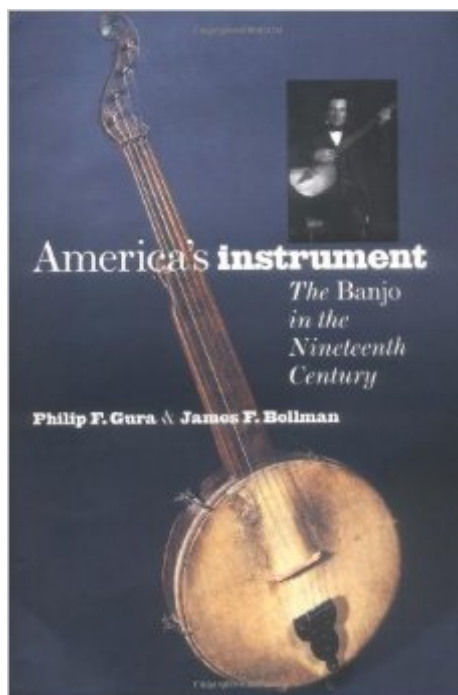


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# America's Instrument: The Banjo In The Nineteenth Century



## Synopsis

This handsome illustrated history traces the transformation of the banjo from primitive folk instrument to sophisticated musical machine and, in the process, offers a unique view of the music business in nineteenth-century America. Philip Gura and James Bollman chart the evolution of "America's instrument," the five-stringed banjo, from its origins in the gourd instruments of enslaved Africans brought to the New World in the seventeenth century through its rise to the very pinnacle of American popular culture at the turn of the twentieth century. Throughout, they look at how banjo craftsmen and manufacturers developed, built, and marketed their products to an American public immersed in the production and consumption of popular music. With over 250 illustrations--including rare period photographs, minstrel broadsides, sheet music covers, and banjo tutors and tune books--America's Instrument brings to life a fascinating aspect of American cultural history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is a great book for anyone interested in banjo history. It's well-written, authoritative, and loaded with wonderful illustrations. Even the physical construction of the book is outstanding. I had a copy on order before it was published, based on the strength of other publications of Jim Bollman's related to turn-of-the-century Vega banjos. I met Jim at his shop, The Music Emporium, in Massachusetts a while back. He told me about the book. The book doesn't deal (other than a brief mention) with the later emergence of the 5-string banjo as the backbone of bluegrass music and the banjos pictured are all pre-war - WW I, that is. As the title suggests, it focuses on the earlier period

of the prototypic banjos brought to America by African slaves, the evolution of those instruments during the minstrel era into the four-long-strings and one-short-string format that we all recognize, and their further evolution into technologically sophisticated and culturally refined instruments in the parlors of the wealthy. For many not familiar with the social transformation of the banjo in the late 1800's, this phase of its cultural history may come as something of a surprise. This book is extremely well documented, the product of the complementary skills and interests of its two authors, one an academician the other an ardent collector. Factory records, municipal directories, contemporary periodicals, patent applications, and other relatively inaccessible sources of information have been used to excellent advantage. You really get a feel for the personalities (banjo manufacturer and proponent S. S. Stewart being a notable and colorful example), the times, and significance of this instrument in the lives of people.

If you buy this book because the title might indicate it is an overall look at the banjo, its playing, its musics, and its place in society, that is not what this book is or pretends to be. This is a history of the physical development of the banjo and its construction and manufacture during the 19th Century. There are some small references to the different musics the instrument was used for, but not many. There is elaborate and detailed discussion of the main lines of construction of the banjos during this period. The authors also write well and thoroughly about the business dynamics of the chief producers of the banjo during the 19th Century. While this book is obviously the work of two of leading banjo collectors in the world and of interest to banjoists and instrument makers of all kinds, it is an important picture of America social and economic history as well. Someone interested in the rise and development of capitalist industry, fetishism of "the finer things in life" by the middle class, and how culture wars were waged in the 19th Century would profit from reading this book. For the artistically inclined there are a number of beautiful plates of 19th Century Banjos as works of art. It is clear that the authors privilege the decoration and physical beauty of the instruments as much as they do the instruments "playability." This work is great in itself. I found it very readable and believe someone who did not know much about banjos would also find this readable. If you are interested in the social and cultural history of the instrument to the present day, what you need is *That Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture* by Karen Linn.

If one were to collect instruments, art and ephemera to organize and document an exhibition about the banjo, a good place to start would be to review Gura's and Bollman's "America's Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century." This impressive book actually seems like a comprehensive

companion to a museum's exhibition which could have the same name, and I could envision such a treatise being a museum gift shop's best-seller. James Bollman is recognized as one of our Nation's foremost banjo collectors, and his outstanding assortment of Victorian-era banjos and related paraphernalia is one of the finest in the world. He was very pivotal as a project consultant to the fine exhibition that took place in 1984 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology called "Ring the Banjar!: The Banjo in America from Folklore to Factory," curated by Robert Lloyd Webb. That exhibit's catalogue had some wonderful information, photographs and illustrations. After seeing it, I was personally inspired to research and write an article about "Banjos at the Smithsonian Institution" which subsequently appeared in Bluegrass Unlimited magazine (Vol. 27, No. 5, November, 1992). Philip Gura, historian and Professor of English and American Studies at the University of North Carolina, is an expert in the history and culture of America's music industry. I found Gura's 2003 charming book, "C.F. Martin and His Guitars 1976-1873," to be well-researched, thoughtfully written, beautifully illustrated, and professionally executed. In "America's Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century," Gura and Bollman begin by documenting the banjo's evolution from the plantation to the stage. An interesting overview of the minstrel tradition and early performers is given.

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