


TAKE THREE: THE BANJO

Working Class Hero to Felon: Picking Apart the Banjo's Cinematic Character Assassination in Postwar Mass Culture and Film

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The first nine notes of “Dueling Banjos,” plucked in the key of G major, can elicit chilling responses from American listeners. This twangy bluegrass melody, originally from 1954, gained widespread recognition when used in the Nixon-era psychological thriller *Deliverance* (1972), set in Appalachian America. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, imitating the banjo's bright twang—even by simply humming this song's opening notes—conjured a world of stereotypes.¹ In post-World War II America, the banjo came to signify uneducated, lower-class Americans and their presumed criminality (especially compared to the guitar) in American films.

Frequently lauded as “America's instrument,” the banjo has a complex symbolic history in popular culture.² During the 1840s, the cultural representation of the banjo, long used as sonic, visual, and material culture shorthand for Black cultural identity and music making, began to bifurcate.³ While the banjo remained firmly in the artistic hands of both enslaved and free Black musicians, blackface minstrel shows mediated its global representation. These professional antebellum performances—exemplified by the Virginia Minstrels and Christy Minstrels—featured white celebrity comedian banjoists in blackface makeup.⁴ Not only did they assume central roles on the minstrel circuit, but blackface comedian banjoists were also showcased on minstrel troupes' sheet music and songsters using woodblock prints, lithography, and photography. Publishers sold banjo guides and songbooks for amateur blackface minstrel performances and private parlor entertainment from 1840 to 1970.⁵ In addition to teaching

¹*Deliverance*, dir. John Boorman (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2007).

²Kristina R. Gaddy, *Well of Souls: Uncovering the Banjo's Hidden History* (New York, 2022).

³Christopher J. Smith, *The Creolization of American Culture: William Sidney Mount and the Roots of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Champaign, IL, 2013); Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright, *Images: Iconography of Music in African American Culture* (New York, 2000); Cecelia Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia* (Knoxville, TN, 1995); Alexia I. Hudson, “Henry Ossawa Tanner: *Modern Spirit* Exhibition, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 79, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 238–48; Paul F. Wells, “Fiddling as an Avenue of Black-White Musical Interchange,” *Black Music Research Journal* 23, nos. 1/2 (Spring–Autumn 2003): 135–47.

⁴Richard L. Hughes, “Minstrel Music: The Sounds and Images of Race in Antebellum America,” *The History Teacher* 40, no. 1 (Nov. 2006): 27–43.

⁵Rhae Lynn Barnes, “Darkology: The Hidden History of Amateur Blackface Minstrelsy and the Making of Modern America, 1860–1970” (PhD diss., Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, 2016); Rhae Lynn Barnes, “Yes, Politicians Wore Blackface. It Used to Be All-American ‘Fun’: Minstrel Shows Were Once So Mainstream That Even Presidents Watched Them,” *The Washington Post*, Feb. 8, 2019,

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how to play the banjo, their covers also taught Black stereotypes through crudely caricatured images of Blackness. Through minstrel shows, banjos became culturally associated with comedy and American racism through performance and again through Black caricatures on program covers.⁶

By the early twentieth century, the remarkable explosion of minstrelsy on the global stage effectively masked the banjo's West African and Black origins, its enslaved creators, and the substantial contributions Black musicians made to American folk, country, and bluegrass music.⁷ Coinciding with the emergence of the American recording music industry, the advent of film, and the legal regime known as Jim Crow, the banjo's ties to racial stereotypes solidified culturally.⁸ However, during the Folk Music Revival, which had its peak from the 1940s to the 1960s, the banjo was briefly recontextualized as a symbol of progressive labor and racial politics championed by white musicians like Woody Guthrie, Phil Ochs, and Pete Seeger among others.⁹ Their Black female banjoist contemporaries like Elizabeth Cotten and Etta Baker did not receive the same national recognition.

By the mid-twentieth century, acoustic and electric guitars surpassed the banjo's popularity in American music. The banjo remained inextricably linked to minstrel performances in Hollywood films like *Babes on Broadway*, where Mickey Rooney plays Stephen Foster's blackface hit "Old Folks at Home" (1851) on banjo in blackface and radio programs like *Amos 'n' Andy*. This enduring connection intensified as this blending of banjo music with imagined Black or impoverished lives continued. In both *This Is the Army* (1943) and *White Christmas* (1954), an oversized banjo sets the backdrop for massive minstrel numbers, the instrument alone symbolizing caricatured Blackness (Figure 1). Following World War II, the portrayal of the banjo in the media, particularly in movies and television, underwent a significant transformation. Notably, white musicians or characters who played the banjo rather than the guitar were frequently associated with over-the-top absurdist comedy in film or television. Examples include *The Beverly Hillbillies* theme song, Roni Stoneman on *Hee Haw*, Steve Martin's standup comedy, and even Kermit the Frog (though admittedly, he is green). More frequently, these characters were associated with a plethora of negative stereotypes stemming out of the minstrel tradition that wedded banjo players to poverty, ruralism, disability, resistance to societal norms, backwardness, a presumed lack of education, and unredeemable criminality for over a century.¹⁰

These stereotypes play out in the infamous "Dueling Banjos" scene in *Deliverance*. The intrepid Atlantan Drew, portrayed by actor Ronny Cox, plays a D-28 Martin acoustic guitar while leaning against his car. The dial of his wristwatch and golden wedding band, objects

https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/yes-politicians-wore-blackface-it-used-to-be-all-american-fun/2019/02/08/821b268c-2b0d-11e9-b011-d8500644dc98_story.html; Rhae Lynn Barnes and Glenda Goodman, "Early American Music and the Construction of Race," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 74, no. 3 (2021): 571–657; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, 2013).

⁶Robert B. Winans and Elias J. Kaufman, "Minstrel and Classic Banjo: American and English Connections," *American Music* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 1–30; Cecilia Conway, "Black Banjo Songsters in Appalachia," *Black Music Research Journal* 23, nos. 1/2 (Spring–Autumn 2003): 149–66.

⁷Laurent Dubois, *The Banjo: America's African Instrument* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); Diane Pecknold, ed., *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham, NC, 2013); Phil Jamison, *Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics: Roots and Branches of Southern Appalachian Dance* (Urbana, IL, 2015).

⁸Karen Elizabeth Linn, "The 'Elevation' of the Banjo in Late Nineteenth-Century America," *American Music* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 441–64.

⁹See Joseph Thompson's discussion of Pete Seeger in this series. Stephen Petrus and Ronald D. Cohen, *Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival* (New York, 2015); Gustavus Stadler, *Woody Guthrie: An Intimate Life* (Boston, 2020); Pete Seeger and Robert S. Reiser, *Everybody Says Freedom* (New York, 1989).

¹⁰A significant number of field recordings made of banjo playing in the twentieth century by Alan Lomax, musicologists, and collections now housed at the Library of Congress Folklife Center are of chain gangs or prisoners. In the context of incarceration, most artists were not compensated or entitled to copyrights for their work. This flood of banjo music tied to incarceration only furthered the stereotype culturally circulating in minstrelsy.



Figure 1. A still from the motion picture 1943 American film, *This Is the Army*, a wartime musical comedy. Produced by Jack L. Warner and Hal B. Wallis under the direction of Michael Curtiz, the film adapts the Irving Berlin stage musical of the same name. Created during World War II, the musical aimed to bolster American morale. Starring George Murphy and a young Ronald Reagan, the narrative follows two generations of soldier-performers: a father's experiences in World War I and his son's during World War II. Both generations stage elaborate all-soldier shows. The World War II show goes on tour, culminating in a grand minstrel performance before a fictionalized President Franklin Roosevelt. The minstrel numbers employ both blackface and drag and use an oversized banjo as a backdrop to symbolically evoke Black musical traditions, despite the exclusively white cast.

of American civilization, are closest to the camera's view and glisten as he effortlessly transitions between frets. The Martin guitar, captured by the camera from a front-on angle, is widely recognized for its rich timbre and loud projection. Its dynamic sound is the product of Adirondack Spruce, Brazilian Rosewood, and distinctive herringbone binding. The Martin guitar's esteemed make and model speaks volumes as a powerful cinematic correlative. It establishes Drew as a cosmopolitan, upper-middle-class consumer immersed in modern, twentieth-century mass music and culture. The link between Martin guitars and mid-twentieth-century recording royalty was well-established by the 1970s. White male musicians representing country, bluegrass, and rockabilly, including Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, Merle Haggard, and George Jones, used Martin guitars on vinyl records, on radio, in televised performances, and on magazine covers, symbolizing the novel landscape of American musical innovation. These artists, hailing from impoverished origins in the Deep South or Southwest, drew inspiration from vibrant Black musical traditions, particularly within adjacent sharecropping communities, Pentecostal strains of Christianity, and commercial blues heard during their upbringings that undoubtedly included the banjo. Despite their tumultuous lives characterized by railroad chasing, substance abuse, unrequited love, and incarceration, these musicians adeptly transformed their struggles into captivating narratives. These guitarists' public personas were ultimately redeemed due to their privileged status as wealthy white men, their faith in Christian salvation, and their deep connections to gospel music.



Figure 2. A still from the 1974 motion picture *Deliverance* “Dueling Banjos” scene, featuring child actor Billy Redden on banjo.

Unlike this rags-to-riches cache associated with Martin guitars, child actor Billy Redden’s character Lonnie, demeaningly called an “inbred” with “genetic deficiencies,” is shot from a camera tilted upwards as he imitates Cox’s guitar picking. Lonnie clutches a weathered hand-me-down banjo of unknown make. His banjo shows his resourcefulness in the face of scarcity. Its muddied head is a testament to Lonnie’s life, far removed from city opulence; a makeshift capo fashioned from rags and whittled wood completes the picture. On a dimly lit porch swing of a primitive cabin nestled on tree stilts beside a gas station, Lonnie’s fast banjo finger-picking blows everyone away. The two characters accelerate their pace. Drew’s face appears in the right corner of the screen, registering amusement and amazement at Lonnie’s banjo skills. In contrast, Lonnie’s face stays framed in cutbacks on the left side of the frame in a series of steady close-ups. This camera position is unsettling to movie-goers trained to associate movement from the left to the right on screen with forward movement and progress. Lonnie displays no emotion for multiple minutes, except for an unnerving, unblinking stare before finally breaking into a smile and laugh as he outpaces his counterpart (Figure 2).

As their musical battle intensifies, the pair incorporates a dozen notes from “Yankee Doodle,” a melody with transatlantic roots and strong ties to Appalachia and the urban blackface minstrel show. This passing reference to a song that, by the seventeenth century, had been appropriated by British English speakers to satirize American-born colonists as unsophisticated provincials posing as dandies (or imitating beyond their social class) emphasized the varied worlds that each character represented. The constant use of “Yankee Doodle” in blackface minstrelsy and nursery play concurrently alludes to the implicit racial appropriation of the now invisible Black culture that forms the foundation of American music while also rendering it derivative. While the city slickers enjoy the pleasures of modernity, such as watches and dental hygiene, the mountain locals seem innately in touch with the primordial backwoods sounds that echo an authentic American past and musical superiority. This further emphasizes the intricate interplay of race, class, and gender that banjos and their music elicit within American cultural representation. The juxtaposition between Drew and Lonnie through their instruments is undeniable. The high-end Martin guitar imbued with cultural capital represents the polished facade of Cold War modern America: a world of economic opportunity. By the end of the film, the wealthy will walk, despite committing murder. The banjo, symbolizing old-timey bygone ways, marginalizes and reinforces Lonnie’s disadvantaged lot as a disabled, immobile, impoverished child living on the borders of modern times where he is forever suspect.

The banjo’s cultural associations with white poverty and criminality similarly take center stage in the 1967 prison drama *Cool Hand Luke* set in the 1950s. The air cracks with the acute sting of Captain’s leather bullwhip in the sweltering heat. Heavy shackles bite into the

ankles of the titular character Lucas “Luke” Jackson, played by a stoic Paul Newman, as he takes another brutal lashing. Captain, an imposing authority figure, gazes down at the dry-straw pit where Luke has fallen; his voice, imbued with a sadistic drawl, famously utters, “What we have here is a failure to communicate.” Captain lingers on the final word as the oppressive Florida sun illuminates a defiant glint in Luke’s steely blue eyes. “Some men you just can’t reach,” Captain spat with a tone of finality, deeming Luke, the ever-defiant petty criminal, a lost cause incapable of redemption. Yet where verbal communication breaks down and falters among incarcerated men in this Vietnam-era film, the banjo takes center stage. Although the incarcerated men project a tough exterior that prevents them from openly expressing their fears, vulnerability, or sorrow with words, the banjo communicates their complex emotional worlds.¹¹

Using the Stanislavski method honed under the tutelage of Lee Strasberg at the Actor’s Studio, Paul Newman cultivated basic banjo skills to infuse depth and emotion into his character’s unwavering defiance of authority. Sentenced to two years of arduous labor in a racially segregated, all-white chain gang prison camp in Florida, Luke’s persistent conflicts with authorities result in “a night in the box.” His great crime? A drunken rampage that left a trail of decapitated parking meters. Luke disobeys authority, outsmarts his wardens, and becomes a folk hero. After winning a bet that he could eat fifty hardboiled eggs, director Stuart Rosenberg uses a high-angle shot to depict Luke’s recreation of the crucifixion. Outstretched on a jail table, Luke’s arms sprawl. His feet are crossed at his ankles. He wears white cotton boxers and a bottle opener, with eggshells radiating around his head like a halo.

Now admired by fellow inmates for his impossible feats and refusal to submit, Luke receives tragic news: his impoverished mother, Arletta, has passed away. The only remaining vestige of his family home is a banjo gifted to him by his brother. After learning of his mother’s death, Luke silently retreats to the spartan room of cold metal bunkbeds that are adorned with scratchy wool blankets and top sheets. Out of deference, fellow inmates move to the farthest corner of the cell, watching Luke with concern as he lightly strums his family’s banjo. Luke softly begins to sing the song “Plastic Jesus.” The opening line, “I don’t care if it rains or freezes/ As long as I’ve got my plastic Jesus” echoes the whimsical lines of one of the most famous banjo songs, Stephen Foster’s blackface hit “O! Susannah” (1848), which claims “It rain’d all night the day I left/ The weather it was dry/ The sun so hot I froze to death/ Susanna don’t you cry.” Luke momentarily ceases his strumming, allowing his voice to break as he sings about driving without motion. The camera panning across the barracks reveals his isolating grief despite being confined to a room full of men. Tears cascade down his cheeks. He increases his tempo, volume, and resolve. The concluding verse, “Going ninety I ain’t scary/ ’Cause I’ve got the Virgin Mary/ Assuring me that I won’t go to hell ...” echoes as Luke bows his head and weeps over his banjo, pondering his fate and thinking of his heavenly mother. Luke goes on the lam multiple times. He is repeatedly recaptured and punished with menial labor. Luke escapes one last time to a humble wildwood church where he pleads directly with God, who he fears has abandoned him. Instead of finding sanctuary, Captain shoots Luke through a window. Shocked, Luke slouches to the nave as his neck bleeds out. Ultimately, the state ruthlessly murders Luke. Despite his demise as an unredeemed convict in a desolate and rural work camp, Luke’s banjo enables him to convey loss and grief and to be emotionally vulnerable with a group of hard-edged men (Figure 3).

The mid-twentieth century marked a significant shift in the banjo’s portrayal in mass media. Its previous associations with Blackness, minstrelsy, and liberal politics faded as guitars took center stage, symbolizing modernity, middle-class America, and the capitalist pursuits of the postwar economy. This shift aligned with Cold War rhetoric touting America’s cultural innovation. In contrast, the banjo became associated with poverty, lawlessness, and uneducated

¹¹*Cool Hand Luke*, dir. Stuart Rosenberg (Warner Home Video, 1997).



Figure 3. A still from the 1967 motion picture *Cool Hand Luke* featuring actor Paul Newman on banjo performing “Plastic Jesus.”

white male rebellion against the conformity of the Atomic Age. This perception of the banjo as culturally out of place and suspended outside of modern time made it a ripe source of humor in 1970s surrealist comedy. Its unexpected presence in a post-Civil Rights society, combined with its racist and classist caricatured past, created a jarring juxtaposition that elicited laughter. Yet, the banjo’s allure as a link to America’s past remained. The banjo is having a renaissance in the twenty-first century. Comedian Steve Martin said, “I’d like to think it’s because we’re Americans and the banjo is truly an American instrument, and it captures something about our past.”¹² But what past banjos now capture remains up for debate. Women banjoists from Dolly Parton to Rhiannon Giddens have used the banjo to tell different stories about America. They are rewriting the banjo’s cultural history and future, diversifying whose music and lives it represents, while sounding a new redeeming history.

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¹²*All Things Considered*, “Steven Martin: Comedian Takes Banjo Seriously,” *NPR*, Feb. 4, 2009, <https://www.npr.org/2009/02/04/100239629/steve-martin-comedian-takes-banjo-seriously> (accessed Mar. 1, 2024).