

A LONG

The banjo is a much loved and increasingly popular instrument, but its history is less well-known. Rose Skelton talks to banjo protagonists Béla Fleck, Jayme Stone and Otis Taylor, who are all intent on highlighting its African roots

TRIP HOME

A sparkling moment of stillness is sandwiched between scenes of children singing at an orphanage in the Malian capital Bamako, and a noisy street scene in which motorbikes, cars and donkey carts chug down a dust-lined road. Béla Fleck, one of modern music's most experimental banjo players, and Oumou Sangaré, arguably Africa's most celebrated female singer, play together in a small recording studio in Bamako; Béla picking out sparse notes on the banjo with a look of calm anticipation on his face and Oumou passionately calling the anguished lyrics of her song 'Djorolen'.

Though the pair barely make eye contact, the tenderness shared is deeply moving, and it's as if the viewer has been given a glimpse of a private exchange between old friends. While it feels as if the two have been playing together for a lifetime, in reality their relationship has been short. Béla felt it too. "When I heard her music," he says of hearing Oumou Sangaré for the first time, "I thought, 'wow, I know this stuff, I want to play music like this.'" It was the start of a musical journey that took Béla and his banjo to Africa and resulted in the remarkable documentary and album, *Throw Down Your Heart*, a project which just won two Grammys and which explores the African roots of the banjo.

That Béla felt such a strong connection to Malian music immediately on hearing it is something other musicians have also experienced, spurring various projects which

dig at the roots of the instrument. Jayme Stone, a young Canadian banjo player, went to Mali to explore *griot* music and has since recorded and toured with *kora* players with their version of the banjo-meets-Africa on his 2008 album *Africa to Appalachia* [reviewed in #58]. The great American bluesman Otis Taylor delved into the African-American roots of the instrument on his 2008 album *Recapturing The Banjo* [reviewed in #50], making the point that when the blues came from Africa, it came via the banjo.

So while the instrument once again seems to be on the rise, appearing in sell-out bands like the UK's Mumford & Sons and championed by mainstream radio DJs like BBC Radio 1's Zane Lowe, other musicians are starting to ask the question, where did this instrument come from?

Most of us think of the banjo as a symbol of southern white American music, a central part of mid-20th century country, folk and bluegrass. But before there was bluegrass, the banjo-based folk music that formed in the Appalachian mountains during the 1940s, the banjo was a big part of African-American music styles like Dixieland, a style of jazz that came out of New Orleans at the start of the 20th century. Going back further to the late 1800s, the banjo was a common instrument in the drawing rooms of New York and Boston, where women would use it to play the popular songs of the day.

"Everyone had a banjo back then," says Béla, reflecting on the instrument's past glory days. "But it fell out of favour, the guitar took over

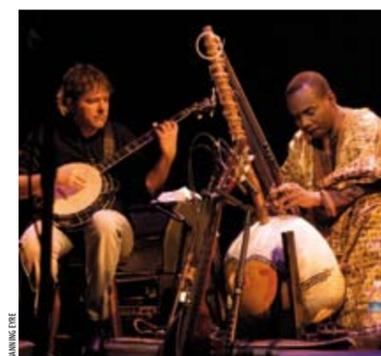
and it got relegated to traditional music and disappeared from common usage."

But the banjo's history didn't start there. Ethnomusicologists reckon the instrument, now made from metal, wood and plastic, actually came from Africa on slave ships in the form of skin and gourd lutes, like the *akonting* of Senegal or the *ngoni* of Mali, the latter of which has been around since at least the 14th century. Once these gourd instruments arrived on American soil, the banjo as we know it today started to take shape. Very quickly the African roots became buried as the early slave songs gave way to jazz, blues and bluegrass, and the instrument took on a whole new American identity.

Now musicians such as Béla Fleck are starting to unpack the whole banjo story. During a year off from his improvisational banjo-jazz ensemble The Flecktones, and suffering what he describes as "being in a funk" – unable to get excited about the music he was playing – Béla decided he'd take his banjo to Africa, on a musical odyssey to find its roots and also see if he could find a place in modern African music for his own instrument.

"I was always aware that the banjo came from Africa," says Béla, "and from the slaves. But it didn't really click for me as being anything important personally, until I started hearing music from Africa that really turned me on." When one of the Flecktones played Béla Oumou Sangaré's track 'Ah Ndiya' one night on the tour bus, he was smitten.

"That's what I'm talking about," he remembers saying on hearing her soaring »



Béla Fleck

New York City-born Béla was 15 when he first picked up the banjo – a 1930s Gibson that set him back \$4,000, an unheard of amount of money at that time. He was inspired to play by the legendary banjo player Earl Scruggs (now 86), an instrumental figure in the bluegrass style; as well as being intrigued by the instrument's long and fascinating history. Since then, Béla has taken the banjo to places well outside of the bluegrass and American folk tradition, with progressive bands such as New Grass Revival and the Grammy award-winning The Flecktones. Béla's recent projects include a funk and bluegrass fusion with pianist Chick Corea, and a concerto called *The Melody of Rhythm* with American bassist Edgar Meyer and Indian *tabla* player Zakir Hussain, which tours the UK in the summer.



Above: banjo maestro Béla Fleck swaps instruments with ngoni wizard Bassekou Kouyaté for a casual jam. Left, clockwise from top left: Béla playing with Toumani Diabate; posing for the new *Where's Wally?* picture book; with Djelimady Tounkara, who features on the track 'Mariam'; enchanting another group with his banjo playing on his journey through Africa

voice and the stringed instruments distantly related to the banjo, “right there.’ I figured the best music in the world had to be happening in Africa and it wouldn’t be the big pop stuff. It was probably buried a little bit and you’d have to go there to find it.”

The trip took in Uganda, Tanzania, the Gambia and Mali over 30 days, with a film crew, sound engineers and a myriad of local musicians, both known and unheard of, collaborating with Béla. The result is both probing and deeply moving, and according to Béla, “one of the things that I’m most happy about that I’ve ever gotten to do.”

Oumou’s song, ‘Ah Ndiya,’ which features on the documentary’s accompanying soundtrack, is a telling part in the puzzle of the banjo’s roots. The song opens with the raw notes of the *kamalengoni*, the low-pitched stringed instrument which in many ways – especially in its buzzy resonations – resembles the banjo. When the song gives way to the rippling currents of the kora, played here by Toumani Diabaté, and then the banjo, it all seems like a natural progression, the instruments sparring off each other seemingly effortlessly. Heard like this, it’s not too far a leap of the imagination to believe that one of America’s great musical instruments did in fact originate in Africa.

But despite the physical and stylistic similarities between the banjo and instruments like the long-necked, lute-like *ngoni*, most recently made popular by Malian rock-blues outfit Bassekou Kouyaté and *Ngoni ba*, the actual songs Béla found on his travels did not resemble bluegrass.

“I was hoping I would find a song that they played that had turned into an American folk

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song or banjo tune,” says Béla, “and I really didn’t find that. But the sound of the music really reminded me of the early slave music that I’ve heard. None of it felt like bluegrass: it was banjo music.”

Jayne Stone, whose last album explored Malian *griot* music through the banjo and kora, explains how it was that the instrument survived but the songs did not. “The people who would be playing this music,” he says of the Africans who first brought their instruments to the US, “were slaves, and there wasn’t really an openness where there could be a real transmission of their music. There

Right: Canadian banjo player Jayme Stone teamed up with Malian kora artist Mansa Sissoko in 2008
Far right: bluesman Otis Taylor set about bringing the banjo’s African roots to the fore on his *Recapturing the Banjo* album



were some curious white folk who were trying to play the banjo but they weren’t really asking to learn traditional music. There are some elements of West African music that you can hear in old-time music and in blues, but there is a rhythmic sophistication in (African) music that I feel a lot of us are having to learn for the first time.”

For bluesman Otis Taylor, this “old-timey” music, that he describes as “very African in style,” is what drew him into the banjo’s roots and led him to make the blues album *Recapturing the Banjo*. “I was playing African music before I knew it was African music,” he says, adding that he only found out about the instrument’s origins 20 years ago. “People thought the banjo was an American instrument invented by white people. Well, that’s not true. I just wanted to get the record straight.”

For Béla, a project of this size came with considerable complications. While the original

idea to make both the film and the album had been picked up by Sony in 2004, the record company pulled out just a couple of months before the start of the trip. Suddenly Béla found himself funding the entire project and he became disheartened when he didn’t gel with the first musicians he met on the trip.

“I just wasn’t getting it,” he said, sounding nervous just at the memory of his first few days in Uganda. “A couple of the guys were very, very old, so not being familiar with the music, I couldn’t tell if they were just past it or whether I just wasn’t getting it. Either way, it was very frustrating.”

The opening scene of *Throw Down Your Heart*, a breezy green field surrounded by slender trees, shows Béla surrounded by throngs of villagers from Jinja in eastern Uganda. Béla leans against a car and plays a rippling tune on the banjo. Old women, young children and middle-aged men look on in >>



PLUCKY STUFF

A selection of our favourite banjo pickers

Steve Martin
Californian comedian, actor, and this issue’s featured Playlist guest (see p8), Steve Martin is now recognised as one of traditional banjo music’s great exponents. Martin won a Grammy in January for best bluegrass album for *The Crow*. He’s played with Earl Scruggs, Dolly Parton and had a sell-out show at the Royal Festival Hall in London in 2009.

Earl Scruggs
Perhaps the most famous of all banjo players, there’s even a style of playing named after him (the three-finger style). The bluegrass classic track ‘Foggy Mountain Breakdown’ which Scruggs wrote and recorded with guitarist Lester Flatt is widely thought to be one of the fastest and most challenging banjo songs. >>

STORINGURE

curious wonder at the white man playing this fascinating instrument, their incredulous laughter increasing with his quickening fingers.

Then a bicycle bell sounds and from the back of the crowd, a young man in a faded 'Tower of London' T-shirt pushes his way to the front, a one-stringed instrument clutched in his hand. He starts to play it with a bow made from a bent branch and the villagers begin to clap, quick and determined. Before long, a huge group of musicians are gathered around him, playing a range of bowed lyres, harps, one-stringed violin-like instruments, rattling shakers and drums. "It's like the lights just came on," says Béla of that moment in the field at Jinja. "From then on, there was really not a bad moment."

Amongst the myriad musicians Béla links up with across the continent, the one character who already knows the banjo – and has one of his own – is Bassekou Kouyaté, the Malian ngoni player. Together they play some blistering blues and Béla teaches Bassekou's son how to play the banjo. Bassekou also features on Jayme Stone's record and curiously, says Jayme, Bassekou uses some finger-picking styles that have travelled across the sea.

"The traditional style of playing the ngoni," says Jayme, "you play down, which in old-time music we call 'claw hammer' style. Then there's the more modern styles that I use and Béla Fleck uses, where you're actually picking upwards, and Bassekou also does that. Those are modern developments, both developments happening in different countries. It's almost like there's something in the instrument that urges this kind of playing."

When both Béla and Jayme passed their banjos to people in Africa to play, the result was amazing. "They loved trying it," says Jayme, laughing. "You'd watch them solve the puzzle of the tuning, they have all these melodies in their head so they'll just figure out a way to make it work. In some ways it would feel natural to them." Bassekou agrees. "I can play the banjo," he laughs, "in my own way. But I play it like the ngoni. For me it's all the same thing."

For Béla, bringing the banjo to Africa, and bringing African music to the banjo, was a desire that had its roots in his early years, growing up during the civil rights movement. "I wanted to bring out that the banjo was more than just an Appalachian instrument that white folks played," he says. "A lot of black people I've met don't know the banjo comes from Africa." As he brought the banjo back into the jazz world with his group The Flecktones, and as groups like The Carolina Chocolate Drops have helped revive the African-American string band tradition, now the banjo has gone back to its earliest roots, back to Africa. Could it ever take on there, I ask Jayme?

"Sure!" he says, laughing. "The fretless ngoni is a great instrument, it's part of the sound of Africa, there's a lot to that instrument. But I'm sure they would also do perfectly well with the banjo." ●

CD Listen to a track by Béla Fleck & Bassekou Kouyaté on this issue's covermount CD – one of Steve Martin's playlist choices

REVIEW The *Throw Down Your Heart* DVD is reviewed in this issue

WIN A BANJO!

We are offering one lucky banjo-picking reader the chance to win a five-stringed openback banjo, courtesy of Hobgoblin Music.

www.hobgoblinmusic.co.uk

To enter, simply answer the following question: Which famous banjo player wrote 'Foggy Mountain Breakdown'?

See p5 for *Songlines* competition rules and address. Closing date May 14.



Mumford & Sons

These four young men from West London have taken the old-time banjo sound, mixed it with gutsy rock and brought it to mainstream attention, playing sell-out gigs in the UK, Australia and the US. The band have only been together since 2007 but are successfully bringing the banjo to places that, in the UK at least, others have failed to reach.



Carolina Chocolate Drops

This energetic trio from North Carolina have reclaimed and revitalised Afro-American banjo music with their spirited interpretations of black string-band music of the 1920s and 30s. Their album, *Genuine Negro Jig* [reviewed in #66], which mixes traditional tracks as well as their own compositions, features the banjo, fiddle and kazoo.



Po'Girl

When banjo player Trish Klein of The Be Good Tanyas collaborated in jam sessions with Allison Russell, they went on to form the band Po'Girl. They call themselves 'urban roots' and take inspirations from country, jazz and blues. The songs, fresh and folksy, are interspersed with galloping banjo solos. Po'Girl tour England and Ireland in May and June. Check the gig guide for dates.



The Deadly Gentlemen

The American foursome who describe themselves as a 'banjo rap' band and 'Béla Fleck with an extra finger' recently performed at Scotland's Celtic Connections festival. Their current album is endearingly entitled *The Bastard Masterpiece*. The group's lead vocalist and banjo player is Greg Liszt – also a member of Crooked Still (see right).



Crooked Still

The young Boston bluegrass group released their last album *Still Crooked* in 2008 – a Top of the World review in #56. Greg Liszt's reeling banjo-playing is finely accompanied by the sultry singing of Aoife O'Donovan. The band are coming to the UK in March, with a date at London's Borderline on March 23. Check out the Gig Guide for more details.



Noam Pikelnny

This Chicago-born, New York-based banjoist ditched his solo career in favour of playing in The Punch Brothers (see feature in #53), a seriously talented fivesome which includes ex-Nickel Creek mandolin whizzkid Chris Thile. Their debut as an ensemble was the highly impressive album *Punch* (a Top of the World review in #51), and they're releasing a second album in May.



Abigail Washburn

Formerly a member of the all-female, old-time Americana group Uncle Earl, Washburn's latest venture is with the Sparrow Quartet which features Béla Fleck, together with Chinese musicians. The group have toured in China and Tibet and last year released the EP *Afterquake*, in memory of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. ●