

## **Black, White and Bluegrass: African American influences on a genre of southern country music**

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### **Résumé**

On a bien reconnu les apports afro-américains à la musique populaire américaine, concernant notamment des genres comme le *spiritual*, le *blues*, le *gospel*, le *jazz*, le *rhythm 'n' blues*, le *rock 'n' roll*, le *funk* et le *rap*. Cet article aborde une question moins évidente : dans quelle mesure le bluegrass, un genre issu de la musique country « blanche » du Sud des Etats-Unis, a-t-il été influencé par les traditions musicales afro-américaines ? La première partie de ce travail présente brièvement le bluegrass. Dans une deuxième partie, on examine les influences afro-américaines sur le bluegrass sous trois angles : l'influence du blues ; l'influence concernant l'instrumentation (le banjo en particulier) et les techniques instrumentales ; et l'influence sur le répertoire. La troisième partie est consacrée à l'évolution du bluegrass, notamment ses interactions avec le jazz et, plus récemment, les collaborations du banjoïste Bela Fleck avec des musiciens africains. Enfin, les rapports entre bluegrass et ethnicité sont abordés dans la quatrième partie.

### **Abstract**

African American contributions to American popular music have often been recognized, especially in connection with genres such as spirituals, blues, gospel, jazz, rhythm 'n' blues, rock 'n' roll, soul, funk, and rap. This paper explores a less obvious question: to what extent has bluegrass, a form of "white" Southern country music that developed in the 1940s, been influenced by African-American musical traditions?<sup>1</sup> Section 1 provides a brief presentation of bluegrass. In the second section, African American influences on bluegrass are examined from three angles: the influence of the blues; the influence on instrumentation (the banjo in particular) and instrumental technique; and the influence on the repertoire. Section 3 discusses the evolution of bluegrass, especially its interactions with jazz, and more recently banjoist Bela Fleck's collaborations with African musicians in 2005. Finally, the relationship between bluegrass and ethnicity is addressed in section 4.

**Mots clés** : banjo, bluegrass, blues, musique country, musique noire américaine, musique populaire

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**Keywords** : African American music, banjo, bluegrass, blues, country music, folk music, popular music

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## Introduction

African-American influences on American culture in general, and on American popular music in particular, are well-known, embracing spirituals, blues, gospel, jazz, rhythm ‘n’ blues, rock ‘n’ roll, soul, funk, and rap, not to mention a host of subcategories. This paper explores a less-discussed question: to what extent has bluegrass, a form of country music that arose in the 1940s, been influenced by African-American musical traditions? Although this influence has been acknowledged by scholars (e.g., Cantwell 1992), it may not seem obvious to non-specialists. Since many readers of this article may not be unfamiliar with bluegrass, I begin with a brief presentation of this musical idiom in section 1. Section 2 looks at the African American influence on bluegrass from three angles: the influence of the blues; the influence on instrumentation and instrumental technique focusing on the banjo; and the influence on the repertoire. Section 3 provides a brief discussion of the evolution of bluegrass, highlighting its interactions with jazz and banjoist Bela Fleck's collaboration with African musicians in 2005. In Section 4, I address the complex relationship between bluegrass and ethnicity, an issue that emerged in the discussion following the presentation of this paper.

### 1. Bluegrass, or “folk music with overdrive”

Although there are excellent bluegrass musicians in France and in Europe, this musical genre is less known to the general public than jazz, blues or rock. Even in the United States bluegrass occupies a rather narrow niche compared to more mainstream musical styles. In an influential article published in the October 1959 issue of *Esquire* magazine, the well-known ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax famously described bluegrass as “folk music with overdrive.”<sup>2</sup> At that time few people had heard of Bill Monroe or Earl Scruggs and the music

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<sup>2</sup> Cohen (2002, 140). The talk on which this article is based included a number of musical examples, which are marked with an asterisk and listed alphabetically in the Tracklist below. For this online publication I

they had created from earlier folk traditions. Many Americans became acquainted with the sound of bluegrass via Flatt and Scrugg's "Ballad of Jed Clampett," the theme music for the popular TV series *The Beverly Hillbillies*, which made its debut in 1962. Two movies also raised the profile of bluegrass in the United States and abroad. In *Bonnie and Clyde*, released in 1967, banjoist Earl Scruggs plays the emblematic bluegrass instrumental "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" during the chase scene. Another famous scene in the 1972 film *Deliverance* depicts an encounter between an urban bluegrass guitar-player and a young "primitive" and perhaps autistic virtuoso banjo-picker from the Appalachians.

Country music historian Bill Malone points out that

Bluegrass music has had a curious history. Almost everyone has heard of it, but few people know what it is or where it came from. It is sometimes used as a catch-all term to describe any form of country music, usually acoustic in nature, that suggests pre-World War II styles. But in fact it is not an old-time style at all; it did not begin to take shape as a distinct entity until the mid-forties, and it was not named until a decade later. (Malone 1985, 323)

As Malone notes, bluegrass represents the transformation of so-called old-time styles, and has been influenced by a variety of musicians and styles from non-mountain and mountain sources, and its songs are from no particular region. Mandolinist Bill Monroe, born in Kentucky (known as the Bluegrass State), is considered "the father of bluegrass." Like all "founding father" myths, this is a simplification; his bandmates, banjoist Earl Scruggs, guitarist Lester Flatt and fiddler Robert "Chubby" Wise, contributed to the forging of the bluegrass sound. Nevertheless, thanks to his instrumental innovation and his signature vocal style (called "the high lonesome sound"), Monroe remains a legendary figure, comparable to Louis Armstrong for jazz or Muddy Waters for Chicago blues. Around 1945 Monroe and his fellow musicians developed the classic bluegrass sound, setting the standard for future generations. The basic bluegrass line-up is acoustic, including guitar, five-string banjo, mandolin, fiddle and double bass. Harmonica and Dobro (or resonator guitar) are sometimes added to the mix. Emphasis is put on intense vocals with tight harmonies and well-executed virtuoso instrumental breaks. Bluegrass fans appreciate drive, impeccable timing, and cohesion.<sup>3</sup>

Like the blues and other musical genres from the American South, the destiny of bluegrass is linked to the social and cultural trends of the 1960s, especially to the folk revival during which the well-educated younger generation, often congregating in major northern cities, began to seek out what were perceived to be more authentic forms of artistic expression (Cantwell 1997, Cohen 2002).<sup>4</sup> The solid foundations of the house that Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys had built would allow the genre to develop over the next decades, along both

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have also provided several links to videos available on You Tube, which will allow the reader to view the exciting visual dynamics of a bluegrass performance. The notion of "drive" was illustrated by "Train Train"\* from Dolly Parton's album *The Grass is Green*, a tribute to her bluegrass roots featuring a cast of stellar contemporary bluegrass musicians, such as Stuart Duncan on fiddle or Jerry Douglas on dobro. See also <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPMbXI3KlXY>.

<sup>3</sup> See Bill Monroe's "Blue Moon of Kentucky"\*, later recorded by Elvis Presley. See [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffhqOy\\_A8KM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffhqOy_A8KM)

<sup>4</sup> Cohen (2002, 106) notes that the Shanty Boys, formed by Lionel Kilberg, Roger Sprung and Mike Cohen in the mid-1950s, was one of the first northern bluegrass groups. They performed regularly in Washington Square Park in New York City.

traditional and experimental paths (Newgrass), and would inspire many not only folk acoustic musicians (e.g. David Grisman), but also many of the leading folk rock bands and rock stars of the Sixties (e.g. The Byrds and especially Jerry Garcia, who began playing bluegrass banjo in the early Sixties).<sup>5</sup>

## 2. African American influences on bluegrass

### 2.1. The blues

The influence of the blues on American music is pervasive and can hardly be overstated. It played a major role in the development of early country music, most obviously in the music of Jimmie Rodgers, known as the Blue Yodeler, who recorded in the late 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>6</sup> The blues also had a direct influence on Bill Monroe, who at around the age of twelve began providing guitar accompaniment for Arnold Schultz, a black musician and coal miner who performed at dances in Western Kentucky. Schultz was a hoedown fiddler and a thumb-and-finger style guitarist, who played both hillbilly music and blues. Influenced by Schultz and by Jimmie Rodgers, Bill Monroe would continue to perform blues throughout his career. In his book *Bossmen: Bill Monroe & Muddy Waters*, James Rooney, provides a revealing quote from Monroe regarding his perception and deep understanding of the blues:

I remember in Rosine this colored man would haul freight from the train station to six or seven stores bringing each man what he wanted. And he would be riding his mule on those muddy roads just whistling the blues. And you could tell by the way he whistled that he was the bluest man in the world. Many days through peoples' lives the blues will touch them (...). If you can sing. If you made up words as you went along you'd make them up to suit yourself, to suit the mood you was in. You would gradually touch the blues someplace. (Rooney 1971, 23).

The blues, which can be defined in different ways, has influenced bluegrass on several levels. First, as Monroe points out, the blues is a sound and a feeling. A jazz vocalist like Billie Holiday sang very few blues in the formal sense, but her singing invariably conveyed blues feeling. The expressive vocal and instrumental inflections of the blues have likewise pervaded bluegrass interpretation and feeling. The bent blue note, embodying the blending of African and European musical traditions, triggers emotion in performer and audience, transcending cultural, linguistic and ethnic barriers. It should be pointed out that the blues scale is quite close to the minor pentatonic scale and the so-called dorian mode (e.g. D E F G A B C), which are widespread in European folk music. Secondly, as Monroe also emphasizes, the blues—which is based on call and response—leaves room for improvisation. In bluegrass performances this may be heard during instrumental commentary on the lyrics, or more elaborately, during the breaks between verses. As bluegrass evolved, musicians went beyond paraphrase and developed full-scale improvisational strategies, echoing a similar evolution in jazz. Thirdly, traditional or composed blues make up a key part of the bluegrass repertoire, and one invariably hears twelve-bar, eight-bar or sixteen-bar blues at bluegrass festivals or

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<sup>5</sup> See Rosenberg (1985) and Cantwell (1992) for two well-informed accounts of bluegrass.

<sup>6</sup> Malone (2002, 127) notes that country musicians had exhibited a fascination with the blues “well before Rodgers’ ascendancy.” Gary German (message Feb. 2013) has pointed out the white singer-songwriter coal miner Nimrod Workman performed several songs that reference the blues. A good example is “Coal Black Miner Blues”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnT4RaIJYUM>.

informal “pickin’ sessions.” Country blues like “Sitting on the Top of the World” or “Going down that road feelin’ bad” have become standards, allowing musicians to reach across cultural boundaries. Finally, many bluegrass songs and tunes refer to the blues in their titles and lyrics: “Walking the Blues,” “Lonesome Fiddle Blues,” “Florida Blues,” “Salty Dog Blues” and many more.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.2. Instrumentation and instrumental technique

### *The banjo*

While the fiddle, mandolin, guitar and double bass all came from Europe, the banjo has African origins and is perhaps one of the most emblematic instruments to emerge in the United States, a marker of American cultural identity. Conway and Odell eloquently sum up the musical journey of the banjo:

The banjo still echoes at the crossroads of West African *griots*, traveling country bluesmen, and the mountain and minstrel banjo players who once formed old-time Southern stringbands and whose descendants later created bluegrass and revival bands. (Conway & Odell, 1998, 1)

According to Conway (1995, 56) a protobanjo, which flourished in “various parts of Africa,” was brought by slaves to the West Indies. The actual “banjar” appeared in Maryland no later than the 1740s.<sup>8</sup> Writing about the plantation Negroes of Virginia in 1781, Thomas Jefferson stated that “The instrument proper to them is the Banjar, which they brought hither from Africa...” (Cantwell, 1992, 91). There are many reports of black slaves playing this instrument, which went by a variety of names, from the late 17th century onwards. It was usually made of a hollowed calabash or gourd, over which was stretched hide or skin, and to which was attached a long fretless neck and strings of vine, gut, silk or wire (ibid.). By the 1840s the banjo became popular thanks to its use in minstrel shows and the circus. The rich African American banjo tradition declined in the 20th century, but has been revived recently by musicians such as bluesman Otis Taylor and Carolina Chocolate Drops, a string band from Durham, North Carolina whose 2010 album *Genuine Negro Jig*, won a Grammy award for Best Traditional Folk Album.<sup>9</sup>

The four-string banjo figured prominently in early jazz and is also used in Irish traditional music. Old-time music and bluegrass use the five-string banjo, which has a high-pitched fifth-string that is shorter than the other four strings. The ringing out of this high drone note contributes to the characteristic sound and rhythm of the banjo, and of bluegrass. The African influence is of course not only present in the actual instrument, but also in the way the banjo

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<sup>7</sup> On Bill Monroe's “Muleskinner Blues”\* one can hear the direct influence of Jimmie Rodgers, the Blue Yodeler. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OldLdrZOOWM>. Vincent Cherré, who is preparing a PhD dissertation at the Université de Nantes on the relationship between bluegrass and Appalachian identity, has created a database of popular bluegrass songs, based on an analysis of bluegrass songbooks and best-selling compilation of bluegrass recordings. Many of the songs in his corpus are blues or have the word “blues” in the title, e.g. “Columbus Stockade Blues” and “East Virginia Blues.”

<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Patrick Couton for drawing my attention to this invaluable in-depth study, and for lending me both the book and the accompanying CD (Conway & Odell 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Otis Taylor “Little Liza Jane.”\* See also [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhiO8rT\\_LnA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhiO8rT_LnA). Carolina Chocolate Drops: see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKTXJUYiAT4>.

is played. The banjo patterns or rolls played by bluegrass masters like Earl Scruggs create a polyrhythm that is part of the African American heritage. Patterns such a 3 + 3 + 2 are superposed over a duple meter (two or four beats), as shown in example 1 below.

baa    dee    dee    baa    dee    dee    ba    dee    etc.  
1        and    2        and    3        and    4        and

Example 1: 3 + 3 + 2 rhythmic pattern over 4/4 meter.

In a chapter devoted to “African Rhythms and the Bluegrass Beat” Cantwell provides a precise description of the contribution of the banjo roll to the fascinating multi-layered rhythmic dynamics of bluegrass:

[...] with its unbroken and continuous stream of notes sharply voiced in bright, acid tones, the banjo roll broke up this congestion, bringing about a kind of rhythmic division of labor in which several strata of rhythm were distributed among the instruments—metronomic line to the bass, pulse to the guitar, offbeat to the mandolin or banjo vamp, subdivided rhythm to the banjo roll—while fiddle, mandolin, and banjo alternately carried improvised melodic lines rhythmically as flexible as any jazz horn player's. (Cantwell, 1992, 100)

Such rhythmic patterns are of course widespread in the African American music of the New World, including ragtime, jazz and Afro-Cuban music, and have now spread around the globe.

### *Slides and blues notes*

African American music has also influenced the way European instruments are played in bluegrass. As discussed above, Bill Monroe was strongly influenced by the blues, and his instrumentals and solos on the mandolin often have blues notes. Fiddle players, because they play on a fretless instrument, can capture blues inflexions by sliding into notes. Slide techniques associated with the blues guitar tradition were heavily influenced by Hawaiian music that was popular in the 1920s and 30s. In bluegrass this can be heard in the sound of the Dobro (resonator guitar), which has often been used in contemporary bluegrass.<sup>10</sup> The harmonica, which is occasionally used in bluegrass, also creates a blues sound through the use of so-called “cross-harp” technique, through which notes are bent to obtain a blues scale.

## **2.3. The bluegrass songbook**

There is considerable overlap between the African American and bluegrass repertoires. As mentioned above, many bluegrass songs are blues. The bluegrass songbook also includes many songs or instrumentals that come out of the 19th century minstrel tradition, in particular fiddle tunes like “Turkey in the Straw” (also know as “Zip Coon”), whose tune dates from the

<sup>10</sup> The brand name “Dobro” was coined in 1928 by the *Dopyera Brothers*, the founders of the Dobro Manufacturing Company. It is both contraction of their name and a word meaning “goodness” in Slovak, their native language. Masters of the bluegrass Dobro include Mike Auldridge and Jerry Douglas, who has appeared on countless recordings in a wide variety of musical idioms.



late 1820s or early 1830s.<sup>11</sup> Bluegrass has also recycled Negro spirituals such as “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” a song Bill Monroe often played in live performances. On his outstanding album of sacred songs, *On Praying Ground*, Doc Watson sings Thomas Dorsey's gospel masterpiece “Precious Lord.”\*<sup>12</sup>

The bluegrass songbook also includes many ballads that were sung in both the white and black traditions. One of the most famous is “John Henry,” which is about an American folk hero who died “with a hammer in his hand” after beating the steam-powered hammer that had been bought by the railroad owner to do the work of the mostly black driving crew. The legend of John Henry is well-known in African American folklore, and the song has often been performed by blues musicians, such as Mississippi John Hurt and Sonny Terry. In his spoken introduction to “John Henry”\* Doc Watson explains to the children in the audience that the story belongs to several traditions, black and white.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. The evolution of bluegrass: connections with jazz and African music

Bluegrass, like jazz, has continued to evolve, absorbing outside influences and developing exciting hybrid forms of acoustic music. Several generations of innovative musicians have expanded the bluegrass heritage. These include, among many others too numerous to mention, mandolinists David Grisman, Sam Bush and Chris Thiele; guitarists Tony Rice and Bryan Sutton; fiddlers Richard Greene, Darol Anger and Mark O'Connor; banjoists Bela Fleck, Bill Keith and Tony Trishka; and dobroist Jerry Douglas. There are many connections between jazz and bluegrass, which both might be considered as forms of American chamber music. First-generation bluegrass musicians, such as fiddlers Kenny Baker and Vassar Clements were influenced by different forms of swing, especially the Hot Club de France tradition represented by Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelli (who were themselves influenced by the earlier Eddie Lang and Joe Venuti duos). Jazz has strongly influenced new forms of acoustic music developed by musicians coming out of the bluegrass tradition, including David Grisman (the creator of so-called “Dawg Music”), who has performed and recorded with Grappelli, and Darol Anger, a founder of the Turtle Island String Quartet, which has recorded brilliant arrangements of compositions by Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, John Coltrane and other modern jazz musicians.

Among these innovators I would like to focus on Bela Fleck for several reasons. First of all, he plays the five-string banjo, which is, as we have seen, an African-American instrument. A master of bluegrass technique, Fleck has extended the earlier innovations of Earl Scruggs, Bill Keith and others, and continues to reinvent the instrument. He has recorded classical music, jazz, fusion (with the racially diverse Flecktones), and different forms of ethnic music, including African music. Bela Fleck recorded three tracks with modern jazz pianist McCoy Tyner's 2008 “Guitars” (sic) album, including “My Favorite Things,” which Tyner had

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<sup>11</sup> Cantwell (1992) provides a detailed discussion of the influence of minstrelsy on bluegrass.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITJ54wcbgxE>

<sup>13</sup> See also <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xaq0t90Q0d8>

recorded with John Coltrane.<sup>14</sup> Fleck's tune "Trade Winds"\* shows how well McCoy's style, honed with Coltrane in the 1960s and based on the use of drones and open fourths, meshes with Fleck's inventive soloing. The outstanding interplay between these two musicians needs to be put in historical context. The development of post-bebop "modal" jazz in the late 1950s (e.g. "So What" on Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* album) paved the way for collaboration between modern jazz and folk-based idioms like bluegrass. The banjo's fifth string makes it hard for the bluegrass banjoist to handle the complex harmonies and modulations found in many of the tunes of the Great American Songbook (e.g., Jerome Kern, Cole Porter), which were reworked and reharmonized by the beboppers in the 1940s. However, when playing modal jazz with masters like Tyner, the droning rhythmic fifth string becomes an asset, opening the path to the universal trance-like soundscapes that Coltrane (strongly influenced by Indian ragas) was seeking as part of a spiritual quest.

In 2005 Bela Fleck spent five weeks in Uganda, Tanzania, Gambia and Mali, bringing back 250 hours of film and more than forty pieces of music recorded with African musicians. This has resulted in a CD *Throw Down Your Heart: Africa Sessions (Tales from the Acoustic Planet vol. 3)* as well as a prize-winning documentary film.<sup>15</sup> As Fleck explains in an interview for the major jazz magazine *Downbeat*, several factors pulled him toward Africa:

One big factor was the history of the banjo. The Africans had brought it over here during the slave trade, and I wondered if there was still a banjo or banjo-like instrument being used over there. But more than that, I'd been interested in African music from way back. (Himes 2009, 30)

Fleck explains that the breakthrough moment occurred when fellow bandmate, saxophonist Jeff Coffin, played an Oumou Sagare CD for him:

It hit me like hearing Earl Scruggs or Ralph Stanley for the first time. I went out and bought all her CDs, and every party I'd have, I'd put Oumou's music on. Everyone would love it because it's great party music. I immediately wanted to hear her in person (ibid.).

It is apparent from this interview that Fleck not only has in-depth knowledge of the history of the banjo, but that he is also aware of the social and embodied dimensions of banjo music, which has always been tied to dancing and partying. Many tracks from *Throw Down Your Heart* album illustrate the successful interplay between the American banjo tradition and African traditions. "Ajula/Mbamba"\* is a medley of two traditional Jola songs, recorded in The Gambia with the Jatta Family, who are playing the akonting. According to Fleck's liner notes,

The akonting could very well be the original banjo. Everyone around Banjul certainly seems to think so! Huge numbers of slaves came west from this area. We were told that the musicians were allowed to play these instruments on the slave ships, and that many lives were saved due to it. (Fleck 2009)

Musical traditions in other parts of Africa also lend themselves to perfectly integrated performances. For example, on "Kinetsa"\* (shortened from "Kinetsanetsa", a traditional dance of the Vezo tribe from the southwestern Madagascar) the combination of the intricate finger style guitar playing of Ernest Randrianasolo (D'Gary) with banjo, fiddle and percussion reminds one of old-time string bands. This successful musical chemistry may be attributed not

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<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j966AGrGXZU>

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDCxaQhhL0A>



only to the outstanding musicianship of the performers and the mutual respect they hold for each other, but also to musically compatible string band traditions.

#### 4. Bluegrass and ethnicity

Following the presentation of this paper I was asked why so few African Americans play bluegrass, which led to a brief discussion on the relationship between ethnicity and bluegrass.<sup>16</sup> In spite of the connections with African American music that have been explored in this article, bluegrass is often considered as a sub-category of country music, that is “white” music originally from the South, and this may explain in part why it has not attracted black musicians.<sup>17</sup> The banjo's association with minstrelsy may have also diminished the appeal of bluegrass in the black community.<sup>18</sup> Have African Americans been excluded from bluegrass? Given the historical context, it is certainly possible that bluegrass musicians and fans may have held racist attitudes in the past, but this needs to be substantiated. In a discussion of what he considers as an overly aggressive pulse in some forms of bluegrass, Cantwell (1992, 110) asserts that in the Deep South bluegrass “has come to be associated in recent years with white supremacy and the Ku Klux Klan—in total ignorance, certainly, of the colossal debt bluegrass owes to black music.” It is disturbing that Cantwell, whose well-researched book has received critical acclaim, would make such a statement without offering a shred of evidence. According to Malone (2002, 220) there were few racist songs from indigenous southern sources “in the folk music heritage or in early commercial country music.” However, in the 1950s

the integration controversy shattered the North-South consensus that had prevailed since Reconstruction. Nothing on major record labels suggested southern displeasure or resistance among country musicians to racial integration, but a sizable body of racist underground material did develop, much of it recorded in Crowley, Louisiana, and distributed covertly through mail-order or “under the counter purchases. (Malone, 2002, 236)

As this quote shows, there is no doubt that country music has been misused in the past to defend segregation, but this concerned small record labels and it is debatable whether this ever had much impact. On the other hand, the bluegrass community developed via the folk revival, which was generally progressive and anti-racist. Furthermore, bluegrass has become international, and for most musicians and fans what counts is the music above all else. The dearth of African Americans in bluegrass nowadays may more plausibly be attributed to lack of exposure to the music and perhaps to cultural stereotyping that restricts the choices of members of all ethnic groups, creating the expectation that talented young African American

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<sup>16</sup> I wish to thank historian Peniel E. Joseph for asking this question, which has led me to think more about a complex subject that can only be explored briefly here.

<sup>17</sup> It should nevertheless be pointed out that African American musicians, such as Charlie Pride and Ray Charles, have made major contributions to country music. Many blues and jazz musicians, including B.B. King and Thelonious Monk, have shown their appreciation for country music.

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to Ben Forkner for reminding me of this important factor. Tom Watts (message Feb. 2013) has added that the black community as whole still has a negative attitude toward the banjo, and that black friends he has questioned on this subject have implied that this has been “sufficient to deter any interest in taking up the instrument or in honoring those African American musicians and their music.”

musicians will (should?) go into genres that have been historically associated with African Americans such as soul, jazz and rap, rather than, say, European classical music or bluegrass.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that few African American musicians play bluegrass may also be related to the way American popular music developed in the 20th century. Historically, African Americans in the South played acoustic music, whether in string bands and jug bands or in the country blues tradition of Robert Johnson, Mississippi John Hurt, Reverend Gary Davis, Skip James and others. During the folk revival of the late Fifties and early Sixties these older country blues traditions were picked up mainly by young white urban musicians, such as Dave Van Ronk, John Fahey, Stefan Grossman and Roy Bookbinder. Reverend Gary Davis was a mentor for many of the revivalists, who were able to learn his complex finger-picking style first-hand. On the other hand, amplified music, (R & B, Chicago blues, etc.) became popular in African American communities during the Forties and Fifties as people moved north to urban centers. The music of Muddy Waters and other Chicago bluesmen would influence white disciples like Paul Butterfield or, across the pond, British blues musicians like John Mayall and Eric Clapton, triggering the explosion of rock and blues-rock in the Sixties. At the same time, younger African American musicians were drawn to amplified soul and funk, two immensely popular musical styles for all young Americans of the era. Except for isolated cases like Ritchie Havens or Taj Majal, few well-known black musicians were playing acoustic music at the time.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, acoustic or semi-acoustic music continued to be embraced by young white Americans even after the explosion of “folk rock” in the mid-Sixties. The release of The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?* album, with its cast of older-generation bluegrass and country musicians (including Doc Watson and Earl Scruggs but not Bill Monroe), was a major cultural event for young white listeners. “Friend of the Devil” on The Grateful Dead's *American Beauty* album has become a bluegrass standard, and Jerry Garcia's work with the legendary *Old and in the Way* band, alongside David Grisman, Vassar Clements and Peter Rowan, is well-known in the bluegrass community.

One of the advantages of heavily amplified music is that it can be played in noisy clubs, in large concert venues and at rock festivals, thereby enhancing its commercial appeal. Bluegrass, however, although it occasionally uses electric bass and some amplification, is at heart acoustic music that thrives in more intimate settings. Adding drums or electric guitars with lots of sustain is problematic because it can disrupt the subtle dynamics of the music, drowning out the unique instrumental and vocal blend that developed in non-amplified contexts (e.g., the back porch pickin' tradition). Drums, which have been used by bands such as New Grass Revival, can also sound redundant since the traditional bluegrass lineup has an almost ideal well-balanced distribution of rhythmic roles, as discussed above. Other acoustic string music, such as flamenco or drumless “gypsy” jazz face similar challenges when dealing

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<sup>19</sup> Bob Harris, a bluegrass guitarist from New Jersey who toured many years with Vassar Clements, has recorded with a black bluegrass singer/musician who actually prefers the traditional bluegrass sound to other styles of music. Bob notes that a common thread between bluegrass and African American music is their gospel roots. Furthermore, when playing for the black inner city audiences at street fairs he noticed that the response was actually better than in white communities in a similar situation. Many people, including young black musicians, would come up to say how much they loved the music and had never heard anything like it before. (message received Jan. 26, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> As Patrick Couton has reminded me, the less well-known African American musician Bruce Langhorne was a key player in the folk revival, performing or recording with many of the major figures of the era.

with amplification. Consequently, these forms of music often get played in smaller venues, which—although they make for good listening—may limit their exposure.

The reality is that relatively few Americans, whatever their ethnic and cultural background, play bluegrass. The question “Why don't black kids play bluegrass?” might be reformulated: “Why do some (mostly white) kids play bluegrass?” The answer, I suspect, is that they grew up in families and in communities that passed on this tradition.<sup>21</sup> In the South this heritage may be related to questions of cultural identity; elsewhere, it is part of the legacy of the folk revival. Nowadays, bluegrass—like jazz or blues—is played and appreciated around the world, even though it has a lower profile than these other idioms. As we have seen, African American musicians like Otis Taylor and Carolina Chocolate Drops are reviving and reinventing the earlier black string band traditions. Wynton Marsalis has also performed the fiddle tune “Boil 'em cabbage down” with Mark O'Connor.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has reviewed and discussed the influence of African American music on bluegrass, from its origins in the 1940s to recent collaborations with jazz and African musicians. Although this influence has been studied by specialists, it is not widely recognized. Country music historian Bill Malone reminds us that

Poor Anglo Americans and African Americans viewed each other with suspicion across the racial divide, but they exchanged songs and styles virtually from the time of their first encounters in the early colonial South. Out of this common crucible of poverty and pain, blacks and whites created a mélange of musical forms that eventually evolved into the nation's major popular styles." (Malone, 2002, 14)

I have also discussed briefly the relationship between bluegrass and ethnicity, specifically addressing the question of why so few African Americans play bluegrass. Our connected world affords access to all kinds of music, potentially allowing people to resist restrictive cultural stereotypes and explore whatever music appeals to them regardless of their cultural background, ethnicity, social class, age, or gender. Educational systems, the media, musicians, fans and academics can all help break down such barriers and foster the basic human need for creativity and self-expression. Jazz, which has been racially integrated for many years, has faced a gender gap that is gradually being closed. Bluegrass is also closing the gender gap, but much needs to be done to expose people of all ethnic groups to this music, perhaps through grass-roots musical exchange programs that recognize the contribution of black music to this genre.

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<sup>21</sup> Thanks to Bob Harris for his comments on Americans' limited exposure to bluegrass. In an apt comparison to sports, Bob notes that few black kids play bluegrass or ice hockey because there are no black heroes in those fields. On the other hand, Tiger Woods made golf much more attractive for young African Americans. Perhaps what is needed, he concludes, is a black bluegrass hero. (message Feb. 9, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyt646v4hxA>

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## Tracklist

- "Ajula/Mbamba" (with The Jatta Family, The Gambia). Bela Fleck. *Throw Down Your Heart: Africa Sessions (Tales from the Acoustic Planet vol. 3)*. Rounder, 2009.
- "Blue Moon of Kentucky." Bill Monroe. *The Essential Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys, 1945-1949*. Columbia, 1992. Recorded Sept. 16, 1946.
- "John Henry." Doc Watson. *Songs for Little Pickers*. Sugar Hill, 1990.
- "John Henry." Hot Rize. *Traditional Ties*. Sugar Hill, 1988.
- "Kinetsa." Bela Fleck. *Throw Down Your Heart: Africa Sessions (Tales from the Acoustic Planet vol. 3)*. Rounder, 2009.
- "Little Liza Jane." Otis Taylor. *Recapturing the Banjo*. Telarc, 2008.
- "Muleskinner Blues." *Bean Blossom*. MCA, 1973.
- "Precious Lord." Doc Watson. *On Praying Ground*. Sugar Hill, 1993.
- "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." Bill Monroe. *Bean Blossom*. MCA, 1973.
- "Trade Winds" (Bela Fleck, banjo). McCoy Tyner. *Guitars*. Half Note, 2008.
- "Train Train." Dolly Parton. *The Grass is Blue*. Sugar Hill, 1999.

## Supplementary Discography

*Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia*. Produced and annotated by Cece Conway and Scott Odell. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1998.

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