
The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts

2. Musical Instruments

There is no doubt that black American music derives its identity from an African heritage. Every commentator on black people has at some point seen fit to describe their musical abilities. And whether speaking in awe or in criticism, no writer has ever failed to suggest that black songs represent an alternative musical tradition. Black music stands as a great cultural achievement, which becomes even more admirable when we consider the fact that this music was created and preserved largely with borrowed instruments. But not all African instruments were lost. Drums continued to play a central role in Afro-American music just as they had in Africa. The early drum forms were more like those of the ancestors, but these were eventually replaced by commercially manufactured trap sets. Cane fifes were a mainstay of some West African melodic compositions and are still made today in Mississippi. Single strand instruments are also found in Africa and Afro-America. The banjo, which contemporary America considers part of a white southern mountain heritage, owes its origins to Afro-American instrument makers and to African chordophone prototypes. These four musical instruments—drum, fife, one-strand, and banjo—demonstrate the diversity of instrument-making traditions. With these three kinds of instruments (percussion, woodwind, and stringed) we can illustrate both the longevity of black instrument-making traditions and the broad cultural impact of African influences on American music.

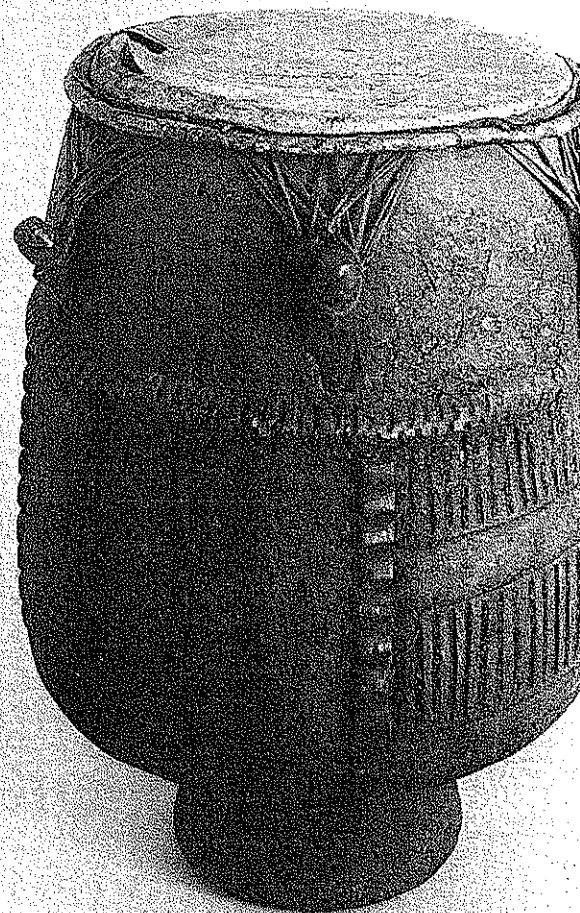
Percussion Instruments

Percussive sounds are a basic element in African and African-derived music. The common instrument for creating these sounds is not, as is commonly assumed, the drum, but the hands clapped together. African slaves were then obviously equipped to maintain a rhythmically oriented music even if drums were prohibited. Furthermore, many objects might function as drums. Benches and table tops, doors, inverted buckets, and wash tubs could all be used to pound out a rhythmic beat. A rice mortar is essentially the same as a hollowed-log drum body. It is possible that some mortars had skins temporarily stretched over them so that they could be played as drums [20]. The shaping of these drum-mortars is so exquisite that the extra care taken

in their manufacture is readily appreciated. The shift from food preparation vessel to musical instrument is not extreme, for when hulling rice black women often established a song cadence with the thump of the pestle in the mortar. Herskovits described how an innovative response to a culturally repressive law in Surinam kept drumming alive:

Adaptation to the legal ban is simple, employing objects of European manufacture never intended for such use. A metal wash basin is filled with water, and another caused to float in it upside down; the rhythms beaten on the bottom of this smaller basin give the sound of a hollow-log drum without the same carrying power. The curing rite [requiring drum playing] is thus carried out quietly and African medical practices continue despite the troublesome rule.¹

Figure 5. *Slave Drum*. Wood, late 17th-early 18th century, H. 18 inches. Virginia. The British Museum, London.

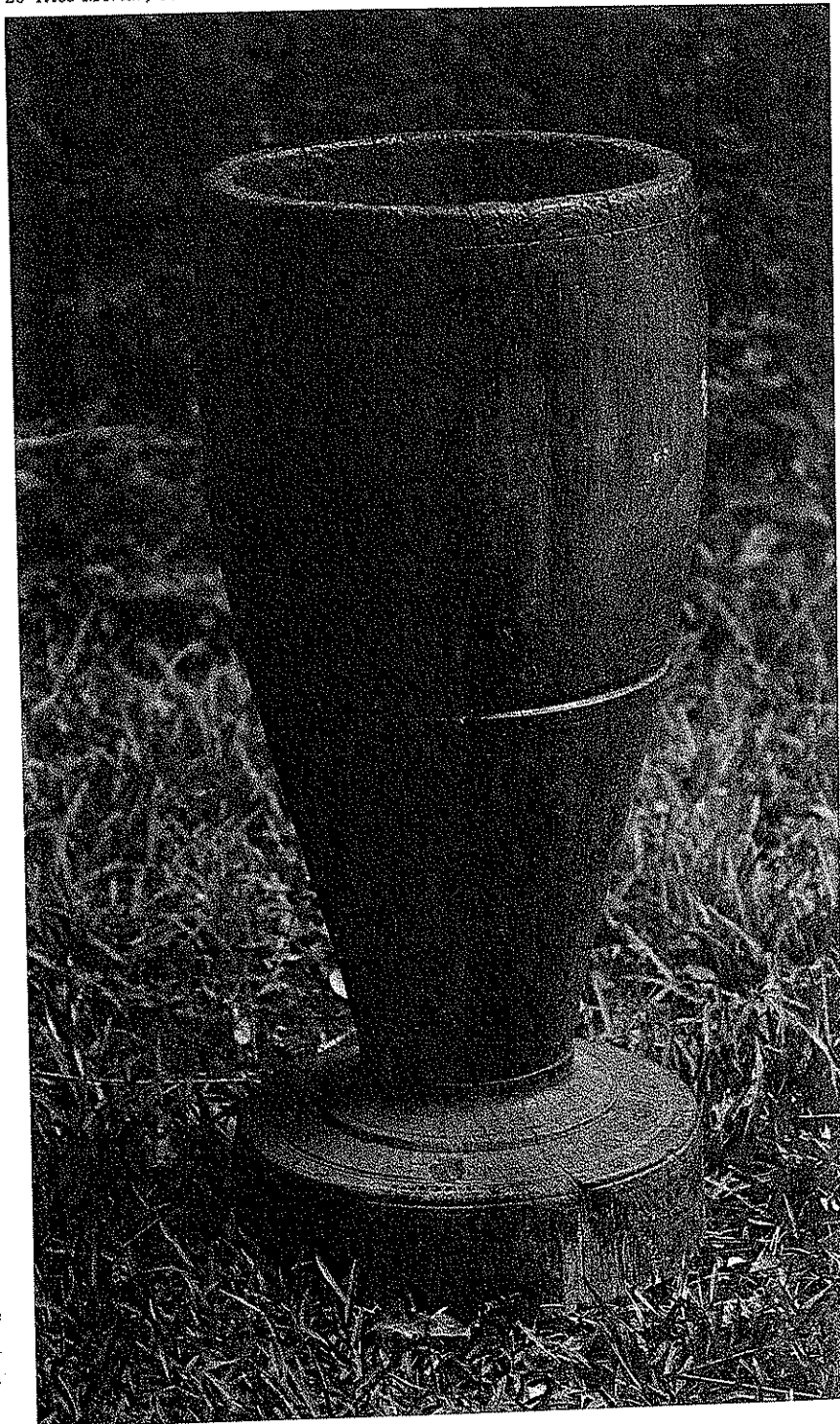


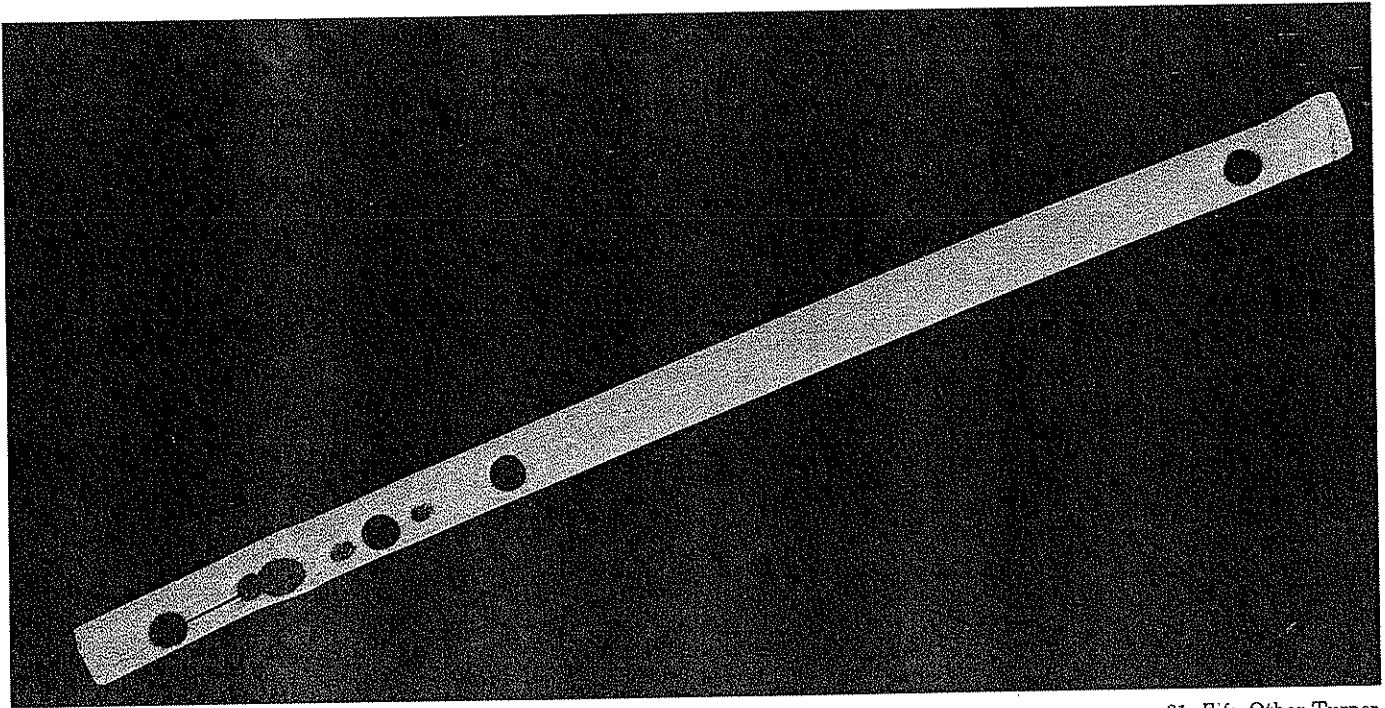
Thus, the absence of drums does not necessarily prevent the survival of drumming. In this context, it is important to recognize that a stubborn persistence of rhythmic concepts in the African nature helped to foster the maintenance of drum-making traditions.

Drums made of hollowed logs with pegged heads were common to both the West Indies and the American South.² George Washington Cable described this type of drum in New Orleans in 1886: "The drums were very long, hollowed, often from a single piece of wood, open at one end and having a sheep or a goat skin stretched across the other."³ The same kind of drum was also found in the Gullah-speaking communities of the Georgia coast. James Collier, a drum maker in Brownville, Georgia, made "old-time drums" in 1938: "He made one . . . out of a hollow log across the end of which he tightly stretched a goatskin. He fastened the skin to the log by means of a number of wooden pegs. Unlike modern drums, this one was taller than it was wide, measuring about eighteen inches in length and ten inches in diameter."⁴ The strength of the Georgia tradition is further suggested by the fact that eleven reports of drum making were elicited from seven different communities. Another, rather recent, example of a peg-type log drum was found in western Alabama in 1950.⁵ These widespread nineteenth- and twentieth-century reports of the hollow-log drum bespeak a heritage which probably dates back to the eighteenth century. Moreover, because of its presence in the West Indies, we can assume it also bespeaks a link between the South and the Caribbean.

The ties that unite African and Afro-American instrument making are illustrated by an early slave drum from Virginia (Figure 5), possibly made in the seventeenth century but certainly no later than 1753, when it was placed in The British Museum.⁶ Like the other Afro-American drums described above, this drum is exquisitely sculptured into a bottle shape typical of Akan-Ashanti *apentemma* drums and decorated with incised patterns of lines. Ghanaian musicologist J. H. Kwabena Nketia notes that plain drums are rare among the Akan and lists among the motifs cut into the surfaces of drums: bands of saw-edged design, bands of vertical grooves, plain bands, and alternating patches of vertical grooves and plain squares.⁷ All of these motifs appear on the Virginia drum. Furthermore, the drum head is secured to the tightening pegs in the same manner Akan drum heads are fixed.

20 Rice Mortar, South Carolina.





21 Fife, Othar Turner.

In form, decorative content, and technology this slave drum is identical to an Akan drum. It is conceivable that if this drum were today taken to Ghana and put into a drum orchestra, it would not be out of place. The only indication that this instrument is indeed not African is in the material from which it is made: American cedar and deerskin.⁸

That this early Afro-American drum should be so African and the others less so is readily apparent. Recently-arrived Africans and first generation slaves had a clearer memory of their African heritage. As they struggled to preserve their ethnicity and to recreate something of the world they had lost, they could draw upon recent memories of even the most intricate details. Later on in the nineteenth century the vision of the past became dim—although it was not forgotten—and consequently only the broad outlines of traditional forms were retained. The commitment of the first slaves to their African heritage was very strong. The Virginia drum is an example of their struggle to maintain an African identity: the patina or red clay which cakes the surface of the drum indicates that it had been buried, hidden away, perhaps, to keep some white master from taking it.

Blacks in the Gullah-speaking communities of Georgia, who in the 1930's continued to make and play drums, also had a sense of commitment. Their instruments may have been rude and simple when compared to those of their ancestors, but their struggle should account for the difference. Even the Djuka, an Afro-American group now in the jungles of Surinam, do not accurately maintain the traditions of their Akan

ancestors even though they have been free from European cultural influences for more than two centuries.⁹ Should we then expect more of American Blacks? Not only did they keep the tradition of the large hollow-log drum alive, but they also made tambourine drums,¹⁰ square frame drums, gourd drums,¹¹ and barrel drums.¹² Drum making thus flourished through diversity; older styles were supplanted by newer forms bereft of extensive artistic embellishment. The art of drumming, then, surpassed the art of drum making.

Cane Fifes

It is within the context of folk drum playing that the making of cane fifes has survived. Several fife and drum groups in the Delta area of Mississippi still entertain at picnics, barbecues, and front porch parties. A three-drum ensemble provides an exciting musical framework for the melodic lead of a fife player.¹³ The rhythmic pattern of a single drum is fairly simple, but when three are played together their thumping beats interlock into a complex polyrhythm which is clearly a carry-over of the drumming tradition of West Africa.

The cane fife is also found in West Africa, both in the savannah and the rain forest.¹⁴ The techniques used both in Africa and Afro-America to make fifes appear to be identical. A short piece of bamboo cane, perhaps a foot long, is cut and hollowed out with a red hot iron rod. Next the holes for the mouth and fingers are marked and then bored. Often the fife maker will experiment with the position of the finger holes in an attempt to find a better sound.

The fife tradition appears to have entered the United States through Georgia. Ex-slave F. J. Jackson of Grimball Point remembered Saturday night parties where there was dancing to drum music accompanied by the sounds of a cut-reed cane fife.¹⁵ In 1970 at Waverly Hall, Georgia, fifes were still being played.¹⁶ Mississippi fife maker Othar Turner claims that the cane fife tradition came from Georgia to Mississippi,¹⁷ where it survives today among several families: the Turners, the Youngs, and the Stricklands.

The instrument is a simple one, but its physical simplicity should not disguise its cultural complexity. The cane fife is the material manifestation of a deep musical memory. African slaves found in the sound of the fife an escape from oppression. Fife and drum music became, therefore, a firmly entrenched mode of southern black music. The fife changed only slightly as Afro-Americans moved westward out of Georgia. Othar Turner's cane fifes [21] have only five holes, while those made elsewhere in Mississippi and Georgia have as many as eight.¹⁸ This is enough of a change to demonstrate the dynamics of folk culture while simultaneously illustrating the stability of the tradition.

Stringed Instruments

There are some stringed instruments in the United States which owe their origins to Afro-American instrument makers. One of these is called the "one-string" or "one-strand." As its name suggests, it consists of one string or wire which is stretched out over some surface, usually a board. It may have a tin can resonator, but often it is only the single string set up on two wooden block bridges. This minimal instrument is important for three reasons. First, it represents an Afro-American retention of African single-string instruments—the earth bow and the musical bow (Figure 6).¹⁹ Second, it has a drone sound—one of the key features of the banjo. Eddie "One-String" Jones plays what he calls a "three-quarter banjo," which consists of a single wire stretched over a thin neck and a tin can resonator (Figure 7). With only one drone string, three-fourths of the strings required for a banjo are missing!²⁰ Third, the one-string is played by plucking the string and running a slider along the strand to change its sound (Figure 8), a method that later gave rise to the use of intricate slide techniques in the Mississippi Delta style of "bottle neck" blues guitar playing.²¹

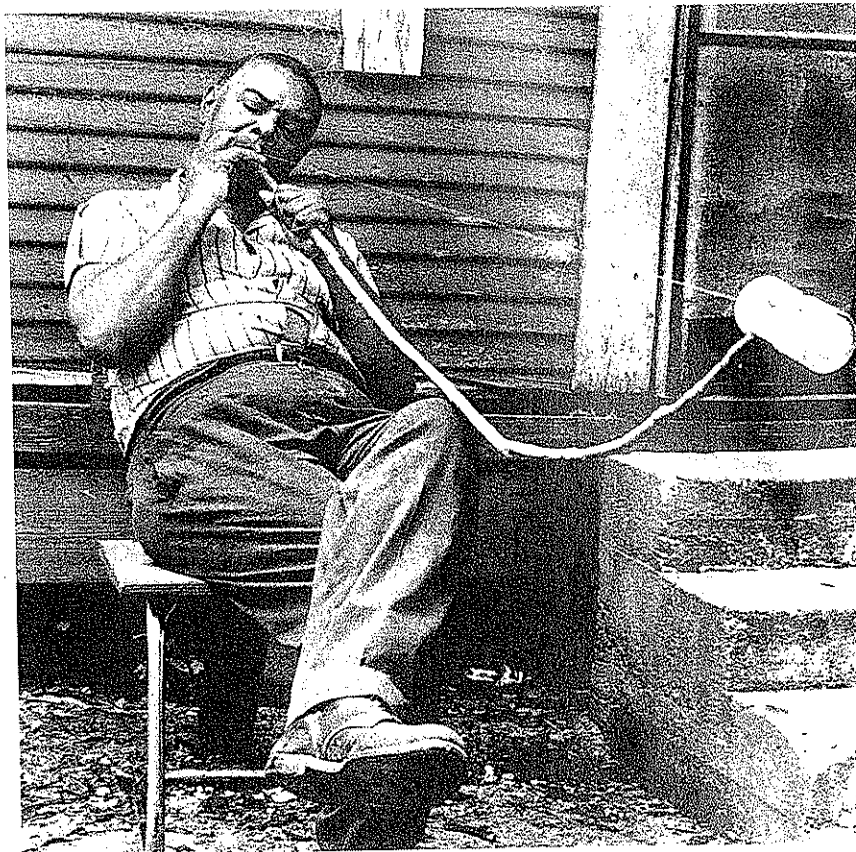
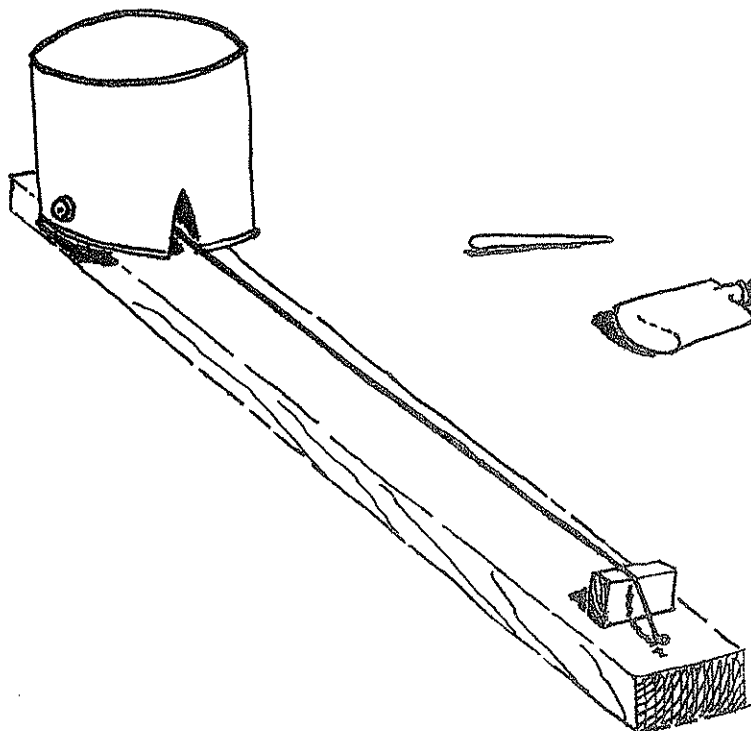


Figure 6. Eli Owens of Bogalusa, Louisiana, playing a mouth bow, 1973. Owens' great grandfather taught him how to make the mouth bow, an instrument that is well known throughout Africa. Note the substitution of a beer can for a gourd as resonator.

Figure 7. Drawing of Eddie "One-String" Jones's one-string instrument, consisting of a three-foot long "two-by-four," a steel wire, and a one-gallon paint can for a resonator. The wire was struck with a whittled stick and the tones were changed by sliding a small pill bottle along the string. Jones at one time lived in Los Angeles; his present whereabouts is unknown. It is known that he played this instrument in the 1950's.



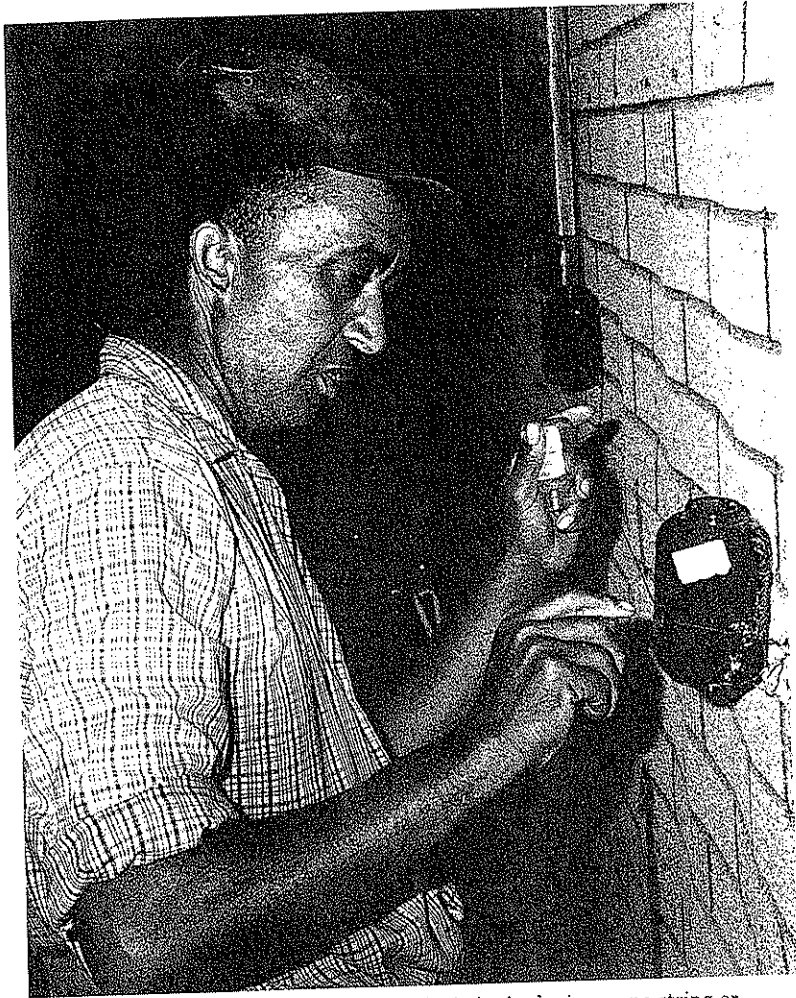


Figure 8. Compton Jones of Senatobia, Mississippi, playing a one-string or "diddley-bow" set up on the side of his house, 1971. The small bottle is used as a slider to change the sound of the string as it is plucked.

Figure 9. *The Old Plantation*. Water color, late 18th century, 11-3/4 x 18 inches. United States. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Williamsburg, Virginia. 35.301.2. Note the banjo player and drummer at the right. See Color Plate I, following page 26.



Because so little is required in the way of materials to make a one-string, it has taken on many forms. Commonly the string is run horizontally along the wall of a house or vertically on the front of a door, or it might be stretched between two chairs.²² It would appear that such examples as these can never be given clear antecedents. Yet it has been noted that instruments consisting of a single string mounted on a board, which are laid on the ground and played with a slider, occur not only in Mississippi but also in black communities in Venezuela and in Zaïre.²³ We can thus identify this instrument as an African-derived musical instrument. Simplicity, of course, aids its retention. Recently, Lonnie Pitchford, a young black musician from Lexington, Mississippi, constructed a modern version of the one-string, complete with electric pickup. While his instrument is more like a minimal guitar, it is also a continuation of an older folk instrument.

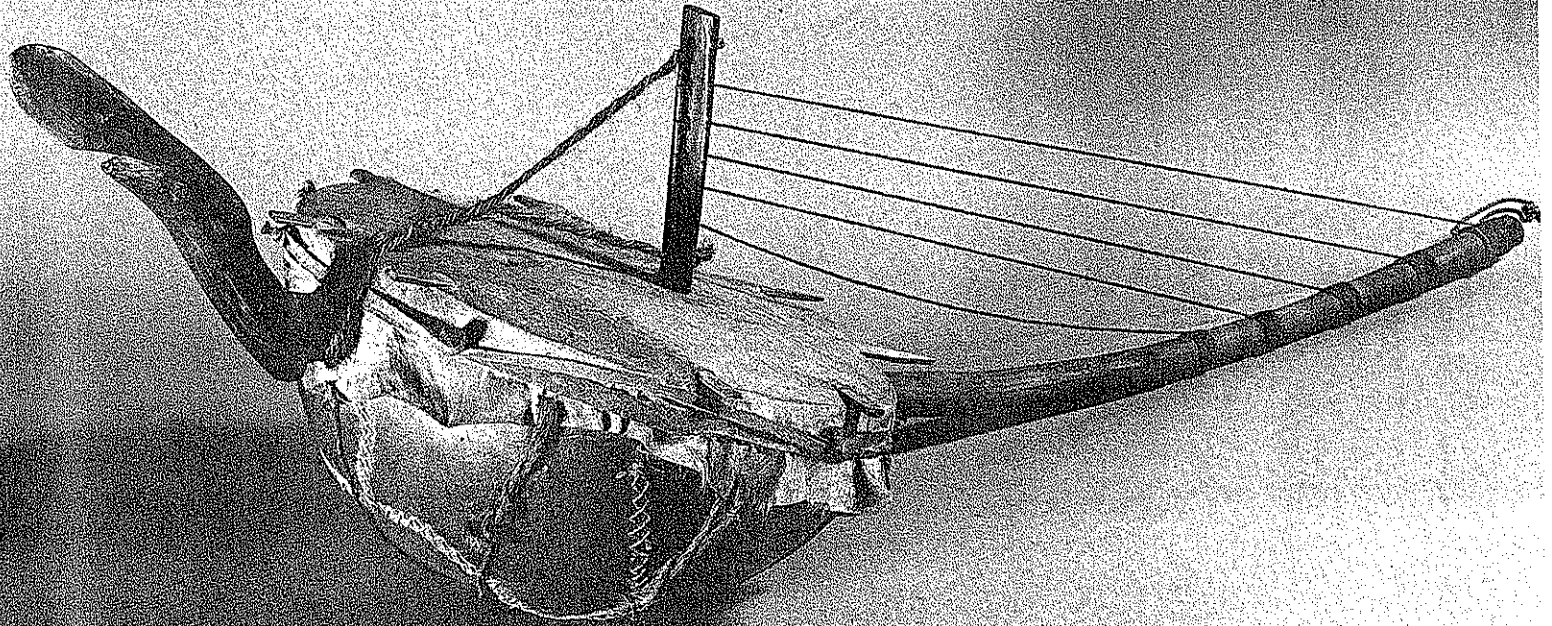
Modern changes in the banjo have so radically altered the instrument that its African origins have become obscured and generally overlooked. Since 1852 there have been more than 360 patents filed in Washington for banjos or banjo-related devices.²⁴ The factory-made banjo with its metal frame, parchment head, fretted neck, steel strings, and screw-adjusted tuning pegs is difficult to associate with African instruments. Comparison becomes more productive when we consider folk banjos.

The banjo made in the southern mountains has a wooden frame, a fretless neck, a head of groundhog or squirrel skin, which is only six inches in diameter, and gut strings.²⁵ Were we to exchange the wooden frame for a calabash or a gourd, a material commonly used in early American banjos, we would then have an instrument that could be easily associated with African prototypes [22]. Litt Young, an ex-slave from Mississippi, remembered from his youth in 1860 that "Us have small dances Saturday nights and ring plays and fiddle playin' and knockin' bones. There was fiddles made from gourds and banjos from sheep hides."²⁶ A painting discovered in Columbia, South Carolina, from the late eighteenth century, shows a black musician playing a banjo with a gourd body (Figure 9).²⁷ Mariah Hines, who was 102 years old when interviewed in the 1930's, recalled from among her slavery experiences in Virginia that an evening's entertainment included tunes picked on the banjo.²⁸ It is evident that the banjo occurred widely in black communities and in a form very like an African instrument. Thomas Jefferson wrote in



22 Gourd-Bodied Fiddle, Virginia.

23 Chordophone, Western Savannah Grasslands.



1781: "The Instrument proper to them [Blacks] is the Banjar, which they brought hither from Africa, and which is the origin of the guitar, its chords being precisely the four lower chords of the guitar."²⁹ When Jefferson gave this description, the presence of the banjo in the American colonies had already been noted by six previous writers, with the first mention coming in 1754.³⁰ As early as 1678 an instrument called the *banza* is reported from Martinique. It was probably the same instrument that Richard Jobson described in 1621 in the Gambia: "They have little varietie of instruments, that which is most com-

mon in use is made of a great gourd, and the necke thereunto fastn'd, resembling in some sort our Bandora; but they have no manner of fret, and the strings are either such as the place yeeldes."³¹ It is clear that the banjo as it was first known in America was an African instrument [23]. It remained a black instrument until the 1840's when minstrel shows took it on as part of their black-face farces. Only then did the banjo become a badge of ridicule for Afro-Americans; they generally gave it up, allowing white southerners to claim it as their own invention.³²

While the African origins of the banjo have gone largely unrecognized, there was one instance where African decorative influences were readily apparent. Architect Benjamin Latrobe made a trip to New Orleans in 1819 to work on the buildings around Jackson Square. In his spare moments he carefully observed the inhabitants, all of whom he considered exotic. One Sunday afternoon he was drawn to the area where slaves would gather for an afternoon's recreation—a place known as Congo Square. After critically evaluating the caliber of the music and dance he makes this startling observation: "The most curious instrument, however, was a stringed instrument which no doubt was imported from Africa. On the top of the finger board was the rude figure of a man in a

sitting posture, and two pegs behind him to which strings were fastened. The body was a calabash. It was played upon by a very little old man, apparently 80 or 90 years old."³³ Whether this instrument was a type of banjo is not clear. It certainly was African in character. The rough sketches provided by Latrobe suggest Mande, possibly Bamana, origins for its maker (Figure 10). New Orleans received some of its slaves from Senegambian sources, which would have included Bamana people.³⁴

If two strings were added to the instrument described by Latrobe and the decorative figure removed, the resulting product would be hard to separate from the banjo described by John Allen Wyeth almost a century later:

The most primitive instrument was made from a large gourd with a long straight neck or handle, shaped like those of smaller growth, used commonly then for drinking dippers. The bowl of the gourd was cut away on a plane level with the surface of the neck, the seed and contents removed and over this, like a drum head, a freshly tanned coon-skin was stretched, fastened, and allowed to dry. The five strings of home-made materials passing from the apron behind over a small bridge near the middle of the drumhead were attached to the keys in proper position on the neck.³⁵

It is important to note that Wyeth, the maker of this instrument, was white and that he was helped in this project by an older black man. In ways such as this African instrument traditions influenced the development of the American banjo.

There are many more associations to be made between the musical instruments of Africa and Afro-America. Harold Courlander points out that frying pans were used to produce the sound of African metal gongs, that washboards filled in for scrapers, that rattles with both internal and external strikers were used in the United States, and that even a form of the "mbira" (the African "thumb piano") occurred in the late nineteenth century in New Orleans.³⁶ These examples are enough to indicate that instrument making was able to survive the trials of slavery. Many changes occurred in the transmission of musical skills across the Atlantic, but the core of the tradition remained firm. If we plumb the depths of Afro-American musical expressions we find that the distance to Africa is not great. So may we also come to understand that Afro-American musical instruments are not so far removed from their African sources.

Figure 10. Drawing of an African instrument discovered by Benjamin Latrobe in New Orleans, Congo Square, 1819. From the papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Vol. IV, February 16, 1819-February 26, 1819, p. 32. Collection of Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.

