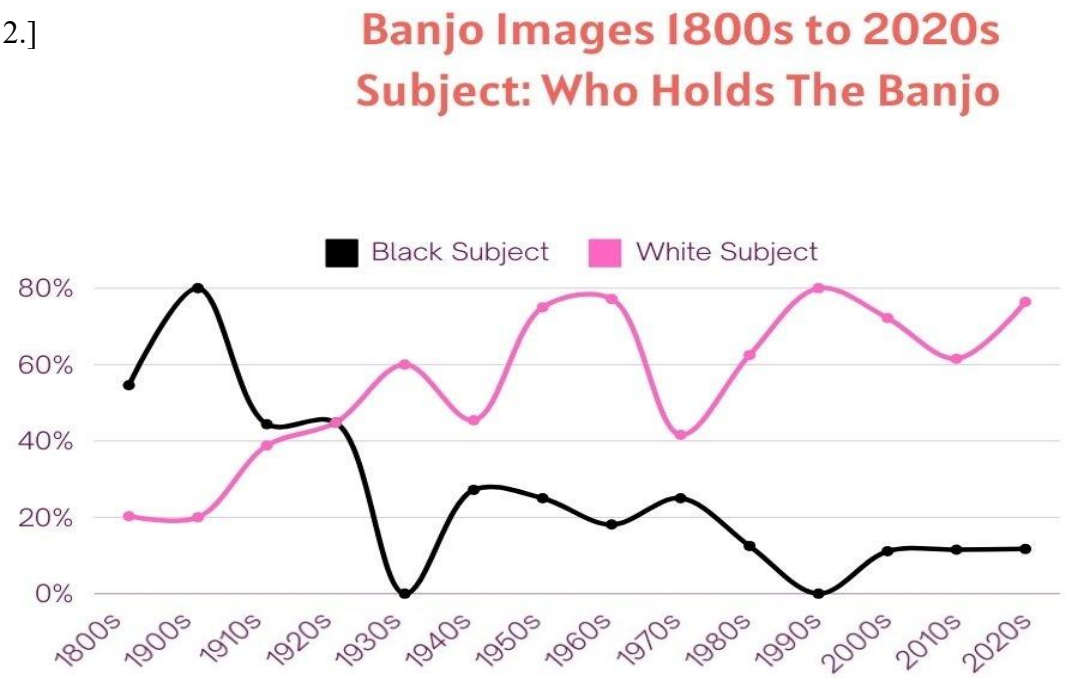
At the beginning of the 20th century, black subjects make up the majority of subjects featured in images holding a banjo, beginning with 80%, and dropping to 44.4 during the proceeding decade. It is in the 1930s where we detect a major shift. Representations of black banjo players decline to nil, and the numbers never recover dominance. From this point onward, the highest ratio of representation happens between 1940 and 1950 at 27.2%, with the average from that time to the present being 14.21%.

The banjo was first documented among white musicians early in the 19th century and artistic representations of these activities quickly followed. Among those images attributed to the 1800s, 20.3% portray a white banjoist. The decade from 1900 to 1910 sees virtually no change with images of white banjo players making up 20% of total images. The 1910s sees a minor surge at 38.8%. Although still in the minority, portrayals of white banjo players begin to close the gap with black banjo players. The decade of the 1920s shows parity between the number of depictions of white and black banjoists, each at 44.8%. In the 1930s, portrayals of white banjoists become the dominant subject portrayed in these images at 60%. This dominance persists to the present. Fluctuating over time, they range as low as 41.6% in 1970, as high as 80% in 1990, and average 65.18% from the 1930s to the present.

The 'other' category appears to act independently of all the other categories. [Table 1.] The category of 'other' was included due to impositions from the image bank itself. Out of all the 20th century images only 3 classified as 'other'. This category is reserved for human subjects who are neither black nor white, present some ambiguity, or are difficult to designate. For example, in the 1940s, an artist's rendering of a banjo, along with a host of other instruments, graces the cover of an album by Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five. Although we know the central figure of a man holding a trumpet is likely supposed to represent Armstrong, the figure is racially ambiguous designating this image to the 'other' category. From the imagery attributed to the 2020s, there is a woodcarving representing an Asian man playing banjo. The lack of emphasis on non-black, non-white players as subjects in these images ought to be considered conspicuous, and relevant to popular perceptions of the banjo.

We can safely conclude that at the turn of the 20th century, images of the banjo featuring black players dominated all other group identity designations. [Table 2.] After the 1930s,

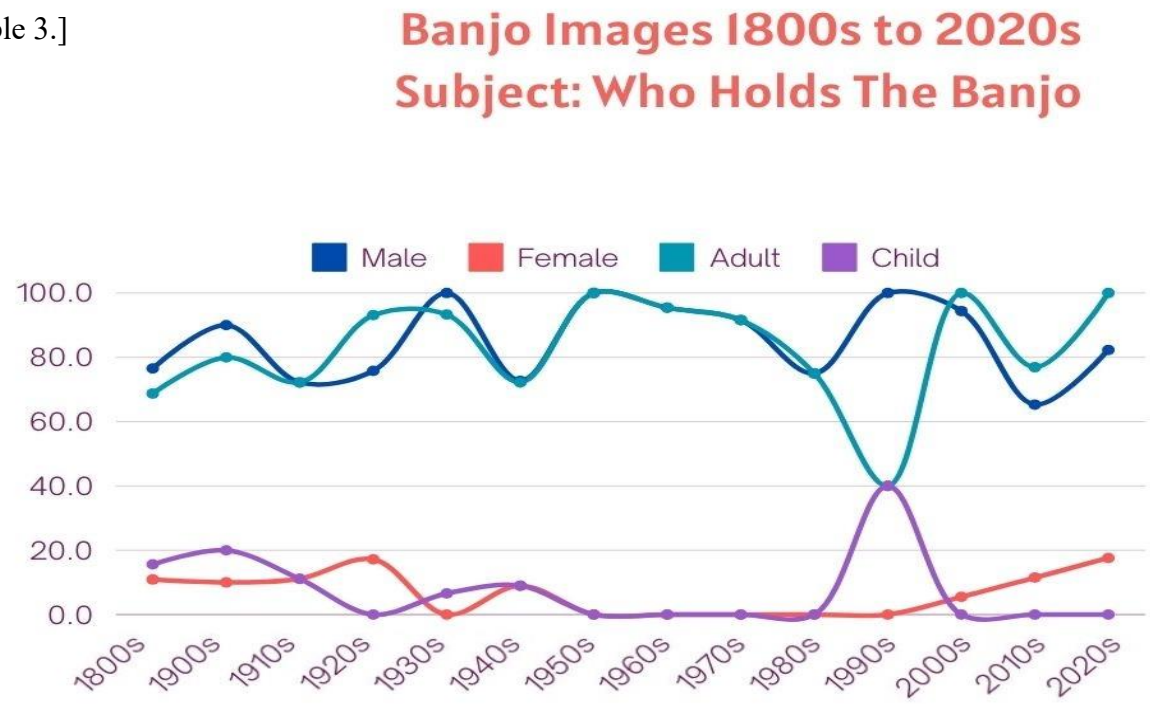
[Table 2.]



depictions of white players as subjects overtook portrayals of black players and a low volume of images depicting black banjo players persisted. Whether this reflects the perception of visual artists who create these images, or the public who consume them is indeterminate. A larger sample size of images would likely even out some of the more dramatic curves in these line graphs, however, it is also likely one could expect much the same pattern and trend as reflected by these graphs.

Of the 299 images, 85.05% portray a male figure and only 6.62% are female. [Table 3.] The egregious disparity is due in part to five consecutive decades, six decades in total producing no images from the 299 representing female banjo players. From the 2000s to the present, we see a steady climb to 17.6%, overtaking the former high mark of 17.2% set in the 1920s. Further

[Table 3.]



analysis is required to determine why such lower rates of representation occur for women, particularly around the latter half of the 20th century. The numbers do not represent accurate levels of female participation, female players were indeed active as banjo players throughout the history of the instrument, including those decades where visual representation is low. Indeed, the low number of visual representations of female players belies known personalities, such as Roni Stoneman, hailed as "The First Lady of Banjo," who was active throughout the 1960s and 70s as a member of the cast of Hee Haw. There was also Karen J. Dalton, singer, songwriter, guitarist, and banjo player associated with the Greenwich Village folk music scene of the 1960s to name a few.

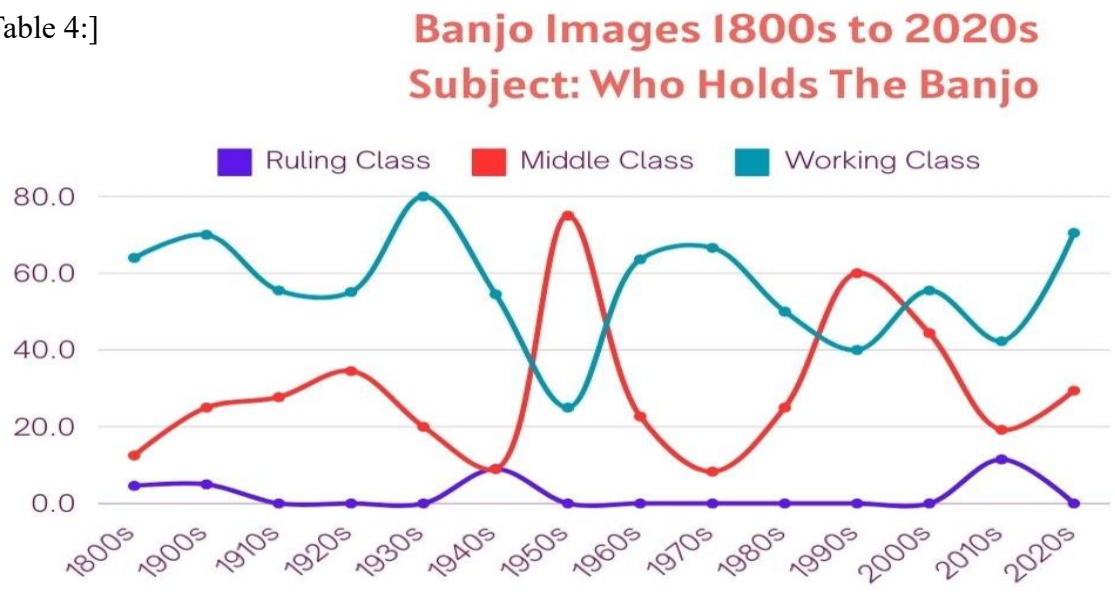
Representation of female banjo players at the beginning of the century is better. At an average of 12.75% for the decades from 1900 to the end of the 1920s, and peaking at 17.2% in the 1920s, the portrayal of women and girls playing banjo was not uncommon. We see a similar trend at the

beginning of the 21st century, with an average of 11.5%, and peaking at 17.6% in the 2020s, nearly halfway through at this point. Suffice it to say, female banjo players are underrepresented among images of the banjo, a situation suggestive of popular notions of the banjo as an instrument chiefly played by males.

Representation of juvenile players of the banjo loosely follows that of females. From the 1950s to the present there are no representations of children playing the banjo, apart from the decade of the 1990s. Note the spike in the purple line on the graph. [Table 3.]

This is an aberration due to one image featuring four young people, each with a banjo. It is a cartoon panel featuring a man being led to a chamber by a demon for his eternal damnation. The demon refers to him as "Maestro" and ushers him into the chamber with the banjo-wielding, troublesome-looking children. Otherwise, there would be no child banjoists represented in these images from the 1950s to the present. We see the greatest number of children portrayed with the banjo during the 20th century's earlier decades. From 1900 to 1950, young players made up an

[Table 4:]



average of 9.34% of these portrayals. Children's portrayals dropped to zero in the 1920s, followed by women in the 1930s. Both groups experienced a brief resurgence in the 1940s but disappeared almost entirely for the rest of the century, apart from occasional exceptions, such as a cartoon panel.

Class is a more curious category to assign. [Table 4.] We are asking, is the human subject with the banjo of working-class, middle-class, or upper-class status. Answering this question requires a more qualitative stance. The images often display class through signifiers such as setting, intent, and attire. There are some ambiguities to mention. Consider the banjo in the hands of a performing musician, or professional entertainer. The opulence of the theatre and the stage attire of the performer can at times be mistaken for affluence and belie the working-class nature of the performer's role in society, making it difficult to discern the class of the subject. Therefore, in making these judgments attention was spared on critical analysis of what is being signified about the subject, and the banjo from a perspective of class. At times this required looking beyond what clothes a person was wearing and applying an understanding of the social role played by the subject. Included in this category are depictions of farm workers, cowboys, trailer-parc dwellers, truckers and, as previously mentioned, entertainers. Included among the middle class are teachers, preachers, people pictured with their own car or sub-urban home, female and child subjects tend to be in this category, and again, entertainers. The ruling class category includes British Lord John Russell, Edward, Prince of Wales, and Kurt Filpots, banjo playing super villain from DC comics.

We clearly see a consistent association with the banjo and this notion of the working class throughout the decades. At its lowest point, in the 1950s, images signalling the working class make up 25%. Although less dominant, the middle class is also well represented by these images.

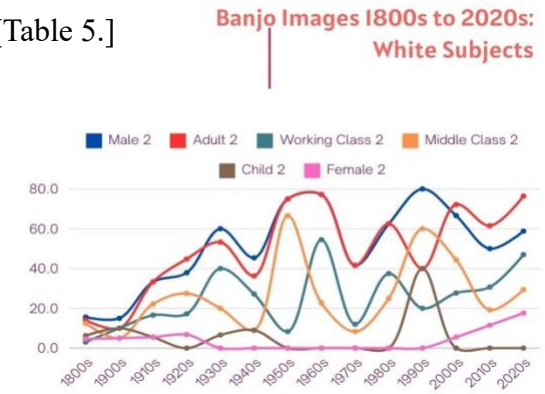
From 1900 to the present, working-class images make up 56%, while middle class accounts for 30.78%. In the 1950s middle-class representations of banjo subjects climbs to 75% amid a drop in working-class subjects to 25%. This is due to several album covers where attire matched certain 1950s middle-class trends. Similarly, the 1990s sees a jump to 60% in middle-class representations of the banjo. This is caused by a larger number of cartoons produced for daily newspaper publications. As the readership of these newspapers were primarily middle class, funnies sections were intended to appeal to middle-class sensitivities. Hence the higher number of middle-class subjects.

The data allows us to analyze these images from alternate perspectives. Each category has the potential for further examination. How, for example, do percentages of male, female, adult, child, working-class, and middle-class, map out when considering portrayals of black, or white subjects exclusively. Looking at those numbers produces fascinating result yet again. When looking at results from portrayals of white banjo players, we see a general pattern indicative of child, working-class, and middle class, map out when considering portrayals of black, or white subjects exclusively. Looking at those numbers produces fascinating result yet again. When looking at results from portrayals of white banjo players, we see a general pattern indicative of diversity. [Table 5.] The graph lines are not convergent, with each of the six categories represented clearly by its respective line. When looking at portrayals of black subjects the lines do converge. From 1960 to the present, there are two lines. [Table 6.] One line indicates an association between masculinity with adulthood and working-class status. The other indicates an association between femininity with childhood and middle-class status, which from 1960 to the present rests at 0%. The beginning of the 20th century is dominated by images of black banjoists as male, adult, and working-class, yet black banjoists portrayed as middle-class,

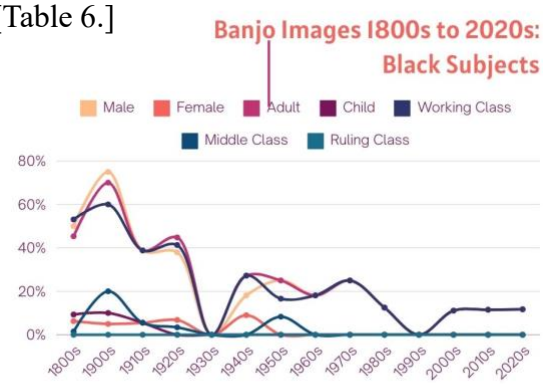
female, and young person persist indicating a greater willingness to see diversity in the personage of the black banjo player. After the 1950s, images of black banjoists are exclusively male, adult and working class. The homogenization of the portrait of the black banjo player leads to more questions. As this coincides with a drop in the number of depictions of black banjo players, how do both phenomena in tandem affect perceptions. Is there perhaps a correlation to notions regarding black children, male black children in particular, as adults?

What can we glean from a quantitive analysis of these 299 images, and what questions arise as a result? We can conclude that through the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, images of banjo players were portrayed overwhelmingly as black and that this number dropped dramatically in the 1930s, remaining low up to the present. Simultaneously, the numbers of white subjects depicted with banjo became dominant and remain so up to the present time. Portrayals of banjoists also become more masculine, adult, and working class over time. Depictions of female, youth and middle-class banjoists begin at a low point and generally descend over time. Female, child, and middle-class depictions of banjo players become the exclusive domain of images portraying white subjects. Meanwhile, after 1960, images of black banjoists become homogenized, portraying exclusively male, adult, and working-class subjects. What does this suggest about the popular perception of the banjo? This analysis may not directly

[Table 5.]



[Table 6.]



address the question; however, at least among those who participated in creating and publishing such images, we can detect a sudden shift in how the banjo was portrayed.

I am working with the assumption that a larger sample of random images would produce similar trends and patterns. Logical though it may seem, it is still an assumption. Although unlikely, a larger sample size could possibly challenge the notions suggested by this analysis. However, we can also apply an alternate way of looking at our 299 images. By taking a cross-section of images, a selection representative of the various categories for these images, and contextualizing them, the image bank becomes yet another source.

A Contextual Analysis; The 1800s

There are several considerations to make when conducting a contextual analysis of images. For instance, in many cases, documentation on the artist who created a work is often quite illuminating as to an artist's motivations and intentions, and these images were created for a purpose. Was the image intended for gallery exhibition, or to adorn the cover of sheet music or record jacket? Was the image intended to be promotional, such as an advertisement or poster for a show? Was it a postcard, or greeting card? How these images were intended to be consumed by their creators and publishers may also be revealing, which brings us to another consideration: impact. To the best of our ability, we must attempt to assess how an image was received by the public. Some images made greater impact than others, entering into the public conscience and becoming a type of collective reference. Others were likely created, published, made an incremental impact, and were subsequently forgotten.

Most works that have accompanying documentation about artists, careers, and purpose come from the category of fine art. This type of data, especially what may have motivated the work, can be very useful for our purposes. The 1800s provide some beautiful examples. Much of the fine art collected from this period share humanist qualities. Regardless of if the subject is black or white, male or female, adult or child, these images portray their subjects in more sensitive manners. However, this motivation to portray the subject with dignity is in contrast to other images from the 1800s, notably the kind of images one might find on posters and in magazine publications, which can be interpreted as having a more dehumanizing effect on the subject. Exaggerated features, large lips, mouth, nose and eyes, wild poses and garish attire are the markers of these works. The image of an anthropomorphic primate with a banjo is indicative of portrayals of Black people and culture during the Reconstruction era when their claims to citizenship were under direct attack. The image above from the Library of Congress is listed under the performing arts posters section. [Figure 3.] It is credited to Calvert Litho Co. Detroit (1892) and was intended to promote a vaudeville touring act.[23] For most, this is interpreted simply as a caricature of a black banjo player, and that's likely how it would have been received.

[Figure 3: Calvert Litho Co. Detroit (1892)]

[23] Calvert Litho Co., *African American, Seated, Playing Banjo*, ca. 1892 (Detroit, Mich.: Calvert Litho Co.), photograph, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2014637036/.

American artist William Sidney Mount, (1807-1868), painted *The Banjo Player* (1856, oil on canvas).[24] [Figure 4.] Over the years, Mount's depiction of African Americans underwent an evolution, becoming more sensitive and less prone to the one-dimensional depictions he produced in earlier paintings, such as Rustic Dance After a Sleigh Ride (1830).[25] George Freeman, a hired worker for Mount's brother's father-in-law sat as the model for the painting. The work became one of Mount's best-known paintings and was sent to Paris along with several companion pieces to be made into engravings for wide distribution throughout Europe. Here we witness an artist's development in terms of their portrayal of black subjects, displaying more depth than the artist's earlier works. The piece has been licensed for various uses including the cover of instructional booklets suggesting a level of cultural impact. However, it is in competition with some heavy contenders for the eyes of the public.[26]

[Figure 4: *The Banjo Player*]

Frank Buchser's *The Song of Mary Blane* (1870, oil on canvas) is yet another example of how an artist's personal mission is reflected in their work. [Annex, 3] A Swiss painter, Buchser was hired by the Council of States Hall in Bern, Germany. The contract required him to travel to the USA, where he was to paint a large painting of the "Heroes of the Civil War" for his European clients. Initially, Buchser dutifully portrays the generals and politicians referenced by

[24] William Sidney Mount, *The Banjo Player*, 1856, oil on canvas, 37 3/4"h x 28 3/4"w, Stony Brook, Long Island, New York, United States, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ward Melville, 1955.
[25] William Sidney Mount, *Rustic Dance After a Sleigh Ride* (oil on canvas, 1830), Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
[26] Patricia Hills, *The Painters' America: Rural and Urban Life, 1810–1910* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1974), 102-105.

his clients. More and more; however, Buchser's interest shifts toward Native Americans freshly relocated to reserves and formally enslaved African Americans. The artist's attention to the human experience in relation to adversity sits in contrast to his client's attention to America's military heroes and ruling classes.

Helen Corson Hovenden's piece *Uncle Ned and His Pupil* (1881, pencil drawing) is another example of an artist choosing to emphasize humanistic values. [Annex, 7.] The piece portrays a senior African American man in a domestic setting with a Caucasian boy sitting on a table with a banjo on his lap. As inferred by the title, the African American man is instructing the boy on how to play the banjo. After having studied art in Paris at the Académie Julien, where she met her husband and collaborator Thomas Hovenden, Corson-Hovenden settled in Plymouth Meeting Pennsylvania on the Corson family estate. Under previous generations of the Corson family, the property had long been an important stop on the underground railroad, and Abolition Hall, a former meeting hall for abolitionists, became the artists' workspace. This close connection to the abolitionist movement is detectable in both artists' work. The model for several of their pieces, Mr. Samuel Jones, sat for six of Thomas Hovenden's paintings, along with Helen Corson-Hovenden's work mentioned earlier. The effort to portray Jones in a dignified manner is apparent.

The image of an elder man teaching banjo to a young boy becomes a common motif. It is often expressed through the older black man and the younger white boy, however, there are variations on this theme. It is a motif we see repeated in Norman Rockwell's *The Banjo Player* (1926, oil on canvas), and again in Henry Hintermeister's *Natural Chilean Nitrate of Soda* (1938, oil on canvas). [Annex 26, 31.] There are works worthy of mention that represent variations on this 'banjo lesson' motif. Henry Osawa Tanner's work *The Banjo Lesson* (1893, oil

on canvas) is one such piece. [Annex, 16] Tanner is widely known for being the first African American painter to win international acclaim in the field of visual arts. He spent most of his career in Paris; however, this critical work was painted during a visit to Philadelphia, PA. The painting depicts an elder black man instructing banjo to a young black boy sitting on his lap. There is the suggestion of a familiar connection or a generational exchange between a grandfather and grandson. The piece has seen various uses and enjoyed wide distribution not unlike Mount's earlier piece *The Banjo Player*. For instance, it adorns the cover of Dodo Press' 2009 edition of William Hannibal Thomas' *"The American Negro: What He Was, What He Is and What He May Become."*

Thomas Eakins' *The Dancing Lesson*, (1878, watercolor) portrays yet again the connection within the black family. [Annex, 4] The painting depicts an older black gentleman with two younger boys. The oldest of the boys plays banjo, while the youngest dances. A framed picture of President Lincoln with his son Tad hangs on the wall, suggesting the setting as the home and emphasizing their emancipation. In later decades, Eakins begins to explore the imagery of the West, specifically that of the cowboy. Among several portraits of cowboys are two works featuring banjo entitled *Cowboy Singing* (1890, oil on canvas, and 1892, Watercolor and graphite on off-white wove paper). [Annex, 13] Here the banjo engages with the stories, legends, and mystique of the cowboy, and is articulated with Western expansion. This is yet another motif for the banjo that will have a lasting effect on popular perception of the instrument, the cowboy motif. Despite African Americans making up roughly one-third of cattle workers, Eakins' portrayal is of Caucasian cowboys. Some scholars have even considered the term 'cowboy', as opposed to 'cattleman' as a reference to these African Americans. The image of the cowboy as Caucasian is reinforced through film and again with television in the 20th century;

however, in the 19th century, the trope had not yet been firmly established. Eakins provides a sort of microcosmic view of the larger phenomenon we're investigating. In his own career, we see the artist's earlier depiction of the banjo in the context of the black family, later his attention is on scenes of western expansion and singing, banjo playing, and cowboys. Indeed, cowboy culture and the banjo engage with each other in many ways, not the least of which is the way both seem to play integral roles in the forming of an American identity.

Another variation on the banjo lesson motif is Mary Casatt's aptly named *The Banjo Lesson* (1893, colour dry-point and aquatint with monoprint). [Annex, 15.] The piece portrays two women deeply engaged with the banjo. The image epitomizes a trend in the late 19th century to align the banjo with female achievement and enlightenment. The initiative to center women around the banjo was spearheaded by those with a stake in the instrument's manufacture and sale as well as those who profited from the printing of music sheets, instructional booklets and all manner of literature dedicated to the banjo. The idea behind this alignment was to civilize or "elevate" the instrument for a more affluent clientele. Although black women enjoy representation among these images of female banjo players, it is white women who fulfill the civilizing role desired by the captains of a nascent banjo industry. White female banjoists appear in myriad American paintings, prints, and illustrations of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. Cassatt depicted the banjo in her work on at least six occasions. These images suggest the instrument's role in evolving conceptions of sexuality, autonomy, and selfhood in American women's culture of the time. The Banjo Lesson is based on Cassatt's *Modern Woman* mural in the Woman's Building at the 1893 World's Exposition in Chicago, from which she at one time intended to produce a series of prints.

To achieve the civilizing effect, images of white women playing the banjo were used in commercial artwork for public promotion. We see from our quantitive analysis that the number of images depicting female banjo players was low compared to those of male players, however, we also see a greater level of female representation during this period of the late 19th, and early 20th century. Images of female banjo players may have had a greater impact on the public than many of the images of male players. However, satisfying the needs of stakeholders in the industrialization of the banjo is not the only impetus behind female representation. Casatt's *The Banjo Lesson* also represents a rising concern over the role of women in society which existed within certain circles at that time. Indeed, although beyond the scope of this paper, the role of women in the banjo's history, and specifically the cultural transmission between black and white communities is complicated, multi-faceted, and deserving of additional reflection and analysis.

The art world of the 19th century appears motivated by various humanistic values. There is an effort among some to portray the subject in a dignified manner. As demonstrated earlier, this sits in contrast with some of the commercial art offerings from the same period. Still, it is a good way to create a snapshot of the cultural zeitgeist at the beginning of the 20th century. We see images of the banjo with African American and Caucasian women and children and high diversity among the male subjects who make up the majority. The banjo acts as more than a simple artifact, it behaves both as its own character and as an extension of the subject, simultaneously adopting meaning from and transmitting meaning to the subject.

The 20th Century

The first two decades of the 20th century proceed much the way the 19th century ends, with examples of the banjo in art and image from 1900 to 1910 looking much the same as from 1890 to 1900. We see similar rates of representation for women, children, and diversity among

male subjects during these early years. Although depictions of banjoists as Caucasian are on the rise, they are still in the minority. From what we've learned from our quantitive analysis this is to be expected.

The first image of the century sets a certain tone. From the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Robert Lee MacCameron's *Two Negro Musicians* (1901, oil on canvas) depicts the image of two African Americans of roughly college age. [Annex, 20.] A young man and woman sit side by side, the young man plays banjo. She embraces him with her hand around his back resting on the opposite shoulder. The expression on their faces is of joy, devoid of any clownishness associated with minstrelsy and its imagery. They are conservatively well dressed in typical Victorian/Edwardian style. Due to the setting, attire, and youthfulness, one might interpret this as a portrayal of two African American college students. Education and scholarly aspirations were indeed a driving force within elements of the black community at the time. Here, the banjo acts as an extension of the male subject. As both subjects are elevated by the suggestion of their collegiate surroundings and attire, so too is the banjo. The banjo itself is included in the pursuit of learning through this image.

The highbrow and humanistic inferences suggested by the previous piece represent an element within these images. It is important to include such imagery, however, it is not to suggest this type of imagery is exclusive, nor that its impact equals other elements. Images projecting humanistic values tend to be among those classified as fine art. The artwork seen in newspapers, magazines, posters and promotional materials, sheet music and album covers is attached to commodification and commercial endeavours. In this milieu, images appear to portray less concern for humanist values, a logically expected observation considering their purpose. The artwork may seem difficult to contextualize, having less available information about the artists,

their backgrounds, their body of work, or their possible motives. However, these works of commercial art have as much, if not more impact on popular perception than their counterparts displayed at galleries and museums. There is background documentation available on some of the commercial artists who have created these images. However, there are many images lacking information. For these, we will have to work with the information provided within the image itself.

To be clear, many of the images originally published in the 1800s remained in circulation during the 1900s. We observe this with the following example: a painting from 1893 (oil on canvas) [Figure 5] repurposed for the program of a minstrel show in 1908. [Figure 6] (WS1. n.d.). The relation between the two images brings into sharp relief how the overlap between centuries occurs. In yet another example of this kind, we have the image attached to the inside of

[Figure 5:]

[Figure 6:]

the Banjo Tobacco company's keg lids.[27] On the right of the image, two happy, middle-aged African American men sit on a bench in front of a log cabin, one plays banjo. On the left, two African American women dance in front of a field of tobacco. They are all well-dressed. The scene is suggestive of a southern plantation, underscored by the printed words "Petersburg. VA. U.S.A." locating where the company is based. The message projected by the image is the same as that which reportedly forms the premise of the minstrel show; that for workers on the plantation, life was happy and care-free. It can be argued that the image resonates with 19th-century nostalgic notions of the old South, commercialized to help sell a brand of tobacco.

In yet another work of commercial art, we find another image dating back to the 1800s. The tin tobacco box says in bold letters, "1860 Old Virginia Smoke." On the right is Polk Miller, a Caucasian man, with his eyes raised to meet the viewer. To his left is Henry, an African American man holding a banjo, face downcast. Miller is pointing at the banjo. The caption under this image says, "Polk Miller and his chum Henry." Miller was a businessman and pharmacist who made pet care products. He was also a banjoist and entertainer, and a former Confederate artilleryman. As his pet care business provided his main income, he dedicated revenues generated from his entertainment endeavours to funding church repairs as well as Confederate statues and memorials. Like the previous image, this one resonates with certain 19th-century notions about race and the banjo. The image and its caption suggest a hierarchy between these two men, an unspoken statement articulated once again to the instrument.

Take note of the name of the tobacco company responsible for the first image and the use of a public figure known for playing banjo by the second tobacco company. It can be argued that

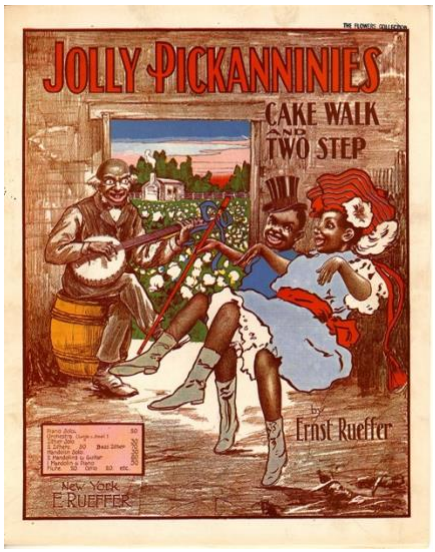
[27] Banjo Tobacco, manufactured by David Dunlop produced promotional artwork on an embossed tin sign inside the tobacco barrels.

these companies are cashing in on the banjo's general popular appeal, an argument further underscored by the "Banjo Club" pack of rolling papers issued by the S.W. Venable Tobacco Co. based in Petersburg VA. In the background, four African American musicians are playing music. Two of them hold banjos. In the foreground is a large banjo with the name of the tobacco company printed on the banjo's membrane. Despite their 19th-century designation, they are included here due to their wide circulation at the turn of the 20th century. One might ask, what does tobacco have to do with the banjo? For those choosing such imagery, the equation may go like this: the banjo has popular appeal. The banjo is from the south and linked to the plantation. The plantation is where tobacco is grown. The products associated with the consumption of tobacco are therefore linked to the banjo. Beyond such speculations, it is clear many brands traded in the currency of the banjo's appeal at this time.

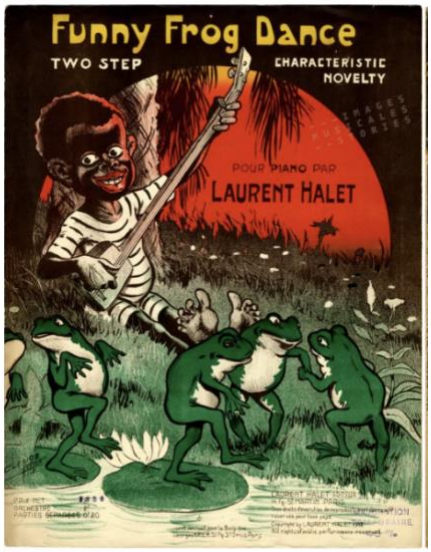
As was the case in the 1800s, music sheets provide yet another source for images of the banjo. These were mostly printed and sold for piano; however, the images adorning their covers portrayed various scenes and depicted many instruments. The banjo, enjoying its popular appeal, is once again not uncommon among these depictions. From 1905, by New York publisher E. Rueffer, comes the Cakewalk Two-Step *Jolly Pickanninies* (illustrator unknown). The image features two well-dressed African American children dancing in what appears to be the interior of a barn. [Figure 7.] Through the open door we can see the building is situated in a field of cotton.

They are accompanied by a well-dressed, bespectacled, elderly black man playing banjo, recalling the "banjo lesson" motif mentioned earlier. He embodies the energy of the banjo instructor or dance coach portrayed in earlier depictions, except in a more caricatured manner. From Parisian publishers Clérice frères we find this 1912 image of presumably an African

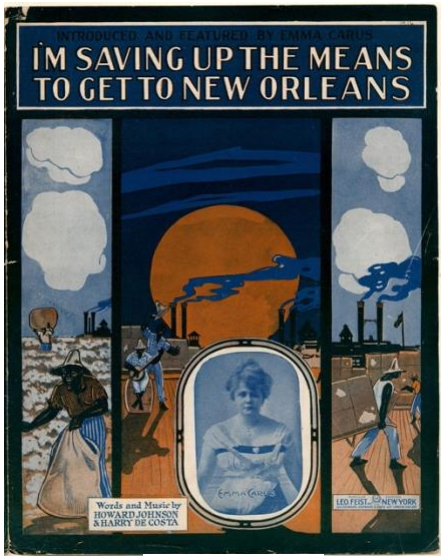
American boy and his banjo. [Figure 8.] The portrayal appears set in a swamp, complete with dancing frogs in the foreground. Our subject sits barefoot on the ground playing what can be described as a makeshift banjo. The song, titled "Funny Frog Dance" is classified as a novelty piece. This depiction is of a caricatured nature as well. From New York publishers Leo Feist Inc., (1916) there is the cover for "I'm Saving Up the Means to Get to New Orleans" [Figure 9.]. The image is divided into three panels: a wider middle panel with two thinner panels on either



[Figure 7.]



[Figure 8.]



[Figure 9.]

side. The representations of people are as though seen from afar and appear more like glyphs. On the left panel is an African American woman in a cotton field, the silhouette of a steamboat in the far background. All three panels depict Southern signifiers; cotton fields, the Mississippi River, and the silhouettes of steamboats adorn the panels. Despite the modernist style, the image successfully reinforces 19th-century notions of the banjo. The depiction of swamps and cotton fields, and African Americans at work or in repose, renders into sharper relief a collective fascination with the South and the music and culture of the African American.

Also found among these images is an increase in depictions of Caucasian banjo players, including the "cowboy motif." Suffice it to say, that aside from some minor stylistic modifications, the images from 1900 to 1920 project much the same information about the banjo as those of the 1800s. The portrayal of Caucasian banjoists is not by any means a novelty. It is seen commonly among images of the banjo, including music sheets. The singing, banjo playing "cowboy motif" is recalled repeatedly. Still, the banjo remains largely seen as an instrument of the plantation and of African American people. Additionally, the images betray a collective fascination with America's southern regions and African American culture. It should be stated that this last observation can be made of both the minstrelsy of the 19th century, and 20th-century rock and roll, one that should be expanded upon. At some point in the mid to late 1920s, there is a shift in the way the banjo is portrayed. According to the quantitive analysis, the 1930s represents a marked drop in portrayals of African American banjoists. It will be fascinating to look at this period through a contextual lens.

The 1920s

If we can detect an inflection point near the end of the 1920s concerning depictions of the banjo, there is little indication of this at the decade's onset. There is widespread and varied use of banjo imagery by numerous interests, indicative of its continuing popular appeal. It maintains its association with African American culture while repeating motifs, such as the "cowboy motif," which reinforce notions of the banjo as part of a mainstream, dominantly white American identity. There is something to consider: stylistic shifts toward modernist aesthetics in commercial art are likely more than superficial re-dressing of the imagery. The use of modernist works may indeed herald a profound change in perspective. Works from this period tend to lean toward abstract or caricaturised depictions of their subjects and less toward realism. This could

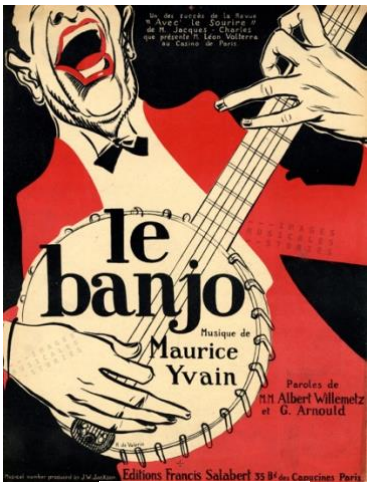
lead to potentially profound consequences. That said, it is perhaps the only notable change at this early stage, Furthermore, stylistic developments manifest differently between commercial art, fine art, and other disciplines. Nonetheless, one can observe a parallel move toward a more modern aesthetic within each discipline. During this contextual analysis, we will attempt to sharpen focus on the inflection point suggested by our quantitative analysis. Can we pinpoint when this pivot happens? What type of imagery are we seeing at this point? And what can we understand from all this?

Beginning with those works classified as fine art we look at the following image by William Aiken Walker titled *Banjo Player*. [Annex, 23.] Walker, born in 1835 and deceased in 1921, is largely a 19th-century artist, having produced his main body of work during this time. He is best known for his portraits of sharecroppers and post-reconstruction era African Americans. The exact date for the piece is unknown; however, it is estimated to be one of the artist's later works.

French chemist, musician, poet and painter, Georges Gaudion (1885–1942) created his piece *Lucy with the Banjo in the Living Room at Rabastens* in 1924. [Annex, 24.] Painting in a post-impressionist style, Gaudion portrays his fiancée Luce Boyal sitting cross-legged, playing banjo on the rug of a well-garnished room. Beyond the rug the floor is richly wood-panelled, there is a piano and bench to one side and a door to the other. (Boyal is a celebrated painter in her own right.) Rabastens is a small town in the south of France close to Toulouse. Taking into consideration the change in style, there is a resonance with Frank Buchser's *The Song of Mary Blane* (1870, oil on canvas). [Annex, 3.] In each, a woman sits on the ground playing banjo. Bucher's 1870 subject is black. She plays outdoors for an audience of children. Gaudion's 1924 subject is white. She sits alone indoors. It is both their sameness and their sense of difference that

becomes intriguing. What does it mean that our 1870 painting depicts a black woman sitting on the ground playing banjo outdoors, surrounded by children, and our 1924 painting depicts a white woman sitting on the ground playing banjo indoors alone? These types of questions are seductive with their potential to reveal some pertaining information for our queries. A modernist perspective may help produce some answers.

Indeed, the modern image became an enigma by the 1920s. At times the image is abstract to the point it acts as a cipher, with part of the appeal to viewers being its decoding. This appears to be the case with Pablo Picasso's, Georges Aubert's *Nature Mort,* (1924, black ink on papier d'arches, wood engraving). [Annex, 25] In keeping with the tradition of still life, the cubistic composition depicts several objects on a table. Interpreting the image is not so simple. It isn't immediately obvious. The appeal may be the challenge this presents to the viewer; however, it also underpins an elasticity where the public's acceptance of modern imagery is concerned. It has been suggested by scholars of modernism that the movement is in part defined by stretching norms beyond expectations. And this elasticity logically extends into issues of identity. In a sense, it is this elasticity that allows the banjo with its pre-modern associations, to become a post-modern artifact through the constructs built around those associations.



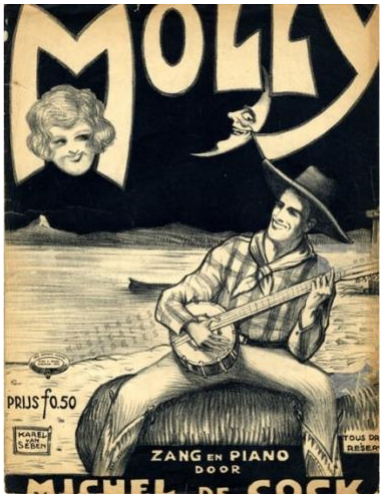
[Figure 10.]

Entering a more commercial domain, we review the illustrated elements of printed music. Roger de Valerio studied architecture at the École des beaux-arts de Paris, however, he began his career as art director for the journal Le Matin in 1911. He went to work for Salabert in 1917, where he created more than 2000 covers for the Paris-based music publisher. The subject of the image created for Maurice Yvain's

composition, *le Banjo*, is an embodiment of the entertainer. [Figure 10.] The depiction is all torso obscuring the top half of the face with the banjo claiming focus. The instrument's negative space is utilized for text. Valerio reiterates the prevailing trend leaning heavily toward caricature.

The banjo enjoyed a level of ambiguity when it came to perceiving the instrument as urban or rural. Depictions of the banjo in settings one can interpret as urban are not uncommon. Where a sense of urbanity or rurality can be interpreted, urban depictions tend to be accompanied

[Figure 11: 1890]



[Figure 12: 1910s]

[Figure 13: 1920]

by African American subjects, while Caucasian subjects tend to align with rural depictions. This presents a shift from the popular portrayal of the Southern plantation where depictions of rurality and African American subjects are common. Perhaps this will be addressed in future quantitative analyses. Qualitatively it is an important observation that imagery depicting Caucasians as rural-dwelling people rose at the same moment African American subjects declined. This association of rurality with whiteness can be seen in the illustrated cover for *Ballade Argentine* by E.V. Malderen, (1920, Paris.) [Figure 13.] The image was illustrated by an artist who goes by the moniker Gems. With no other information on the artist, we'll rely on information provided by the image itself. A Caucasian man sits cross-legged on the ground in a wooded, natural environment. He is dressed in cowboy attire, presents a stubbled, unshaven face, and plays banjo.

The song is a tango for piano, while the image is a vehicle which repeats and fortifies the notion of the banjo-playing cowboy.

If we are tracking paradigm shifts through the analysis of a culture's imagery, the 1920s provides exactly the type of image to exemplify these changes. Among the first of these for observation are images of non-human subjects. The personification of animals in imagery, although not new to the 1920s, begins to be purposed in new ways. Along with previously mentioned stylistic changes comes an openness to the notion of the subject, who needn't be human at all. The song sheet for Ogo-Pogo [Figure 14.] portrays a scaled fish-tailed creature playing a banjo. (1924, London.) The novelty song's title refers to a legendary lake monster from Lake Champlain, a lake bordering upstate New York, Vermont and Quebec. Non-human characters as subjects would have been previously intended for youth consumption typical of children's literature. By the 1930s, this type of imagery becomes more common; it targets all ages and permeates visual expression from commercial to fine art. A feature of the new modernist approach, and an elasticity of interpretation within popular culture, the trend begins in limited fashion in the 1920s.

[Figure 14.]

Sound for sale: The Record Industry

When considering developments in the 1920s where culture is concerned, we cannot ignore the graphic imagery attached to the establishment of the industry commodifying sound recording. The technology to record and play back sound was developed in the 1800s. The technology to effectively manufacture reliable reproductions of recordings for mass consumption happened much later by comparison. Because of this, the commodification of music only began

to gain momentum in the 1920s. In common with most products, a record would need labelling and packaging, and where there's packaging there is branding accompanied by the use of imagery. Beyond packaging, there are published advertisements, show posters, and other promotional materials generated by the activities of record companies to consider as well. This represented a new source of revenue for the entertainment industry; however, the use of imagery was rooted in the notions of the past. It can be argued that the use of imagery was also heavily influenced by industrial notions about how the population could be divided into consumer groups, as well as by pressure to establish markets for this new commodity. Race, class, and geography would play major roles in how record companies market music to the public.

10" Vinyl records (shellac, phonograph) came packaged in sleeves like these. On the left is a sleeve from 1926 for Vocalion Records. [Figure 15.] The descriptor "Old Southern Tunes" informs listeners what kind of music to expect. On the left of the sleeve, a man rides a donkey

[Figure 15: 1926]

[Figure 16: 1926]

down a slope. There is a home with chimney smoke in the background. On the right side, two musicians perform while approximately five people are dancing. One musician plays guitar, or

possibly banjo, the other plays a fiddle. From afar, the figures appear Caucasian, the dancers are mixed-gendered and stand apart from the musicians who are both male. The mountain-dwelling man on the left is also Caucasian. The Victor Records sleeve on the right makes no attempt at describing the music through text, offering imagery as the only indicator of the sound. [Figure 16.] This appears to be the back side of the sleeve, advertising similar recordings published by the company. The only text there is says, "Victor Records you will like. Hear these records on your next visit to our store." There are eight lithograph images representing other recordings released by Victor, each with a catalogue number. There is no mention of the musicians' names, their groups, or the titles of the songs they perform. The image alone is intended to entice listeners back to the store to hear these sound recordings. The middle right panel features a banjo player. The group is comprised of two guitars, banjo and fiddle. The musicians are male, Caucasian, and dressed in suits and ties.

The Victor sleeve provides us with an opportunity. All eight of these images are intended to be visual representations of a sound. What Vocalion dubbed "Old Southern Tunes" was already being understood in context with an alignment to sacred music, the home, traditional dancing, and folk instruments.[28] These eight images in their square panels reinforce these notions. The top left panel portrays a man serenading a woman on guitar as she sits apparently knitting on a porch, invoking the home and traditional courting rituals. The top middle panel features four young men standing around a fifth man sitting at an organ, suggesting a religious theme. The bottom left panel portrays a fiddle and what appears to be two square dancers. The instruments featured are mostly string instruments. The guitar dominates; however, there is a

[28] Curtis W. Ellison, *Country Music Culture: From Hard Times to Heaven* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), chap. 1.

sting bass, a ukelele, two fiddles, an autoharp and a banjo. Non-string instruments include a saxophone, a trombone, a piano and the organ. The lack of text is an intriguing detail; the images are intended to convey all the meaning and context on their own. This could suggest that the popular associations being made between these images and the sound had already become convention. Additionally, all the subjects appear Caucasian, reinforcing yet another association with the sound on the record.

To summarize, according to our analysis of these images, the sound is associated with the home, faith, tradition, dance, the South, fiddle playing, Caucasian/American identity, and each instrument portrayed. The images do not suggest any of these associations are exclusive to the recording, nor suggest an exclusive connection between any of these notions, values and artifacts. To put it clearly, because the images suggest an association with white southerners, does not mean these instruments, notions, and values are associated exclusively with white southerners, nor exclusively with each other. Nevertheless, the images do suggest affiliations to race, class, religion, and tradition. They affirm certain notions and attachments without negating, nor indeed acknowledging other notions and attachments that may temper overall perceptions. Over time, we see a collective perception of the banjo as belonging exclusively to these musics begin to congeal. The guitar, which dominates these images, remains collectively perceived as a versatile instrument, lending itself to multiple sounds.

At this time in the 1920s the banjo is also lending itself to multiple sounds. It is the primary string instrument in the popular jazz sound, it is commonly coupled with the guitar in country blues, and occasionally it is among the instruments at Sunday church services. This versatility is reflected in the promotional imagery published by record companies. Dr. David Brackett, and Dr. Karl Hagstrom Miller. *Categorizing Sound* and *Segregating Sound* look

specifically at genre, and at how we create designations or classifications for sound. It is necessary to understand how these early recording companies conceived of categories for sound to understand the context of the images they produced.

When looking at packaging and labeling for early sound recordings there are notable observations. For instance, before the technology to mechanically mass produce sound recordings, terms used to describe the sound were similar to their print counterparts. Danse categories were highly popular. Describing the sheet music and the sound recording are terms such as 'Foxtrot', 'Cakewalk', 'Two-Step', or 'Ragtime'. However, the list is long and varied and includes descriptive terms such as military marches, Irish reels, hymns, spirituals, instrumental tunes, coon-songs, rags, and show tunes. Recording companies sought talent from Broadway and Vaudeville acts, conservatory-trained and self-taught singers and musicians alike. There was little precedence to go by when classifying recorded sound, apart from how it had been classified before the existence of recording technologies. These previous classifications adapted from print music and performance conventions may be a logical starting point, but it becomes clear to those active in these endeavours that both the new medium and the terrain in which it exists, require new ways to classify sound. With the U.S. becoming the point of destination for millions of migrants, the early 20th century coincides with a period of mass migration to North America. Immigrant communities hail from all points across the globe. Among them are a high concentration of Irish, Italian and Eastern European peoples. Record companies saw immigrant communities as potential markets, providing foreign language recordings intended for purchase by these communities. The idea of associating sound with a particular ethnic group was arguably a seductive tactic to those looking to market recordings. Brackett writes…

> In the years during and immediately following the First World War, participants in the world of popular music laboured to develop new categories and to adapt existing ones adequate both to the flood of novel musical utterances that burst onto the scene, and to a rapidly changing awareness to who was making and listening to these musics…many factors played a role, including changes in sound reproduction and transmission technology, the way and the rate at which cultural texts circulated, immigrant and patent law, and shifting demographics within the United States, to name a few.[29]

This description gives us a firm grasp of the environment under which promotional and commercial images were generated by record companies.

Notions of homologic and ethnographic articulations within culture didn't emanate solely from incorporated cultural producers such as record companies. To be clear, immigrant communities did import their respective cultures to the Americas. For example, linguists have spent time chasing dialects in the Americas to their origins. In many cases, the research reveals a level of preservation of the vernacular reflecting the period of immigration.[30] This intriguing phenomenon appears to manifest throughout culture. Techniques for agriculture and farming in the Americas can be traced to specific regions and populations in Europe, Africa, and Asia. The same can be said for architecture and building techniques. Indeed, culture is as transportable as it is transmissible. To provide a musical example specific to the fiddle, a bowing technique common to Cape Breton, NS may be traced to a singular county in Ireland. Where the banjo is concerned, there are building and playing techniques in Appalachia that can be traced to regions in West Africa. This information has many implications as per our research that will have to be

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[29] David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 95.
[30] Einar Haugen, "Language and Immigration," *Norwegian-American Studies* 10, no. 1 (1938): 1–43.

addressed at a later point. For now, let us simply adopt the premise that recording companies in the early decades of the 20th century were employing concepts on culture and ethnicity in their marketing and branding techniques that exploit this nature within migrant communities.

What's In a Name

[Figure 17: The Hill Billies (1926)]

When Al Hopkins brought his group to New York City in 1925 to record for Okeh Records, they didn't have a name. Hopkins told the Okeh executive, Ralph Peer "We're nothing but a bunch of hillbillies from North Carolina and Virginia, call us anything." [Figure 17.] This despite them not conforming to the typical stereotype of the mountain dweller. Indeed, fiddle player Alonso Elvis (Tony) Alderman, the only member to have grown up in an isolated cabin, was the son of a surveyor, civil engineer, and justice of the peace.[31] Nevertheless, the group became known as The Hill Billies. The 1926 Okeh catalogue features a promotional lithograph of the group where there is no text beyond the group name giving the listener any indication of the sound. As a term, "hillbilly" had been part of the American vernacular since the mid-19th century; however, this would be an early use of the term in a musical context. The Hill Billies later recorded for Vocalion in 1926, and Brunswick, Vocalion's parent company, in 1927 as 'Al Hopkins and His Buckle Busters'. The Vocalion sleeve features a fiddle player seated in front of his cabin home. [Figure 18.] Text describes these recordings as 'Old Time Tunes'. The Brunswick sleeve portrays a group of people on the left as they congregate and dance. [Figure

[31] Archie Green, "Hillbilly Music: Source and Symbol," *The Journal of American Folklore* 78, no. 309 (1965): 204–228.

19.] A guitarist, fiddle player and singer are portrayed on the right. Text identifies the recordings as ‘Songs from Dixie, Old and New’. Note the similarities between the Brunswick sleeve for ‘Al Hopkins and His Buckle Busters’, and the earlier Vocalion sleeve. [Figure 15].

[Figure 18.]

[Figure 19.]

Recording companies had a vested interest in increasing sales, not in associating sound recordings to white, American identity. However, there were powerful socio-political forces at work with precisely that objective. The Hill Billies’ seminal performance at the Mountain City, TN fiddlers’ convention in 1925 provides insight. The festival was attended by many acclaimed Appalachian musicians considered pioneers of both country music and bluegrass such as G.B. Grayson, Charlie Bowman, Dudley Vance, and of course Al Hopkins and company. (They are yet to be named The Hill Billies.) Alderman set up a portable radio kit to broadcast the historic event, one which continues annually, and which has been the inspiration for many other festivals.

To offer some background, formal and informal fiddlers’ conventions and competitions have been held in the U.S. since 1736. Originally these were organised locally by invested individuals and local community groups. However, by the turn of the 20th century, conventions began to formalize under the sponsorship of groups such as Daughters of the American Revolution, United Daughters of the Confederacy, and Henry Ford of the Ford Motor Company. Each of these groups and individuals has displayed or expressed willingness to promote a white,

protestant, Anglo-Saxon identity as the dominant American identity. The DAR would ban African American artists from their Constitution Hall stage in 1932 following protests over mixed seating during performances of black artists, a move that would prompt the resignation of prominent member Elenore Roosevelt. Additionally, the DAR began admitting women of color as late as 1984 after the organization denied membership to schoolteacher Lena S. Ferguson basing the decision solely on her race.[32] The UDC, aided by sympathizers such as Polk Miller, tirelessly promoted the 'Lost Cause' characterization of the American Civil War ensuring history textbooks conformed to the narrative, and erected monuments romanticizing the Confederacy. Ford, a self-described antisemite, loathed jazz, which he credited, or blamed Jews for inventing. His sponsorship of fiddle competitions and his lobbying to have every American school-age child learn to square dance were in direct response to his anxieties over jazz's popularity. Where he saw jazz as depraved and evil, he saw fiddle music and square dancing as wholesome and good.[33] With this revelation, Giddens' earlier childhood recollections take on new dimensions.

Separately, these groups sought to establish a narrative of white, protestant, Anglo-Saxon identity for America at a time of insecurity over immigration and racial tension. Understanding the motivations of cultural promotors, and the underlying premise they sought to establish provides better insight for our analysis. These groups engaged with the same sound, the same canon, and the same artists as the recording companies. If the promotional images produced by

[32] Simon Wendt, "Defenders of Patriotism or Mothers of Fascism? The Daughters of the American Revolution, Antiradicalism, and Un-Americanism in the Interwar Period," *Journal of American Studies* 47, no. 4 (2013): 943–969.
[33] Leo P. Ribuffo, "Henry Ford and 'The International Jew,'" *American Jewish History* 69, no. 4 (1980): 437–77.

record companies seems to associate 'old-time' music with whiteness, it is the likely result of deeper societal concerns over identity represented by these groups and individuals. There are many examples supporting the notion that square dancing and 'traditional' music were being

[Figure 20: Mountain City fiddlers' convention (1925)]

coopted to affirm whiteness. To emphasize the point, the group that sponsored the Mountain City fiddlers' convention of 1925, featuring Grayson, Bowman, Vance and Hopkins, was the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, the group known for their willingness to employ destruction of property, violence and intimidation in support of white supremacy. [Figure 20.]

Race Records

In the early 1920s, recordings intended for the African American population were classified under terms such as "Records for the Colored Catalogue, Blues records, and Old Negro Folk Songs" among others. By the mid 1920s the term "Race Records" classified these recordings.[34] The lithograph here is a promotional image produced by Okeh Records for their

[34] David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 89.

[Figure 21.]

Race division. [Figure 21.] It is the cover of the Okeh Records Race division's catalogue circa 1926 to 1930. The music presented within the catalogue is classified under designations such as Blues Dance Music, Blues Vocal, Instrumental, Spirituals, all co-existing under the umbrella term Race Records. The image representing this music is iconographic in nature. It depicts a bald or short-haired black man. He is well dressed in attire that invokes the bandstand. He smiles broadly as he holds his banjo. The iconography is multi-faceted, it invokes notions of minstrelsy yet is vague enough to represent various sub-genres of race music. For our analysis, there is something this image tells us specifically. At that point in the mid to late 1920s, executives at Okeh Records continued to associate the banjo with the music they marketed to the African American community.

[Figure 22: Cannon's Jug Stompers (1928)]

In keeping with record companies of the mid/late 1920s, Victor Records had a Race division. Promoting Cannon's Jug Stompers, one of the acts signed to Victor Race Records, we have the following image from 1928. [Figure 22.] With an increase in demand for commercial imagery, and technological advancements in photography occur, we see more use of the medium. The promotion of a specific musical group or individual personality indicative of the entertainment industry also require more accurate portrayals of the subject, a requirement photography can provide. Gus

Cannon is to this day celebrated as one of the leading pioneers of the banjo in the 20th century. His life and career have many implications where the banjo is concerned.[35]

By default, messaging in marketing and advertising must be accessible and to the point. When describing music, messaging is often filtered through a sole genre ignoring the nuances and influences that may have gone into its production. Although marketed to the public through Victor Race Records as a blues artist, Cannon's repertoire transcended blues, including spirituals, traditional ballads, and various dances and struts. Having entertained at sawmills, levee camps and later medicine shows, Cannon's repertoire is naturally rich. Through exploration of the cultural work done by the banjo, the transmission, adoption, and modification of the culture surrounding it, it becomes clear Cannon's career merits a much deeper analysis. But for now, it is sufficient to simply acknowledge that in 1928, for those at Victor Records, the banjo was still affiliated with music intended for the black community.

Paradoxical Equations

All of this exists in a complicated ecosystem of competing ideas. Underneath the veneer portraying the 'Roaring 20s'as good times lies a society replete with polarizing tensions. These include a turbulent labour movement, a faith-inspired temperance movement, crime and gangsterism, immigration, and racial tension. To outline the terrain of racial tension as it pertains to our analysis, I present the following overview with apologies for any oversimplification due to brevity. Racial tensions in the U.S. have ebbed and flowed over time and certainly did not begin in the 1920s. However, the decade of the 20s began in the aftermath of the 1919 'Red Summer,' which saw race riots in at least 26 cities across the U.S. The period saw an increase in legislative

[35] R. B. Winans et al., *Banjo Roots and Branches* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), chap. 16.

controls over the African American population. Described as ‘black codes,’ or ‘Jim Crow’ laws, (we recall “Jim Crow as a term borrowed from minstrelsy), more jurisdictions adopted such codes. Additionally, extra-judicial acts or acts of vigilantism committed against the African American community by individuals and groups such as the KKK became more normalized and condoned. Such an environment led to increased individual killings and full-scale massacres. Black community leaders made attempts at defence and retaliation. However, systemic barriers to power stunted these initiatives. Racial tension may have been most concentrated in the South; however, racially charged incidents occurred nationwide. The trend among African Americans in the South to move west or north increased as what are now considered acts of terrorist intimidation convinced many to relocate.

When describing the racial terrain of the time, there is another under-emphasized element of the 1920s. Over the backdrop of racial tension, consider this quote from Wynton Marsalis.

[Figure 23: James Pendleton ‘Uncle Pen” Vandiver with baton, Arnold Shultz with fiddle, unidentified man, and Luther Shultz, bull bass fiddle (Courtesy of Roger Givens).]

[Figure 24: Arnold Shultz with guitar, James Pendleton Vandiver with fiddle.]

"Louis Armstrong, once in the 1960s said something very interesting: he said, "You know, we were more integrated in the twenties than we are now."[36] And indeed, although rarely documented in the photographic record, as racial tensions abound, there is evidence supporting this quote. Pictured here are two photographs featuring Arnold Shultz. [Figures 23, 24.] Shultz, an African American musician from western Kentucky, is considered the Godfather of bluegrass music. He had a profound influence as mentor to Bill Monroe, the man widely credited with the genre's emergence. The two photos also feature James Pendleton Vandiver, uncle and additional source of inspiration for Monroe. In the first of these two photos [Figure 23.] there is a second, unidentified Caucasian man, exemplifying the integration mentioned by Marsalis. In the racially tense environment laid out in previous paragraphs, it may have been rare to see white and black musicians perform together publicly, a hypothesis given credence by the lack of photographic record. However, it must have been common enough to justify Armstrong's original statement. The historical record suggests there may have been spaces protected from public scrutiny where integration was acceptable. These spaces may have included the back rooms of clubs and venues during after-hours, faith-based camp meetings, or work camps.

There is some evidence suggests that these spaces include those of a geographical nature. The region west of the Cumberland Gap gets an honourable mention. Prior to the American Civil War, at a time when Western Kentucky was considered frontier, a mixed group of pioneers settled here. Letters and private journals speak of a place where one could live unencumbered by authority and suggest an informal society characterized by a spirit of inclusiveness, and

[36] *Speakeasy TV*, season 2, interview with Wynton Marsalis, December 11, 2016, Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse, New York City, executive producers: Denis J. Gallagher and Don Maggi; talent producer: Michael Jensen; producer: Christine D. Reagan; interviewer: David Crosby. "A discussion between David Crosby and Wynton Marsalis for Speakeasy TV."

cooperation.[37] They were comprised mostly of adventure seekers and people who valued independence and freedom, which they sought in the wilderness. This descriptor could fit the Scotch/Irish settler, ironically described collectively as staunchly independent-minded, or the self-liberated enslaved person, for whom mountains and wilderness provided safe haven throughout the Americas. The region has spawned legendary tales of frontiersmen, such as Daniel Boone, James Bowie, Davey Crockett and Bass Reeves. Among many things, Reeves was a runaway slave, deputy U.S. Marshal, and the alleged inspiration for the fictitious Lone Ranger. Historians have been attempting to separate fact from fiction where these legends are concerned. Our concern however is with cultural transmission, and the region provides another potential setting for musical exchange between cultures. Images such as the two above [Figure 23, 24.] lend credence to the suggestion, however, there is much research left to do to fully understand this phenomenon.[38]

[Figure 25.]

To cap off the 1920s we revisit an old trope with Norman Rockwell's *The Banjo Player* (1926, oil on canvas.) [Figure 25.] By now the scene is familiar. A young boy sits cross-legged on the floor, animated by the old man who sits playing banjo. The image could be interpreted as instructive or simple amusement. However, one wishes to interpret this it is still an iteration of the banjo lesson motif, one in which both

[37] John W. Townsend, "Daniel Boone," *Register of Kentucky State Historical Society* 8, no. 24 (1910): 17, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23367217.
[38] Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 119.

subjects are Caucasian. A celebrated 20th-century American artist, Rockwell found success early. As art director for the official publication of the Boy Scouts of America, Rockwell's work has been widely distributed and is publicly well known. Considering this, it is doubtful in 1926 that imagery of the like dramatically changed the banjo's place in popular culture. Images like this have an accumulative effect, effecting gradual changes in perception through repetition. Rockwell is not the catalyst of these changing perceptions. However, his work exists within a chain of works that have shaped American identity.

The 1930s

The late 1920s and 30s are a pivotal time of dramatic change in banjo history. Through the quantitive analysis, we observe more Caucasian than African American subjects portrayed with the banjo. This trend persists throughout the following decades until the present. There was commercial art in circulation from earlier times featuring primarily black subjects and the banjo, buffering the 1930s viewer from the immediate effects of such changes. However, in commercial art unrelated to the music industry, use of the banjo in imagery declined dramatically as well. It appears the banjo's overall popular appeal was in decline. A fascinating discussion on the website *Banjo Hangout* from December 2017 posed the question as to why the decline in popularity occurred with varied and thought-provoking responses. (Archived topic: Guitar vs. banjo in the 1930's.)[39] The general consensus within the online forum relates this to the rising popularity of the guitar; however, reasoning varies greatly as to why. Some posters credited it to a stylistic switch where the guitar was perceived as a 'modern' sound more befitting newer styles

[39] Discu, "Guitar vs. Banjo in the 1930's," *Banjo Hangout*, December 12, 2017, https://www.banjohangout.org/archive/337572.
The Banjo Hangout is a public online forum where banjo enthusiasts and interested parties share information and discuss banjo related topics.

of popular music. Others mentioned the banjo's historic attachment to "minstrel shows' and "plantation life, and slavery", noting the guitar lacked these attachments. Some posts took a more analytical approach, commenting on the guitar's greater versatility and sonic range compared to the banjo. A technical argument was made by numerous posters in reference to advancements in guitar building, citing specific innovations such as larger resonators and cross bindings. These would allow the installation of metal strings, rendering the guitar more capable of competing with the banjo on a bandstand along with louder percussion and horn instruments.[40] Take into consideration the advent of electronic amplification in the mid-30s and the banjo's resonance and volume were no longer necessary.

The Depression and the economic reality of the times are also given as reasons for this decline. As sales of manufactured banjos dropped, the instrument's influence may have been limited to regions where homemade banjo building traditions were maintained. This interpretation is supported by the fictional character Uncle John from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Uncle John hails from Oklahoma and plays a "box" banjo, likely referring to a fretless homemade variation. Steinbeck based his characters on Dust Bowl refugees and migrant labourers living in California's Salinas Valley. In 1936, as a journalist for the *San Francisco News*, he was commissioned to cover their story and the great adversity they endured.

The discussion is fascinating because there is likely some truth to each of the opinions posted to the *Banjo Hangout* forum. As interesting as these speculations are, for whatever reasons, many banjo historians view the beginning of the Great Depression as the end of the 'Jazz Age,' and the beginning of the decline in popularity of the banjo. According to the Banjo

[40] Douglas Martin, "Innovation and the Development of the Modern Six-String Guitar," *The Galpin Society Journal* 51 (1998): 86, https://doi.org/10.2307/842762.

Museum.org, (archived, 15 May 2009,) this moment "marked …the final years in which the banjo held a place of prominence in American popular music. By 1940, for all practical purposes, the banjo was dead." A bold claim made by a discontinued website of the self-proclaimed "four-string banjo Hall of Fame museum".[41] After all, it was in 1932 when a teenage Pete Seeger wrote to his mother; "I would like to buy a big banjo and play in the very little band up here that's just been started," foreshadowing future directions for the instrument.[42] That said, the image record supports the notion that the popular appeal previously enjoyed by the banjo had declined significantly. Taking that into consideration, announcing the instrument as "dead" is perhaps more an over-emphasis than an inaccuracy.

Seen through the lens of diminishing popularity among musicians and the general American public, our quantitive analysis takes on new dimensions. It is perhaps a relevant synchronization considering the moment when the banjo lost prominence in American popular music coincides with the moment when it was no longer prominently portrayed in an African American context. At the risk of entertaining speculation, it seems likely messages posted to *The Banjo Hangout* discussion forum pertaining to historic associations with "minstrel shows…plantation life, and slavery" merit further examination. A similar sentiment was expressed by one of the founding members of the Fisk Jubilee Singers from Fisk University regarding Negro Spirituals. Abolitionist H. H. Wright, founding dean of Fisk Freed Colored School (now Fisk University) in Nashville Tennessee recalls that "there was a strong sentiment among the colored people to get as far away as possible from all those customs which reminded

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[41] The national four-string banjo hall of fame Museum. (2006). *The national four-string banjo hall of fame Museum*. Wayback Machine. https://web.archive.org/web/20090515200646/www.banjomuseum.org/banjohistory.htm
[42] Laurent Dubois, *The Banjo: America's African Instrument* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 271.

them of slavery." Wright reports that the students "would only sing 'white' songs." Choral director and founding member Ella Shepherd elaborated:

> The slave songs were never used by us in public. They were associated with slavery, and the dark past and represented the things to be forgotten. Then, too, they were sacred to our parents, who used them in their religious worship.[43]

This reticence toward all that is associated with slavery and the plantation, while acknowledging the importance of culture to honoured ancestors presents a paradox. Music teacher and missionary George White strongly encouraged the choir to include spirituals along with the selection of parlour songs, hymns, and classical choral music. As history records, it was the popularity of the spirituals that propelled the Fisk Jubilee singers into national and international spotlight.[44]

Returning to our contextual analysis of imagery with these concepts in mind, let us look once again at offerings from the world of fine art. The quantitive analysis of our random collection of images registered zero portrayals of African American Banjoists in the 1930s. To reiterate, this extreme result is likely due to our admittedly small sample of images. The result more likely reflects a dramatic drop in portrayals, not a literal count of zero. To illustrate this let's begin with *The Banjo Player* (1929, oil on canvas) by Hale Apacio Woodruff. It is the portrait of a middle-aged, moustachioed African American man. [Annex. 27.] He sits smiling and he plays banjo; Woodruff creates a sense of movement around the hands signalling sound. It appears as an updated interpretation of a classic motif. On one hand, the work title, and the idea

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[43] H. H. Wright, "Jubilee Songs at Chapel Exercises," Ella Sheppard Moore "Historical Sketch," quoted in Sandra Jean Graham, *Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), p. 30, 31.
[44] Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music on the Move* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 86,

to portray a black man playing banjo resonates with the 19th century; on the other, the painting style, setting, and the subject's attire all place the image in a 20th-century context. For the artist's career, this is an early piece. Woodruff went on to become a celebrated African American artist credited as a trailblazer. He is known for his murals depicting important moments in African American history.

We proceed to works firmly published in the 30s with a landscape from Donald Masefield Easton. Born the son of a railroad executive, Easton's young life was itinerant as his father's employment moved the family around from place to place. Some elements of this childhood may be detected in his work, as Easton favours California landmarks and Western scenes. *Playing the Banjo* (1932, oil on board) perfectly exemplifies the latter. [Annex. 28.] Easton invokes the spirit of the pioneer, wagon trains and the historic drive west. The painting depicts a wagon train at camp, invoking Western expansion and the spirit of the pioneer. We see someone driving a mule. A man with a rifle attentively stares into the distance as a little girl holds the hem of his jacket. The center foreground is dominated by the back of one of the wagons, out of which a cowboy hat-wearing banjo player leans, mouth open in song. The cowboy motif returns.

As a cultural icon, the banjo is a popular object for many artists to portray. Some artists engage with the iconography of the banjo more prolifically than others. Thomas Hart Benton is one such artist. Three of Benton's works featuring banjo are included in our sample. *Lord Heal the Child* (1934, oil on canvas) portrays a scene inside a church during service. [Annex. 29.] In the background, on the left are choral singers and, on the right, a small ensemble prominently features banjo, fiddle and guitar. Benton was inspired to paint American life and culture, in which the country church was an important element. During his travels, he met a small

Pentecostal group in South Carolina and was invited to attend services. His sketches from that night soon resulted in this dynamic painting. Benton later wrote in his autobiography that, "The hymns of Holy Rollers verge on dance music, as they must to encourage the prancing proclivities of the faithful."[45]

[Figure 26: *Natural Chilean Nitrate of Soda* (1938)]

Easton and Benton's human subjects are Caucasian. Their respective works portray scenes including multiple human subjects. With the following work, we return to the 'banjo lesson' motif and examine Hy Hintemeister's *Natural Chilean Nitrate of Soda* (1938, oil on canvas). [Figure 26.] Henry Hintermeister and his father John Henry Hintermeister often worked together from the 1890s to the 1940s, under the pseudonym Hy Hintermeister. Producing over 1,000 illustrations; they were often compared to Norman Rockwell with their illustrational storytelling. The duo produced a series of calendars depicting American history from 1775-1787. They used identical signatures making their illustrations nearly impossible to distinguish. The oddly titled work portrays the familiar form of a white-haired, balding, elderly black man observing a small Caucasian boy playing banjo. There is a striking symbolism being suggested. The old man's

[45] Leo G. Mazow and Thomas Hart Benton, *Thomas Hart Benton and the American Sound* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2012), 40-43.

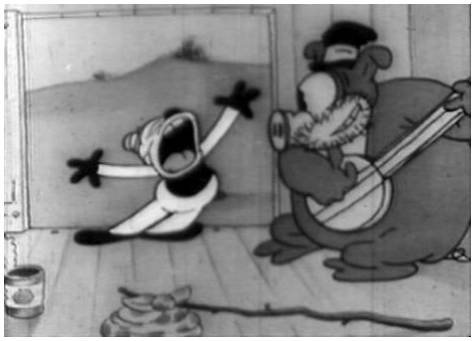
presence invokes the banjo's older, 19th-century associations with African American folk music and culture along with minstrelsy, slavery, and plantation. We observe he is not holding the banjo. He approvingly observes the Caucasian boy who represents the 20th century and the banjo's association with white culture. Take note that at this time associations of this sort were emerging. However, when one considers the storytelling nature of Hintemeister's works, interpreting this as an intentional commentary on American culture remains a distant possibility.

With these developments, we are beginning to see the significance of the 1930s concerning mainstream perception of the banjo. However, even as depictions of the banjo declined, new associations established in the 1930s were repeated, maintained and would persist throughout the 20th century.

Toon Town and Hollywood

The film medium is another source of popular imagery, and with new technological advancements, the film industry had developed into something recognizable to modern audiences. As was the case with live-action film, techniques for animated movies had been developing since the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. To best explore the imagery of animated film it may be helpful to have some history of the medium. The groundbreaking *Gertie the Dinosaur* was released in 1911, *Felix the Cat* was introduced in 1919, Walt Disney's first animation studio Laugh-O-Gram. Inc. operated from 1921 to 1923, and Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, a proto–Bugs Bunny, arrived in 1927. After Charles Mintz took direct control of production, Disney lost his character and most of his staff to Mintz. The Oswald character would

end up at Warner Brother's Looney Tunes In 1928. Enter Mickey Mouse, who it is said was created as a replacement for Oswald.[46] By the 1930s, there was a boon of images associated with


[Figure 27: Looney Tunes (1930)]

Bosco was created in 1927. The character was modelled after a young negro boy and spoke a Southern dialect of African American vernacular. He was the first recurring character in Schlesinger's cartoon series and went on to star in 30 Looney Tunes shorts released by Warner Brothers. In 1930, the animated short *Box Car Blues* portrays Bosco as itinerant, hopping trains and riding the rails. [Figure 27.] The perspective of this image is from the inside of a box car, we see the countryside rolling past in the background. Included in the animated short along with atypical slapstick antics is a song and dance number featuring Pig on banjo.[47]

Disney's success with Mickey Mouse led to merchandising opportunities. Mickey, whose character was originally developed as a lovable rogue character along the lines of Charlie Chaplin, was repurposed.[48] The character's image could be found playing banjo on postcards, toy figurines, and even banjos. [Figures 28, 29, 30]. Through images such as these, the banjo is associated with the itinerant, affable rogue. Like a chameleon of character, the banjo seems to absorb these traits into its own identity, simultaneously lending them to the subject. On one side we labour to understand the decision

[Figure 28.]


[Figure 29.]


[Figure 30.]

[46]Suzanne Brogan, "Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, 1927–1928," San Francisco Silent Film Festival, 2009.
[47] Harman, H., & Ising, R. (Directors). (1930). *Boxcar blues* [Animated short film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.
[48] Leonard Maltin and Jerry Beck, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons; Revised and Updated* (Penguin, 1987), 48.

of the respective artists to put a banjo into the hands of these two characters, on the other, we attempt to understand the effects of these images on viewers.

Live-action film also made great strides in the 1930s, and one of the more popular personalities amid on-screen talent was child actress Shirley Temple. From 1934 to 1938, Temple was Hollywood's top box-office draw. In 1935 she starred in the Fox feature film, '*The Littlest Rebel*', with John Boles, Jack Holt, Karen Morley, and Bill Robinson as Uncle Billy. The story centers around a little girl navigating family life during the American Civil War, an ideal vehicle to showcase Temple's talent and youth. The following is a lobby card, a form of promotional item for the film. [Figure 31.] The image resonates strongly with the banjo lesson motif. Uncle Billy plays the role of the elderly black man, while Temple fills the role of the young child, a girl in this case, with the banjo. Embedded in the image is a suggestion, connecting the banjo to the South, to the Confederate cause, and to specific interpretations of the American Civil War. Billy Robinson's character Uncle Billy is an enslaved person. The manner he is portrayed, smiling and dancing, resonates with portrayals from the 19th century, particularly those associated with minstrelsy. Since the minstrel show introduced the banjo to mainstream white society in the mid-19th century, perhaps for the audience, seeing the banjo in this context may have been unconsciously understood as a sort of homecoming. Indeed, it was common practice in the film industry to borrow elements from minstrelsy and Vaudeville, including films showcasing Temple's young talent.

[Figure 31.]

The quantitative analysis spans the entire 20th century and into the 21st, while the contextual analysis concludes with the 1930s. This discrepancy draws partially from the greater interpretative demands of contextual analysis, yet it primarily reflects the 1930s as a highly pivotal era in the banjo's history. Observations from the early 20th century in the quantitative data gain sharper definition when viewed through contextual analysis. In the following decades, the quantitative analysis' findings reveal a "holding pattern" of sorts, as the framework of ideas set in the 1930s adapts to the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, continuously repeating and reinforcing perceptions of the banjo. Through repetition these ideas evolve; for instance, as association with the Southern plantation and African American culture decline, connections to the Mountain South and the "hillbilly" image gain more prominence. Additional critical points emerge from the quantitative data, notably in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and again in the 2010s. Altogether, the timeline up to the 1930s offers much to consider. This decade marks a transformative shift in the banjo's cultural perception, one the analysis indicates is yet to be matched.

Chapter 3: Drawn Conclusions, a Summary of Analysis

Results and Interpretations

In attempting to assess the takeaways from the contextual analysis up to the late 1930s, we observe certain patterns supporting the quantitive analysis of the same period. The banjo was played by enslaved peoples on plantations throughout the 1700s and into the 1800s across various regions of the Americas. The prime vehicle for introducing the banjo to mainstream, white America was the minstrel show, which painted a sanitized, tailored portrait of enslavement and plantation life. The 2017 Banjo Hangout forum accrediting the instrument's decline to this association with minstrelsy, slavery, and plantation life, effectively reflects this data. However, as the minstrel show reaffirms these associations, it promotes the banjo far beyond the borders of the plantation, beyond the borders of the U.S. transcending class, race, and gender, essentially creating new associations. Additionally, the abolishment of slavery brought new options to African Americans. Emancipation brought access to instruments formerly difficult to attain for the enslaved person. Still, the banjo's mainstream appeal was not exclusive to white America, enjoying favour within African American culture well into the 20th century.

We begin our contextual analysis at the turn of the 20th century by exploring two aspects of the banjo's association with black subjects through the work of William Sydney Mount and a poster published by the Calvert Litho Co. Detroit. [Figure 3, 4.] While Mount's piece projects a dignified respect for its subject, the Calvert Litho Co. resonates with characteristics of buffoonery, or clowning, presenting a dichotomy which highlights the ideological diversity and social tensions surrounding issues of race in America. We identified repetitive motifs in the imagery, such as the banjo lesson or cowboy motifs, tracking them over time. These repetitive motifs are profoundly relevant to popular perceptions, interacting with other cultural idioms and

tropes. We present an argument for the late 19th century as a moment when diversity of perspectives is reflective of ideological diversity. This effectively contextualises results from our quantitive analysis exposing the diversity of subjects. Put clearly, the takeaways are, for images depicting the banjo, the 'banjo player' or the person who holds the banjo could be male, female, child, adult, working class, middle class, ruling class, black or white. There are practically no options in the image record for subjects other than black or white. The tendency is for the subject to be male, adult, working class and black; however, white, male, and working-class subjects are also common.

We effectively demonstrate how the concepts and association connected to the banjo carry over from the 19th into the 20th century, taking note of changes in artistic styles. There is an expansion in the use of caricature in depictions of human subjects, particularly in the realm of commercial art, a trend that has the potential for unanticipated consequences. There is much imagery featuring the banjo that includes depictions of river boats, swamps, cotton fields, cabins and other signifiers reinforcing the instrument's connection to the rural South. With the motif of the singing, banjo playing cowboy, the instrument is repeatedly associated with western expansion. In each image, the cowboy subject is Caucasian, also affirming the banjo's association with the construct of whiteness. To be clear, the banjo being associated with white culture did not negate or replace established associations with African American culture; it appears that initially, the two associations coexisted separately. Contradictory imagery depicting concepts such as itinerancy and conversely the home also seem to coexist harmoniously, further demonstrating the flexibility the banjo held as a cultural icon.

The beginning of the 1920s marks a historic pivot point. A little general information on the forces shaping the defining characteristics of the decade may assist our understanding. The

aftereffects of WWI were playing out in societies across the globe, effects which included a global pandemic, a generation of returning soldiers whose perspectives had been broadened, religious initiatives that resulted in the temperance movement, along with other era-defining effects. Numerous nations colonized by European empires began initiatives for independence from their colonial rulers; the phenomenon became an important geopolitical issue. In the U.S. this phenomenon manifests with pressure from returning African American soldiers demanding their civil rights. This is a movement which, like many of those other projects, will only gain momentum after WWII.

Within this environment, or perhaps regardless of it, the banjo appears to retain its popular appeal, at least to the extent indicated by the image record. Furthermore, as a subject, it continues to play a flexible role as a cultural icon. In their zeal to delineate music markets, those involved in the nascent recording industry did make use of banjo iconography. Record companies created new connections between the banjo and music associated with the South (which imagery has suggested is codified as 'white'), while simultaneously reaffirming its connection to music associated with the African American community through the promotion of race records. These associations may have indeed coexisted together, however, in keeping with the age of Jim Crow, they seem to have been mutually exclusive. In addition to the segregated nature of the recording industry, the analysis highlights a casual alignment between the music described as 'Songs from Dixie', 'Old Time Tunes', or 'Old Southern Tunes' and groups promoting both soft and hard versions of white supremacy. A paradox is presented due to this alignment when we consider the complicity many of the creators of these sounds seemed to have with their African American contemporaries. Arnold Shultz and James Pendleton Vandiver are offered as an example representing other occurrences of cultural transmission reported to have

happened in similar fashion. It must not be overlooked that moments of complicity occurred despite an environment dominated by racial tension and Jim Crow.

The 1920s ended with another historic event. The market crash of 1929 brought an end to the 'Jazz Age', a period when the banjo enjoyed prominence within the popular jazz ensemble. From this point to the present, the image record suggests the banjo is significantly less associated with African American culture. There is a hypothesis as to why this is, a hypothesis backed by testimony from a founding member of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. This question as to why the banjo's appeal within the African American community fell into decline represents a key phenomenon which merits deeper exploration. Meanwhile, there is plenty of imagery reaffirming the banjo's association with what is colloquially referred to as 'hillbilly music'. The term 'hillbilly' is an odd term, having pejorative connotations, it is often tolerated from within the culture, and less so from without. Although there are many valid reasons to interpret the term pejoratively, it is still accepted in various mainstream contexts.

Change is reflected by the imagery. Gone are the cotton fields and riverboats, the banjo's attachment to the south centers more around Appalachia or imagery that can be reasonably interpreted as such. The recurring image of the banjo playing, singing cowboy motif makes numerous appearances. Indeed, the banjo's association with the cowboy and Western iconography is persistent. There is competition for the instrument played by the iconic singing cowboy. As reflected by the image record and the discussion posted to the *Banjo Hangout* forum, the guitar appears to replace the banjo as the instrument of choice in the hands of our cowboy, and yet the banjo, the west, and the iconic cowboy's shared associations persist. The depiction of a country church service in South Carolina, prominently featuring banjo presents a fascinating juxtaposition between familiarity and unfamiliarity. When looking at the vast pool of imagery

portraying the banjo, it is noticeably less familiar in a religious context and is more often associated with aspects of secular society. However, Thomas Hart Benton's *Lord Heal the Child* (1934, oil on canvas) connects the banjo to worship. [Annex 29.] Along with this outlying association, the image also suggests more familiar connections to spaces such as the South, small communities, and rural settings. Additionally, the portrayal of an all-white congregation places the banjo in a context of culture and ethnicity. And again, it isn't a big stretch to interpret the image as a representation of Appalachia.

We are still tracing the recurrence of older motifs. We revisit the banjo lesson motif with Hy Hintemeister's *Natural Chilean Nitrate of Soda* (1938, oil on canvas). [Annex 31.] The motif is close to its original format; a Caucasian boy sits on the porch of an old cabin as an elder black gentleman sits perched on a chair to his side. A dog observes the duo. The relationship between the man and the boy appears instructional in nature, similar to Helen Corson Hovenden's piece *Uncle Ned and His Pupil* (1881, pencil drawing). [Annex 7.] However, by the 1930s, the image had adopted some new associations. We recall the article by literary scholar Patricia A. Turner on what the image of an elder black gentleman had come to represent, the Uncle Tom idiom. First introduced by Harriet Beecher Stowe in her extremely successful 1852 abolitionist novel Uncle Tom's Cabin, the novel represents the original source for the Uncle Tom idiom.[49]

According to Turner to understand the meaning behind the Uncle Tom idiom, one must examine the numerous stageshows loosely based on the best-selling book. Those involved in the production of theatre who did not share Stowe's humanist persuasions took great liberties with the novel's protagonist. The Uncle Toms depicted on stage were usually portrayed as thoroughly

[49] "Uncle Tom," *Oxford Reference*, accessed August 5, 2024, https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803110606892.

subservient individuals who willingly betrayed their black brothers and sisters to please white masters. As a result, in modern vernacular, the Uncle Tom label is often assigned to individuals who are perceived to have sabotaged other blacks for personal benefit. Known as *Tom shows*, stage productions of Uncle Tom's Cabin were a mainstay of American theatre well into the twentieth century. Uncle Tom became a trope; a figure of speech used to refer to fawning, selfish black men (and women). Thus, Uncle Tom's ubiquitousness had a definitive impact on mainstream society's assumptions about actual black men.[50]

The Uncle Tom idiom or trope, as described by Turner seems to have left an indelible mark on the collective perception of the elderly black man, one which has tainted both the original character created by Beecher Stowe and works by artists such as Corson Hovenden and her husband Thomas Hovenden. Earlier mention of Hintemeister's storyteller approach to composing paintings led to speculation on what story he may have been telling through this incarnation of the banjo lesson motif. In truth, we can never know, and it is irrelevant to the point being made. Hintemeister's portrayal of an elder black man lacks any use of caricature and possesses none of the exaggerated features or silly gestures associated with unfavourable depictions of black men. It appears a dignified portrayal of an elder black gentleman. Yet, despite this favourable portrayal, the Uncle Tom idiom has permeated the iconography of the elder black man archetype, changing the dynamic of these images. To illustrate a possible side effect, this idiom cultivates a degree of suspicion toward the intention and motivation behind portrayals of elder black men, meanwhile, its association with black men persists to the present.

[50] See footnote 49

The expansion in the use of caricature over time is a curious phenomenon. The 19th century saw limited use of the device, reserving its use for satire and at times commercial art. There is a noticeable increase in use of caricature in the 20th century. If we look at the images generated by animated cartoons through this lens they could be contextualized as further expansion of caricature in popular imagery. Heavily influenced by slapstick, a form of comedy popularized by Vaudeville, early animated shorts often parodied or were modelled after human personalities. Bosco was modelled after a young African American boy; however, the depiction is vague enough for viewers to commonly ask 'What type of creature is Bosco?' [Figure 27.] The banjo's place on the Vaudeville stage may have been a factor in how it came to be depicted in animation. However, in the cartoon world, as with much caricature, observation suggests a consolidation of the qualities associated with the banjo. Within these types of images, it becomes increasingly rare to see the banjo outside a male, adult, working-class and white context. In the Looney Tunes short starring Bosco, the banjo is played by Pig, whose pack, stubbled beard and placing on the train mark him as an itinerant or 'hobo'. He may have been modelled after a black man, a white man, or neither. As in Bosco's case, the depiction is sufficiently vague enough to leave questions of race up for interpretation. When considering the banjo with cartoon character archetypes, the banjo is often played by the lovable rascal, the underdog character who uses his wit to find outrageous solutions to common problems. This archetype could describe many early animated characters, including Mickey Mouse, and Bugs Bunny.

Several questions arise. How does the increase in the use of caricature affect the viewing public? Does caricature fundamentally change the perception of the subject? And if so, how? If the image includes an artifact, such as the banjo, how does caricature affect perceptions of that artifact? To offer even potential answers will require some critical speculation. Firstly, the image

record suggests it was less common to find caricature intentionally denigrating a particular group, it is more often applied without detectable bias. Indeed, most caricaturised images for mainstream consumption portray mainstream subjects. However, it could be argued certain sections of the population, sub-groups of society were more prone to the effects of caricature than others. The argument being posed assumes that those from marginalized communities may have had greater sensitivity to how members of their community were portrayed in the mainstream. This could apply to immigrant communities, indigenous communities, and the African American community. Considering that in her assessment literary scholar Patricia A. Turner asserts the Uncle Tom trope "had a definitive impact on mainstream society's assumptions about actual black men." And how the trope creates a dynamic effectively casting a degree of suspicion over the intentions behind portrayals of black men. If a portrayal such as Hintemeister's elicits a degree of suspicion, is it arguable that caricaturised portrayals of subjects from marginalized communities also elicited suspicion from within that community. In cases where caricaturised imagery includes the banjo, the banjo effectively shares any distortions attributed to the subject. Recalling the words of Fisk Jubilee founder Ella Shepherd may be of help. It can be argued that the reticence Shepherd and her cohorts felt towards engaging with culture that they had "associated with slavery, and the dark past" could extend into culture interpreted as denigrating, insulting, or possessing negative bias. With these things in mind, did the use of caricature in banjo imagery have any effect on the banjo's decline in popularity among black musicians? If so, to what extent? Interpreting cartoon animation as an extension of caricature in imagery, how do portrayals of the banjo in this medium affect popular perceptions? In Charles Fuller's theatrical production, A Soldier's Play (1981), African American drill Sergeant Vernon Waters expresses his disgust and contempt for the Southern black men under his

command, describing them as "singin', clownin', yassuh-bossin'' country Negros.[51] Fuller's representation reflects an element within the African American community, as observed through the writings of authors such as William Hannibal Thomas.[52] This element of harsh internal critique from within the community would arguably interpret caricaturisation along the same lines as Waters interprets the singing, clowning, and "yassuh-bossin" of the men under his command.

As previously stated, more focused research is required to fully understand these observations. Exploring ideas such as these will invariably impose engagement with other disciplines such as sociology and social anthropology. Using these questions as a guide, methods and practices commonly used by scholars of these domains will prove helpful in providing more definitive answers. For the moment it will be sufficient to acknowledge that certain questions will have to remain unanswered at this time.

This brings us to the final image in our contextual analysis. It is a lobby card for 20th Century Studios feature film *The Littlest Rebel*, starring child actress Shirley Temple. [Figure 31.] The image again affirms the connection between the banjo, the South, slavery, and the Confederate cause. The banjo, the dancing enslaved character, and the happy expressions on both characters' faces suggest a narrative of the Antebellum period, slavery, and plantation life inherent within minstrelsy. In conjunction with the minstrel connection, one might also acknowledge that the image, as well as the film it promotes, conforms to the 'lost cause' narrative fostered by groups such as the United Daughters of the Confederation, and can stand as a testament to the success of their work. The messaging inherent in the imagery is reinforced by

[51] Charles Fuller, *A Soldier's Play: A Drama* (Samuel French, Inc., 1981), 536.
[52] William Hannibal Thomas, *The American Negro: What He Was, What He Is, and What He May Become; A Critical and Practical Discussion* (New York: Macmillan, 1901), 224.

repetitive imaging. It surrounds and permeates society, along with any underlying concepts contained within the message. When competing ideas are voiced less frequently, and as is often the case, lack the proper vehicle to reach mass populations, the dominant idea can gain a monopolizing effect on collective perceptions.

Comparing the Banjo in Literature

When we briefly compare the banjo's role in literature to our findings from the image record, we find many of the same patterns of association. To effectively make the comparison, let's attempt to recreate the terrain of the literary world in the 19th century. During the period, the U.S. was a nation of readers, an activity that retained much of its appeal past the advent of radio and film, however, prior to this, this was the number one leisure activity in the U.S. The Local Color Novel was a fashionable form of literature which tended to center stories around familiar settings. These novels represented regions across the U.S. however, they tended to be rural, with an emphasis on the relation between 'mankind' and nature. One of the characteristics of the genre is a high level of sentimentalism. "Local Color fiction tended to soften the rough edges of history and society. They gloss over issues dealing with race, class, and gender. Local Color literature rarely presents an objective account of the complex or problematic nature of past events and cultural norms."[53] (StudySmarter, *English Literature* 2024 Local Color Novel.) Another characteristic is nostalgia achieved by weaving local traditions and customs into the plot and providing readers with a carefully constructed sense of the past. Although popular, these novels were not taken as serious. Taking this into consideration, in the 19th century it is perhaps

[53] StudySmarter, "English Literature: American Regionalism Literature," n.d., https://www.studysmarter.co.uk/explanations/english-literature/american-regionalism-literature/local-color-novel/.

not a coincidence that many of the genre's authors were women. However, the most celebrated among them was arguably Joel Chandler Harris. Harris is famous for his collections of African American folklore narrated by a freedman character named Uncle Remus. Br'er Rabbit, (brother rabbit) a trickster archetype, appears in many of the Uncle Remus folktales. While not explicitly mentioned playing the banjo in every version, Br'er Rabbit's association with the instrument, along with other characters in later adaptations reflects its connection to African American storytelling and trickster narratives. When interpreted as yet another repetition of the trope, Uncle Remus represents the elder black gentleman archetype that would come to be affected by the "Uncle Tom idiom".[54]

As alluded to earlier, the banjo's role in American literature carries meanings and associations parallel to findings from the image record. Authors prodigiously use symbolism as a device for storytelling, and good writing is often less explicit and more descriptive. 'Show; Don't tell', is the mantra. It would seem the banjo is coopted into these stories precisely on account of its symbolic nature. In 19th century literature the banjo's association with African American characters was fairly common. Mark Twain's novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* introduces us to the character Jim, a runaway slave who plays the banjo and sings traditional African American folk songs. The banjo is interpreted as a device connecting Jim to his heritage and cultural richness. This rich heritage and culture stand in contrast to the indignities of enslavement. Incidentally, Twain is himself a banjoist. He saw the instrument as a vehicle for American humour and storytelling.

[54] See footnote 49

In the later part of the 19th century, the banjo's appeal among the upper classes becomes a feature. In his novel *The Grandissimes*, (1880) George Washington Cable introduces Gabriel. Gabriel, a free man of colour, embodies cultural richness through his virtuosity on the banjo and other instruments. His music acts as a bridge between different social classes, showcasing the vibrancy and complexity of Creole society in New Orleans, and the power of the banjo to transcend class. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), William Dean Howells' rags-to-riches protagonist Silas Lapham's attempts to learn the banjo reflect his desire to ingratiate himself with Boston society and assimilate into upper-class culture. However, his clumsiness highlights the tension between social aspiration and individual identity.

These stories underscore the banjo's brief flirtation with ruling-class associations. However, as with the image record, the early 20th century generally reflects the late 19th century. Keeping in mind Cable and Howell's use of the banjo, we fast forward to the late 1920s and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929.) In a narrative that reflects the banjo's fall from upper-class association, the novel details the downfall and destruction of an aristocratic family. The story of the Compsons is told from the perspectives of three brothers. Their sister Caddy (Candace), the central character of the story, never appears in the novel, she is reconstructed through the accounts of her brothers. Disowned by her husband and family due to infidelity and the prospect of an illegitimate child, the disgraced Caddy's banjo playing is a signifier of her role as cause for the family's demise and ill repute. In *As I Lay Dying* (1930) Falkner attributes the banjo to Jewel, the illegitimate son of the main protagonist Addie, to whom the title refers. Jewel is a man of few words. His expressions are made through the aid of several devices, such as the observations of other characters, his actions toward his horse, and his banjo playing. In each of Falkner's family-centred stories, the banjo is played by the outcast or

proverbial ‘black sheep’. When combined with Falkner’s themes of decline, loss and despair, the banjo’s association with the outcast holds particular significance. Literature seems to offer additional explanations for how the banjo’s perceived association with upper and middle classes waned, and how the instrument almost became exclusively connected to working-class associations.

We briefly mentioned John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1930) due to the “box” banjo referred to in the novel. The instrument, played by Uncle John, serves as a source of comfort and joy for the characters who are facing hardship during the 1930s Great Depression. In Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* (1937), the banjo doesn’t make an appearance per se. The character Lennie, who dreams of owning and raising rabbits, also harbours a desire to play the banjo. While he never learns, the banjo represents his yearning for connection and belonging. Steinbeck often associated the banjo with the aspirations of the lower classes.

We have observed how authors including Falkner and Steinbeck align the banjo with the personage of the outcast. Additionally in these novels, the banjo is linked to the struggles of the working class, many of whom during the Great Depression were facing destitution. These associations are indeed corroborative of the findings from both quantitive and contextual analyses of the image record. There is, of course, another important corroborative comparison to make concerning race. Falkner’s treatment of race in his stories is an ongoing topic of discussion among literary scholars. In his fictitious setting of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, Falkner seems to acknowledge the ambiguity of race in the South and presents his working-class Caucasian characters through this lens.[55] Still, both Falkner and Steinbeck’s stories feature the

[55] “Performative Blackness in the Fiction of William Faulkner,” *Edubirdie*, September 10, 2021, accessed December 12, 2024, https://edubirdie.com/examples/performative-blackness-in-the-fiction-of-william-faulkner/.

banjo as played by a working-class Caucasian character. And we recall, this too is reflected in the image record.

We recall from our quantitive analysis of the banjo's image archive a decline in mainstream popularity in 1930, a decline that is far more dramatic within an African American context. It should be acknowledged that having organized data by decade, 1930 may be an inaccurate marker for when this decline happened. Our contextual analysis suggests a slow decline over the later part of the 1920s, consolidating in the market crash of 1929. The subtle and not-so-subtle changes in the way the banjo was portrayed can be detected stemming from this point. As the banjo's overall appeal declines, it appears to abandon some associations. It does this while retaining, even strengthening others. The banjo's connection to the middle class in imagery seemed weakened after 1929, its association to African American culture seemed even more severely so. Any connection to upper or ruling classes could not be found beyond this point. The banjo maintains its connection with Caucasian working-class people, rural spaces, and iterations of Southern pride among other associations. The cowboy, the farmer, the small-town church community, the hobo, the 'hillbilly', each represent a slight variation on the theme concerning portrayals that intersect white subjects with hard living. A brief investigation of the banjo's portrayal in literature reveals parallel associations. In these stories, Caucasian characters associated with the banjo, live through hardship. The imagery employed by Falkner and Steinbeck is easily comparable and compatible with images from the previous analyses. The imagery provided by literature adds depth to the list by providing the back story behind the outcast or loner who is portrayed as the itinerant or 'hobo'. Literature informs us that some subjects had once enjoyed ease and success, but have now fallen on hard times, such as the

farmer, or aristocrat from Steinbeck's and Falkner's works, offering an explanation for the decline in portrayals of the banjo in middle and upper-classes contexts.

The Mass Market and the Commodification of Sound

The imagery produced by the recording industry is commercial in nature. When imagery is occasionally sourced from the stock of images considered fine art, it is still intended for branding and marketing sound to a mass market. Recognizing the subjectivity of musical tastes and market demands, those involved in the commodification of sound recordings instinctively divided the mass market into smaller market demographics. How recording companies conceived of sub-dividing the mass market is in direct correlation with the imagery produced for these promotional purposes. Where genre and group identity intersect, the recording industry had mixed success when applying a designation to a sound. As mentioned earlier, with little precedence for categorizing sound, safe perhaps for categories attributed to various sheet music publications, record companies were forced to rely on trial and error when applying names to genres connected to identifiable groups. As the technology developed during these early decades of the 20th century, a consensus regarding genre began to emerge within the recording industry and supporting industries as these entities learned which marketing strategy worked, and which didn't. Once effectively categorized, a sound, and any accompanying image to said sound, have a profound effect on the public perception of not only the sound itself, but all things associated with that sound. Therefore, research into the recording industry and relative popular music genres presents high potential for understanding the changing perception of the banjo.

John and Alan Lomax's far-flung influence on the study of folk music, and the impact of their prolific field recording merit attention. For example, Alan Lomax's theories behind cantometrics, which codifies ten musical styles according to a perceived ethnography, may help

explain how the banjo is associated with various signifiers, and how the banjo becomes itself a signifier. Even Richard Middleton's counterarguments on the topic concede the likelihood that some signifying structures are more easily connected to the interests of one group than are some others and that some signifying structures are more easily connected to the interests of one group over those of another.[56] To better comprehend how music is identified and classified, and how genres emerge, the work of Karl Hagstrom-Miller and Dr. David Brackett offers depth, insight, and perspective. Both Brackett and Hagstrom-Miller demonstrate homology at work within the commercialized music sphere. Turning attention to how this may have affected the popular perception of the banjo, any speculations or findings concerning its ethnographic trajectory ought to correlate with data from the image analyses.

In the world of song collectors, folklorists, and musicologists, the name Lomax has left an arguably large imprint. John Lomax and his son Alan were each American folklorists of influence. Under the tutelage of George Lyman Kittredge, the senior Lomax was encouraged to follow up on his fascination with "cowboy songs" and ballads. (What music qualifies as a cowboy song is left undetailed, suggesting the material is familiar to the point it needn't be described.) "Go and get this material while it can be found. Preserve the words and music. That's your job."[57] John Lomax founded the Texas chapter of the American Folklore Society, His anthology, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, had a profound effect on his contemporaries. Lomax Sr. published several articles, co-authored subsequent books, and is at least partly responsible for raising the profile of academic folklore studies. Among his

[56] Richard Middleton, "Articulating Musical Meaning/Re-Constructing Musical History/Locating the 'Popular,'" *Popular Music* 5 (1985): 5–43.
[57] Jerrold Hirsch, "Modernity, Nostalgia, and Southern Folklore Studies: The Case of John Lomax," *The Journal of American Folklore* 105, no. 416 (1992): 189.

achievements are the field recordings, which began in 1933 and included 18-year-old Alan. The younger Lomax would continue his father's work, collaborating with Elizabeth Barnicle and Zora Neale Hurston in their fieldwork. The resulting recordings would proceed to directly, and indirectly influence music researchers, song collectors and folklorists, as well as musicians and those involved in choosing music for commercial recordings.

For their fieldwork alone, it is arguable the Lomax name has left a big footprint on popular music. Lomax's system centred around vocal performance. How do his theories apply to the topic of the banjo? Here is some of the forethought behind Lomax's system matching ethnographic signifiers with musical styles, a concept called cantometrics, "I propose that the new science of musical ethnography be based on the study of the musical styles or musical habits of mankind."[58] Lomax argues that what are commonly viewed as peripheral factors, such as venue, attire or instrumentation take on greater significance.

> An Andalucian gypsy finds it difficult to sing well in his flamenco style unless he is in a bar with wine on the table, money promised, women to clap and dance the rhythms, and fans to shout encouragement. Yet a melody hummed at work in an olive grove conjures up this experience to his imagination. (Lomax, A. 1959, p. 929.)

From this point of view, the significance of ethnographic signifiers, such as the wine, the money, the clapping, dancing and shouting are parallel to, or close to on par with the vocal performance. Lomax also suggests the vocal performance alone may evoke these other elements in memory. This concept can arguably be extended to musical instruments, which when sounded alone, may also evoke the whole experience to the listener's imagination.

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[58] Alan Lomax, "Folk Song Style," *American Anthropologist* 61, no. 6 (1959): 928.

As both cultural artifact and musical instrument, the banjo seems to possess the evocative quality described in Lomax's Andalucian example. We've examined the portrayal of the instrument in imagery and taken note of signifiers and associations articulated to the banjo. Akin to the melody hummed at work, the banjo can conjure any of its associated signifiers in the imagination of the listener with its sonic signature alone. Fast forwarding to a point in history closer to the present, we observe these signifiers at work in the use of thematic material from national anthems as leitmotif in film and television. It is arguably used to quickly establish character development and provide a backstory for a new character. In "The Simpsons" *The Bonfire of the Manatees* (1999) S17E01 we see this use of music. On a long drive, Homer suggests to the kids that they stop at his country cousins' home. At 13:38, Bart asks, "Country cousins…are they rubes? cause I don't cotton to rubes." To which Homer replies "Oh, the rubiest…". In the next scene, when approaching the house and knocking on the door, we hear the opening motif of "Dixie's Land" played on a solo banjo. A moment later Homer's country cousin answers the door. The joke is revealed when the country cousins seem more refined and intelligent compared to Homer. Note the decision to use the melody for "Dixie's Land", the de-facto Confederate anthem. What does that say about this yet-unknown character? Why perform it on solo banjo?

The sonic marker of the banjo acts as a device in the setting up of a joke. The term "rube" implies a lack of sophistication, manner, education and culture. By entertaining common tropes about Southerners, The Simpson's writers lure their audience down the well-trodden path replete with notions about intelligence, etiquette, hygiene, breeding and diet. In this instance, the banjo's cultural work is to share its associations with the South, with the under-classes, with rurality, and to resonate with notions of the mountain dweller, or hillbilly construct. It's a bait and switch as

we see the country cousins enjoying a familiar, contemporary home life. The looks exchanged between them after each time Homer speaks reveal it is they who feel their cousin is the "rube". The sound of a solo banjo playing "Dixie's Land" contributes to the set-up of this joke by reinforcing our pre-ordained assumptions. It is possible the discussion about rubes combined with the Confederate battle song played on any other instrument could achieve the same result. Indeed t joke may still work; however, the banjo's baggage of articulations helps solidify the associations between the South, the Confederate cause, and what we've termed the hillbilly construct. From this perspective, even Bart's use of the word 'cotton' in the previous scene seems yet another inconspicuous hint designed to lead audiences' false expectations regarding Homer's country cousins.

This seems to illustrate the point made by Lomax. He discusses the seemingly peripheral elements to the musical experience, such as the formal ritual of attending a symphonic performance in contrast with the formal ritual of a West African tribal gathering, or a Levantine bard regaling his village with an epic poem. Lomax asks: to what extent is the silently contemplative audience at the symphony, or the congregation responding at a West African tribal gathering, or the applause after a solo at the jazz club for that matter, part of the entire musical experience? "Musical reality is three-quarters composed of such materials, and it is, therefore, unscientific to focus our interest on formal musical patterns torn out of their context (as if music was intrinsically different from other human activities), or upon the precise measurement of particles of sound (as if musicology were a branch of physics.)"[59]

[59] Alan Lomax, "Folk Song Style," *American Anthropologist* 61, no. 6 (1959): 928.

Although Lomax's ideas about ethnology and music are certainly useful in the study of the banjo and its mainstream perception, Richard Middleton's counterargument to Lomax's cantometric system merits discussion. According to Middleton, "such theories always end up in some kind of reductionism – 'upwards', into an idealist cultural spirit, 'downwards', into economism, sociologism or technologicism, or by 'circumnavigation', in a functionalist holism".[60] Middleton seems to find a measure of value in "such theories". He admits he "would like to hang on to the notion of homology in a qualified sense", conceding that "some signifying structures are more easily articulated to the interests of one group than are some others." Middleton's tempering effect on Lomax's theories on ethnography and musical styles is just as well. Lomax's theories in Middleton's qualified sense works in helping understand the signifying structures and ethnography of the banjo.

The years and decades containing our focus were dominated by activities related to industrialization's expansion. Despite modern conveniences inevitably brought on by the Industrial Revolution, there were many detractors (paradoxically, many of whom were beneficiaries of such industrial endeavours.) As cities grew and the effects of urbanism and modernism disseminated throughout society, a concept of rural purity began to emerge. Initiatives to collect and preserve the perceived culture of the people, or 'folk', are not just an American or English phenomenon. Many societies embarked on such endeavours equating the culture of the folk with national identity, with the common threads being industrialization and a latent fear of the effect modernism could have on culture, identity, and society. England and the

[60] Richard Middleton, "Articulating Musical Meaning/Re-Constructing Musical History/Locating the 'Popular,'" *Popular Music* 5 (1985): 11.

United States were experiencing rapid industrialization, effectively intensifying these preoccupations with culture and identity.[61]

Compounding these sentiments are collective anxieties concerning immigration. From the end of the 19th century into the beginning of the 20th, immigration was a society shaping force and a major issue for both Europe and North America. From 1880 to 1914, the U.S. absorbed over 20 million European immigrants to the United States, an average of 650,000 a year at a time when the United States had 75 million residents. Among those established communities born in the U.S., the phenomenon of newcomers arriving in great numbers cultivated anxiety over national identity and fostered notions of ethnic nationalism. Modernism and immigration were perceived as threats to society, which could be remedied through the practical application of folk traditions in their 'purest' forms. The result, in what historians have dubbed the English Folk Revival, was that "between 1890 and 1914, the idea that the national musical idiom of England was to be found in a particular class of song called 'folk song' became deeply entrenched in English musical culture."[62]

One of the main purveyors of the folk song revival was folklorist, song collector, and educator Cecil Sharp. He is a well-known figure in English musical culture. A quick summary of his career will be necessary. For brevity, I will spare the details. Sharp, along with several cohorts, surveyed the inhabitants of small English towns collecting songs and dances passed down through oral tradition over generations that he felt were at risk of being forgotten. His work brought him to the United States where he traveled through Appalachia collecting ballads. His

[61] Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000): 11.
[62] A. L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), chap. 6.

belief was that these ballads were of English origin and had, in the wild mountains of America, been preserved in an earlier form even than those he collected in England.[63]

This describes, in a very general way, the work undertaken by Sharp and his cohorts. In the context of industrialization and immigration, it is important to note that Sharp's collecting takes on dimensions beyond the musical domain. According to historian Ezra Fischer, "Sharp and the first folk revival were not music and dance enthusiasts unaffected by their political context. Quite the opposite. The folk revival was a political act. Sharp was a Fabian – a political group in English politics that promoted social reform for the purposes of imperialism. Although this may seem like a strange combination of beliefs, it's not dissimilar from the beliefs of American Progressives at that time. We remember the Progressive era for social reform in the areas of education, medicine, and government. According to Historian James S. Pula, it had a dark side as well. "While the Progressive Era is generally viewed as a period of social, political, and economic reform, the alliance between restrictionists, Progressives, and organized labour brought different results for southern and eastern European immigrants." For them, "the era brought condemnation from an official United States government investigating commission, the restriction of further immigration, and the development and dissemination of negative stereotypes that would haunt them for decades."[64] "The institutionalization of demeaning ethnic stereotypes propagated by authors such as Madison Grant who, in his 1916 work The Passing of the Great Race, argued that the pure superior American racial stock was being diluted by the influx of "new" immigrants from the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Polish ghettos." Sharp

[63] Ezra Fischer, "Anti-Racism and the Folk Revival," July 8, 2020, http://ezrafischer.com/anti-racism-and-the-folk-revival/.

[64] James S. Pula, "The Progressives, the Immigrant, and the Workplace: Defining Public Perceptions, 1900–1914," *Polish American Studies* 52, no. 2 (1995): 57.

asserted that the "national type is always to be found in its purest, as well as in its most stable and permanent form, in the folk-arts of a nation," but if there were no folk arts, there could be no "national type." Sharp blamed immigration and modernization for destroying Anglo-Saxon folk traditions, and he recommended that public schools teach "the folksongs and folk-ballads of the race" so that children could "as quickly as possible enter into their racial inheritance. The songs would, he explained, "arouse that love of country and pride of race, the absence of which we now deplore." In Sharp's mind, racial identity and folk music were inseparable, and his commitment to the ballads was both personal and patriotic.[65]

For the Fabians in the UK and the Progressives in the U.S., race was a significant factor in their politics. Progressive politician (and President of the United States when Sharp came to America,) Woodrow Wilson, wrote In his *A History of the American People*, "Throughout the century men of the sturdy stocks of the north of Europe had made up the main strain of foreign blood which was every year added to the vital working force of the country… but now there came multitudes of men of the lowest class from the south of Italy and men of the meaner sort out of Hungary and Poland, men out of the ranks where there was neither skill nor energy nor any initiative of quick intelligence; and they came in numbers which increased from year to year as if the countries of the south of Europe were disburdening themselves of the more sordid and hapless elements of their population."[66]

In harmony with Sharp and President Willson, industrialist Henry Ford opines on the cultural situation. "Many people have wondered whence come the waves upon waves of musical slush that invade decent homes and set the young people of this generation imitating the drivel of

[65] Gavin James Campbell, *Music and the Making of a New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 110.
[66] Woodrow Wilson, *A History of the American People*, vol. 10 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1918), 98.

morons. Popular music is a Jewish monopoly. Jazz is a Jewish creation. The mush, slush, the sly suggestion, the abandoned sensuousness of sliding notes, are of Jewish origin."[67] The statement can arguably work as an effacement of jazz's African American origins, and a vehicle to position square dancing, as well as other dances like waltzes and quadrilles as expressive of a specific Anglo-Saxon /American cultural tradition. Through these initiatives, Ford believed he would be able to combat what he describes as the malignant influences of jazz on America. He reasoned if jazz was the cause of America's moral decline, replacing it with fiddles and square dances may be the solution. To attain his goal, Ford diverted a substantial amount of capital toward the promotion of square dancing and country music. In 1926, he published a manual for square dancing instructors titled *Good Morning: After a Sleep of Twenty-Five Years, Old-Fashioned Dancing is Being Revived by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford*. Ford created square dancing events which his employees were required to attend, he funded fiddling contests and radio shows promoting "old-time dancing music," as well as the creation of square-dancing clubs across the U.S.[68]

Notions of eugenics, racial hierarchies and identity swirl around the concept of an Anglo-Saxon national identity. Wilson famously screened the propaganda film The Birth of a Nation at the White House on February 18th, 1915. Lauded for its technical innovation and pioneering nature, the film was controversial even before its release. Its African American characters, played by white actors in blackface, are portrayed as unintelligent, sexually rapacious, and morally inferior. In contrast, the Ku Klux Klan is depicted as a heroic force, necessary to preserve

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[67] Ribuffo, Leo P. "Henry Ford and 'The International Jew.'" *American Jewish History* 69, no. 4 (1980): 437–77.

[68] Robyn Pennacchia, "America's Wholesome Square Dancing Tradition Is a Tool of White Supremacy," *Quartz*, December 12, 2017, https://qz.com/1153516/americas-wholesome-square-dancing-tradition-is-a-tool-of-white-supremacy?source.

American values, protect white women, and defend the supremacy of the race. The popularity of groups like the KKK has ebbed and flowed over the years, and the legality of such groups, including the KKK specifically, has come into question. However, during this time, the national zeitgeist, combined with the approbation of so many prominent members of society provided fertile ground for groups promoting hard white supremacy, like the KKK. In the face of such a national mood, those who would employ violence, intimidation, or destruction of property to advance this goal, along with softer efforts, (such as holding a fiddle competition) could, for the moment, operate with impunity.

Taking this information and applying it to Lomax's theories reveals an emerging music style complete with corresponding ethnographic signifiers. The dances associated with this music, the instrumentation of the music, the venue/region where this music is played, the attire, the racial identity of the players, dancers, and listeners, are all articulated to the music as ethnographic signifiers. The Caucasian roster of the Mountain City Fiddlers' Convention of 1925 needn't share their sponsor's opinions on racial hierarchy to support such associations, they need simply to participate. Their clothing, fiddling, speech, and their whiteness, along with the gathering itself reaffirm the pre-proposed ethnography. Accounting for Middleton's viewpoint, we understand the observations must be viewed in a qualified sense. People may come to a consensus on matters of quality when in groups, however, quality remains reliant on instinctive cognition and is individually subjective. Nonetheless, most would concede the ethnographic mapping being suggested, and much like the fiddle, the banjo sits somewhere on that map as an ethnographic signifier.

These affirmations of the ethnography of the music style are only half the equation. The other half of the equation requires the erasure of African American participation in this music

style. When Sharp and his colleague Maud Karpeles came across African Americans during their survey of the southern Appalachia region, the music was deemed unworthy of collection.

> We tramped – mainly uphill. When we reached the cove, we found it peopled by niggers … All our troubles and spent energy for nought.

Karpeles described the encounter in slightly greater detail:

> We arrived at a cove and got sight of log cabins that seemed just what we wanted. Called at one. A musical 'Good Morning' turned round and behold he was a negro. We had struck a negro settlement. Nothing for it but to toil back again.[69]

Sharp's choice of language may provide insight into his mindset; however, the more important observation is the active ignoring of African American participation in this musical style. A short excerpt from Philip A. Jamison's book *Square Dance Calling: The African American Connection* mentions this encounter described by Karpeles and Sharp.

> As early as the eighteenth century, in addition to playing for white dances, slaves began to dance the European dances themselves… One account from a South Carolina newspaper in 1772, mentions a "cabel" of about sixty slaves gathered near Charleston to dance "Country Dances." Although there have been African Americans in the Appalachians since the 1700s, Karpeles remarked that when she and Sharp visited in 1917 there were "practically no Negroes in the mountains."[70] Even if she herself did not see blacks on her travels in western North Carolina and eastern Kentucky (which is hard to believe), they had been there for generations,

[69] Mike Yates, "Cecil Sharp in America: Collecting in the Appalachians," *Musical Traditions*, 1999, 39.
[70] Maud Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp's Collection of English Folk Songs* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 146.

> and their influence in the region's music and dance is undeniable. According to US Census figures compiled by William H. Turner, African Americans made up twenty-one percent of the population of the Appalachian counties in Kentucky in 1830 (Turner 1985). By the time Sharp and Karpeles visited eastern Kentucky in the early twentieth century, the percentage of blacks in the population was lower, but the African American practice of calling had become an established part of the mountain dance tradition, giving the southern Appalachian square dances a looser structure than the highly formal quadrilles that had been taught by the dancing masters. In looking for connections to English country dance, they failed to recognize the numerous African American elements present in the dances they witnessed. In addition to dance calling, these include the presence of the banjo, hand clapping on the upbeat, patting juba, and dance calls such as "yaller girls.[71]

The recording industry had its own motivations for dividing up the population, albeit for commercial reasons instead of political. However, with so much energy and resource diverted toward the political construct of a white, Anglo-Saxon national identity, it would inevitably influence decisions by those involved in the recording industry "The history and trajectory of music made largely by and for white people from rural areas in the southern United States is closely bound to that of race music. Like race music, this music – in the 1920s called by various publications "mountain Music," "Old-Time Tunes," Special Southern Records (Fiddling)," "Square Dance Records." "Hill Country Music," and "Familiar Tunes" – could boast a prehistory of sorts with recordings made since the early years of the century that evoked the rural South."

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[71] Jamison, Philip A. "Square Dance Calling: The African-American Connection." *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2003): 395.

This may explain how imagery produced by the recording industry ends up affirming its assigned ethnography. Before the 1920s, divisions exploited by record companies for commercial reasons were perhaps less clearly delineated, however, they were pre-existent. However, these early recordings were not enough to establish separate categories of music.[72] Marketing music as a commodity along these lines of division was likely perceived as the path of least resistance toward a commercial goal. Whether or not gatekeepers within the recording industry, and record executives shared the political opinions of Progressives such as Sharp, Wilson, or Ford is irrelevant. Regardless of motivation, the creation of ethnographic genres and the promotion of these music styles were affirmative of the political mood. The dynamics inherent in commercial endeavours was such that the manner record companies perceived the market led them to cater to immigrant communities through foreign records and its subgenres, African American communities through race records and its subgenres, mainstream, urban audiences through a variety of genres and sub-genres focused on immigrant communities and white Southern rural demographics through Old-Time tunes (among other monikers). In a manner one might interpret as collating Lomax and Middleton's approach, Brackett writes: "Race music and foreign music provided models for how to apply ideas about homology to the formation of musical categories – that is, to connect types of music to narrowly targeted segments of the population – leading to the relatively rapid acceptance of old-time music as an industry category even as imaginary identifications with these categories continued to proliferate."[73]

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[72] David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 113.
[73] David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 119.

In his book *Segregating Sound* (2020), Karl Hagstrom-Miller quotes Okeh recording mogul Ralph Peer: "I saw that this was really a business like our foreign record business," Peer noted about Okeh's race record list. "We put out German records, Swedish records and what have you. So, I decided that, like the German records were all in let's say the 6000 series, I said well we need another number series so I started using this 8000. That was the theory behind it." Peer continued, "And when the hillbilly came along, and I quickly saw the analogy and I gave that a separate number series almost immediately. The first record was Fiddlin' John Carson, and they were so terrible I just didn't dare put any of them in the regular list."[74]

Peer may be credited as a pioneer for how he understood the market; however, in short order, his associates at rival companies would follow his lead. In a North America that had been absorbing mass immigration from disparate ports of call for decades, the notion of social divisions along ethnic lines was long established. By creating demographics along those lines for the marketing of music, companies act on this notion in a repetitive manner, effectively reinforcing these notions. Realizing that identifiable groups in America who were not necessarily foreign, but who were perceived as 'other' would likely respond similarly to this approach to marketing, record companies would apply the technique to these home-grown markets as well.

These associations are made through special actions. When repeated, the special action strengthens the association. At one point an association didn't exist, then suddenly it does; what special action happened to create the association? (Conversely: at one point an association did exist, then suddenly it doesn't; what special action happened to erase the association?) Where did they disappear those African American string bands of the early 20th century, what happened to

[74] Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 35.

black people making old-time music? Some grace these early recordings of the 1920s and 30s, represented scantly by commercial imagery and fine art. Some found fertile ground applying their skills to race music, which didn't include black Old-Time music. Some would fall into obscurity. In many cases, the fate of an individual musician would include all three of these scenarios. Each release of Old-Time music by white musicians, compounded by the overlooking of black participation in Old-Time music, repeats and strengthens the ethnography of the music style. Each commercial image portraying the presence of white subjects within this musical context works in tandem with the portrayal of black absence within the same context. For the record company executive, the motivation is to inform potential customers and promote product. Nonetheless, it isn't difficult to notice how this association between Old-Time music and white Southern rural communities was useful for the advancement of undesirable aspects of Progressive politics in the 1920s and 30s.

Split Ends

Recalling the quantitive analysis presented earlier, there is clear indication that the phenomenon concerning ethnography and music style continues to repeat, advancing the reinforcement of such notions. The association of white rural Southerners to a specific style of music, which is in itself associated with artifacts such as the banjo, continues to proliferate through the 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s. According to Brackett, historians applied the term 'hillbilly' to describe this proto-country music style later. In the 1920s, the term was used to name one of the genre's pioneering acts, however, barring this usage, it is mentioned sparsely as a designation for the genre. By the 1930s, the hillbilly construct had been germinating for some time, notions of the isolated mountains and their people are found in the local color novels of the late 19th century. Thought to have drawn from the Scottish concept of 'hill folk', the term hillbilly is

thought to have been used increasingly in the American context after the Civil War. Its use was documented as early as 1898, however, the construct, as we recognize it today, would still be in emergence during the 1930s. As the Great Depression sparked an Appalachian out-migration that would continue into the 1950s, bringing previously isolated cultural practices into the view of the mainstream. Called the 'Hillbilly Highway', this movement of people brought culture from the mountain south to populated urban centers in the north and west, in parallel with the Great Migration experienced by African Americans. And, like their African American and Indigenous counterparts, there is a paradoxical nexus of veneration and denigration applied to these mountain peoples, they are the 'other' from within. Each of these constructs serves a purpose to the mainstream, however, the hillbilly construct serves a unique purpose to mainstream white society. Simultaneously embodying a notion of ethnic purity and serving as a marker indicating how far mainstream white society had come from humble origins, the mountain folk were perceived as both noble purveyors of traditional Anglo-Saxon values, as well as isolated, illiterate, violent, inbred, and backward.

As the so-called 'hillbilly' genre could boast a sort of pre-history, so too could the banjo's connection to this culture. In the 1920s, a time when ideas surrounding ethnology, music and markets influenced the formation of music styles or genres, a major shift in how the banjo is portrayed occurs. By the late 1920s, it is less representative of America as a body, while it retains a strong connection to the South. It becomes less often portrayed as an instrument of the urban North, keeping a connection to rurality and Confederate sympathies. Absent from catalogues promoting race music, it is depicted in commercial imagery for 'Old-Time' and 'Southern Tunes'. Rarely seen in the hands of an African American musician, it began being depicted repetitively in a Caucasian context. Recalling my walk down Royal Street in New Orleans, a city

with its own strong associations with music that would ostensibly have been deemed race music, the banjo's absence from portrayals of the city's musical culture comes back into relief. I understand better why and how this occurred; however, lingering questions need addressing. Did the decline in portrayals of African American banjoists precede or proceed the decline in popularity of the instrument among African American musicians? Are there lingering feelings among the African American community about the banjo and its association with slavery as suggested by several posts in the banjo hangout forum? Ella Shepherd provides support for this notion by expressing concerns about Negro spirituals and their association with slavery, perhaps there are other accounts of these concerns being expressed.

I think of those African American folk musicians who played banjo or fiddle, called square dances and participated in this culture through the 20th century. If their stories and their careers were brought out of obscurity, what might be found? I think of Cecil Sharp, Woodrow Wilson and Henry Ford, who invoke culture and music in their attempts to socially engineer a national identity, and I recall the compounding effect of the divisiveness inherent in market demographics. Is this divisiveness responsible for Giddens', Royster's and my own apprehension surrounding the banjo and country music culture? Could this account for the obfuscation of the banjo's trajectory? Continued analysis of imagery into the 20th century and up to the present and employing theories such as Mieke Bal's *Material Image-Thinking* would certainly be enlightening and help to answer some of these questions.

Within the region of the Appalachian Mountains, evidence of banjo tunings, picking techniques, and building traditions would seemingly be transferred directly from African American traditions, and survive among Caucasian populations. There are many moments in the history that present opportunity for this manner of cultural transmission. It would be fascinating

to trace these moments of transmission. How intertwined is the transmission of banjo culture through minstrelsy with these other, lesser-known opportunities for cultural transmission? What is the true story behind the banjo's articulation to the Southern Appalachian region? And how did the people who shared that space really interact for the possibility of these cultural transmissions to have occurred?

Posing these questions leads me to recall the interview quoted earlier with Wynton Marsalis on the RBR music podcast. The full quote pulled from the interview is as follows: "It's interesting with American music because our music is so integrated, but after it hits the public, it becomes a thing that is used to divide. Even in a very beginning, 18th centuries Anglo-Celtic music and certain forms of African music come together. Rock and roll was an integrated movement, all the earliest people in rock and roll saying, 'Hey, black and white'. Alan Freid wasn't doing white covers if he had a better black original on and on and on, the musicians come together. Louis Armstrong, once in the 1960s said something very interesting, he said, 'You know, we're more integrated in the twenties than we are now'. And I always found that curious as a guy who grew up in New Orleans with that type of segregation, But, uh, in our musics, for some reason, we want the music to be separate. But the music itself is not, music is the art of the invisible. When you get so deep inside of a human being, the superficial differences are not there. When you're writing songs, like that kind of spiritual stream you get on. This stream doesn't contain information about the race of a person."[75] These sentiments from a musical luminary such as Marsalis reveal an underlying paradox. Musical culture can act as invisible

[75] *Speakeasy TV*. Season 2. Interview with Wynton Marsalis. December 11, 2016. Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse, New York City. Executive producers: Denis J. Gallagher and Don Maggi. Talent producer: Michael Jensen. Producer: Christine D. Reagan. Interviewer: David Crosby.

connective tissue within society, even as forces surrounding it separate and divide populations. Perhaps there will come a time when music and culture's connective qualities are emphasized, national, ethnic and racial identity associations are de-centred, and culture celebrates our collective humanity. Taking stock of the effect on society and collective perceptions made by former efforts to use music and culture in divisive manners, and more fully understanding who, what, and where we are as a collective culture represents a step toward that end.

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