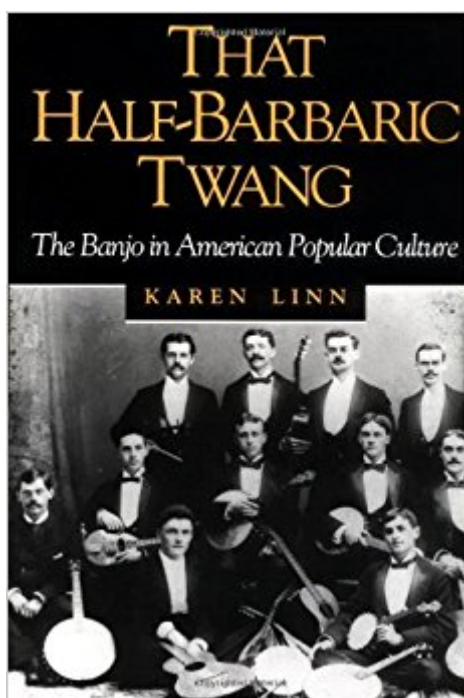


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That Half-Barbaric Twang: THE BANJO IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE (Music In American Life)



Synopsis

The Banjo in American popular culture.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is an interpretation of the changing and conflicting images of a musical instrument as found in the national, commercial culture of the United States.

This is a very well researched and documented history of the banjo in America up to the time of writing. I found it very interesting, though in some respects depressing. I have loved the banjo for all my 77 years (not counting the first few, which I can't remember) for its own sake, I also play banjo in its various styles - 5-string clawhammer, bluegrass, classic styles and 4-string plectrum. The book focuses on the general public's perception of the instrument through the years; not so much on the sheer joy of playing or listening. The perception changed radically, often with the help of promoters, but also because society changes in time. All in all this is a very interesting study.

Excellent look at the growth of the banjo. This book helped me appreciate the banjo and what I know about it. Was it a slave instrument, or do I only have a vague idea of that because of minstrel shows?"That Half-Barbaric Twang" with help any banjo player appreciate the ideas formed around the identity of this fine instrument. It's a pretty quick read too. I enjoyed coupling this book with

"America's Instrument: Banjo in the 19th Century."

This is one of the best books on the nature of cultural perception and the wars between reality and the stereotypes of the dominant culture, as well as the relationship between capitalism and culture, race and capitalism in America, as well as class race and style. This book belongs in every home. Linn deals with the social image of the banjo from its African and African American origins, to minstrelry's role in popularizing this instrument as well as the conflicts between the racism of minstrelry and the explosion of an instrument suited to popularize African American music. She continues by charting the now-forgotten age of the classic banjo from post civil war period until the first decade of this century, when manufacturers and teachers tried to elevate the five string instrument from its working class and African American roots, to becoming a polite and privileged possession for the rich. She then charts the evolution of the instrument and its image into the jazz age with the various 4 string banjos. Finally she deals with the images in the culture created by the persistence of the instrument in Appalachia and its revival in the folk scene of the 1950s through today. This is a gross summary of a subtle, well written book, that provides pictures about how stereotypes and misinformation based on the racial and class conflicts of society both cloud our knowledge of the real culture and constitutes part of it. This is a fascinating book about American history and culture and race under capitalism, even if the reader is not interested in the banjo. If one is interested in the banjo in any way, you Need this book!

This book reads as if it were written to fulfill a thesis requirement, and not out of love for the banjo. The author only touches on banjo technique and music, instead she prefers to base her arguments on iconography. I gave it two stars since it provides some interesting perspectives on race relations in the U.S., but it severely falls short for anyone who loves banjo music and the instrument itself.

I read this book about 15 years ago. I thoroughly enjoyed and have recommended it many times. Yes, it reads like a PhD thesis. No, it's not about technique, famous instruments or popular players. I'm not rating it based on what it isn't but on what it is, which is a highly-illuminating discussion on the history of the banjo and its place in American society over 300 years.

The book is exactly what the title claims- concerned with the *image* of the banjo in American *popular* culture. In other words, the book is about the ideas (sometimes good, sometimes bad) folks from different parts of society got in their heads concerning the banjo- what they thought about

the instrument & the people who played it, why they thought these things, & how this changed through time. Basically, the reputation of the banjo. It is written in a scholarly [dry & impersonal] fashion, and I will admit that I had to wade through parts of it (re-read some sentences, and occasionally put the book down and ponder what was meant) but overall I enjoyed the book for the historical tidbits and for the author's insight. You won't find the music in here, nor is it written in a way that indicates her own musical preferences, but she does give the names of individual artists so you can go hunt recordings down & give a good listen. What you will find is evidence of how Americans perceived the banjo- how it was portrayed in advertisements, cartoons, photographs, magazines, paintings, and literature. I found all this really interesting. My favorite was the snippets of literature & illustration from the 1880's that portray saucy young women as banjo players! She discusses the instrument's African origins, the banjo before the Civil War (briefly), the Southern black banjo, the banjo in minstrel shows, medicine shows, vaudeville theatre, 1890's college clubs, the parlors of upper-class Victorian women, the jazz & ragtime banjo, the dance orchestra banjo, the urban banjo, the banjo in Appalachia [mostly how it was viewed by folklorists], the banjo in early country music, what record companies chose to record and why- which affects our perception/ideas/understanding today. Good stuff- though keep in mind that each one of these appearances of the banjo probably deserves its own book. :) Also, I appreciated the author's break-down on authenticity, esp. considering all the argument in music over the topic, whether or not something is "authentic". For moments you really step-outside your own cultural perceptions when you take a good look at WHY people thought what they did- and you question where your ideas of the banjo (or anything else, for that matter) came from. Awesome. Worth reading. I gave it four stars because I felt that the book was missing the opinions of people from WITHIN banjo culture- very little here from musicians, more from outsiders looking in & forming opinions. Though that is not what the title promises ("popular culture") I feel that it is important for context and would have greatly added to my personal enjoyment of the book. How the banjo is perceived within the culture that plays the instrument is just as important as how "outsiders" view it. Also I felt the coverage was a bit uneven, more on the "largely unrecorded" African American string bands would have been good, more on medicine shows- I am guessing that rather than this being the preference of the author that she was working with what information she could find. These subjects & more deserve further attention- or perhaps my curiosity is insatiable.

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