In his new “biography” of the banjo, Laurent Dubois builds on the work of significant predecessors: Karen Linn’s *That Half-Barbaric Twang* (1991), Cecilia Conway’s *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia* (1995), Philip Gura and James Bollman’s *America’s Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century* (1999), Nicolas Bardinet’s *Un histoire du banjo* (2004), Bob Carlin’s *The Birth of the Banjo* (2007), and the essays of the late Shlomo Pestcoe on the Caribbean and West African roots of the banjo. In building on these foundations, Dubois has produced what must now be considered the definitive study of the banjo’s history and cultural significance. The subject had long been waiting for a scholar of Dubois’s sensibilities as well as his expertise: he is one of the leading scholars of the Atlantic world (both black and white) and, in particular, of Haitian revolutionary history and culture. He is also a polymath: in addition to his Atlantic and Caribbean works, he has written a major study of soccer and the World Cup. Not least importantly, he is a banjo player and devotee of the instrument.

What Dubois has brought to this new study is a profound appreciation of the processes of invention – not only the invention of physical objects such as the banjo, but also the invention of concepts such as “Africa” and, consequently, the one of the major instruments to be associated with it: the banjo as a cultural signifier. The subtitle of Dubois’s study is both playful and telling, for, as his book reveals, the banjo as we know it is not an African invention: it emerged in the Caribbean plantation societies, drawing on a plethora of African antecedents, amongst a linguistically and culturally diverse black population sharing the experience of slavery and in need of a unifying musical force – just as the idea of something called “Africa” as a coherent entity was developing in the minds of Europeans and white Americans. Thus the “invention of Africa” was accompanied by the creation of an “African” instrument in the Caribbean. Dubois’s subject is the continual reinvention of the banjo, not only physically (the progression from gourds, animal skins and gut strings to industrially produced models) but sonically and culturally as well. The unique combination of rhythm and melody in a drum-and-string-based instrument, he shows, has had a profound place in community formation, from the establishment of the Caribbean and American slave plantations (where the auction block was known as the “banjo table”) through the nineteenth-century minstrel shows; the birth of ragtime, jazz and bluegrass; and the solidarity movements personified in Pete Seeger.

Crucially, Dubois does his best to reconstruct a sonic history that has until now been dominated by literary and visual references. As such scholars as Richard Cullen Rath and Mark M. Smith have demonstrated in their respective explorations *How Early America Sounded* (2003) and *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (2001), the privileging of sight over sound has left the study of history with an enormous deficit. Working against the old adage that writing about music is like dancing about architecture, Dubois succeeds in recovering the shifting soundscapes of Atlantic and American culture, emphasizing the part that the sound of “strings
over skin” has played in African, European, Caribbean and American community formation.

Dubois’s sweep is breathtaking and his attention to historical detail is unsurpassed. He revisits and interprets anew a wealth of early sources that have previously been given cursory attention at best – sometimes resulting in the correction of commonly held assumptions (for instance, that the first American mention of the banjo was in Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia (1785), or that it was Joel Walker Sweeney who invented the five-string banjo). One can always ask for more: what was significant about the proliferation of strings numbering from two to four to five to six? Where does the classical tradition of Paul Cadwell fit into the instrument’s history? What is important about the stylistic innovations of those players who have worked to take the instrument beyond the mechanical and generic limitations associated with Earl Scruggs (Bill Keith, John Hartford, Bela Fleck et al.)? One can ask, but one should also accept that Dubois, like anyone else, has had a word limit imposed upon him. What he has offered is the most comprehensive and most sensitively imagined history of the banjo yet written. Interested readers will also enjoy – and learn much from – Dubois, Dom Flemons, and others discussing the subject on Duke University’s Faculty Bookwatch podcast, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2ccs7F--6w.

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