

**Lee Bidgood “Banjo-Mandolin Hybrids as Instruments of Control”
(Banjo Gathering, 2022).**

DRAFT, please don’t distribute, cite, etc. Talk to me about it!

[intro slide]

[silent march slide]

Black New Yorkers carried out what Grace Elizabeth Hale calls the “first black mass demonstration in the history of the nation, the Silent Protest Parade” on July 28, 1917, in quiet outrage over the massacre of African Americans in East St. Louis earlier that month. Again, from Hale:

“Organized by Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, leaders of the young National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, ten thousand blacks marched down fifth Avenue to protest the carnage, in a startling silence punctuated by the staccato of muffled drums. ... Placards broke the quiet, asking “Mothers, Do Lynchers Go to Heaven?” and “Mr. President, Why Not Make America Safe for Democracy?” ... Black New Yorkers had made the modern cityscape itself their stage. And their silence and symmetry only dramatized the powerful counterpoise of restraint and rage” (Hale 1998:37).

In the early 1900s along with Johnson and DuBois, musicians, writers, and other change-makers gathered north of 125th street to imagine alternative futures for black Americans. Hale argues that the members of the Harlem Renaissance “...celebrated black distinctiveness and yet exposed racial difference as a product of historical development and white fantasy” (Hale 1998:37). Langston Hughes expressed a radical hope in his poem of 1926:

*I, too, sing America
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes.
But I laugh.
and eat well.
And grow strong.
Tomorrow I'll sit at the table
When company comes
Nobody'll dare
say to me,
'Eat in the kitchen'
Then.
Besides, they'll see how beautiful I am
and be ashamed, —
I, too, am America.*

I invite you to join me in see the banjo and its antecedents—with the people through the centuries for whom it has been important—at the table, not hidden; well, strong, and beautiful.

[Images from July, 1917 Cadenza magazine]

...and then follow me, if you will, in considering the banjo as it existed somewhere between black distinctiveness and white fantasy, in the context of that 1917 Silent Protest Parade.

I am revisiting a project that I worked on as an undergraduate student—I was interested in learning about the origins of the tenor banjo, and my advisors guided me to Banjo-Mandolin-Guitar movement periodicals, especially the *Cadenza*, a publication of the American Guild of Banjoists, Mandolinists and Guitarists.

[microfilm slide]

In a dim corner of a UNC library I read through issues of the *Cadenza* on microfilm, diving into a world of rhetoric, hype, and music that felt oddly similar to the bluegrass-related discourses I was also entering at the time, in which arguments about the value, cost, quality, and legitimacy of sounds, instruments, compositions, and performers were debated in remarkably similar ways.

This year, instead of simply looking for traces of four-stringed and mandolin-like instruments, I have sought to learn more about what was motivating players, teachers, instrument-makers, and other stakeholders in the BMG phenomenon that bloomed in the decades around 1900. In particular, I am considering how the BMG world's use of the banjo during this time was related to the violence ca. 1900, and the activism and hope of the Harlem Renaissance. I am curious how banjo makers, teachers, and players negotiated the balance of mandolin and banjo in these hybrids, and how this negotiation might also be a way of dealing with ideas of self and other—both for black and white Americans. I am balancing my time spent with the very white BMG world with consideration of the case of James Reese Europe, writing of black New Yorkers from the early 1900s, as well as current scholarship on race.

[more Images from July, 1917 Cadenza magazine]

As I surveyed items related to banjo-mandolin hybridity, I noticed some themes that were often discussed by writers - that of **legitimacy**, that of the **tone** of the instrument, and the ways **techniques** and **equipment** (both instruments and accessories) could address the tonal and legitimacy goals of participants. **BUSINESS**

First, a survey of material about history / development of hybrid banjos, and approaches that mix the banjo and mandolin:

[Post slide]

In *The Music Trades* for Dec 12, 1903 p. 77 Charles N. Post of Lyon & Healy. Post reports in an article entitled "**The Origin and Growth of the Guitar, Mandolin, and Banjo Industry in America**" that "The banjo has made marked progress since birth, and to-day retains scarcely a semblance of the old cheese-box of three-quarters of a century ago. It has been greatly improved both as to **quality and quantity of tone**. With its present fretted fingerboard, carefully shaped neck, also generally improved dimensions and outlines, it invites rapid and accurate execution, something that was quite out of the question in the days of Christie, Hall, Arlington, and the other old-timers, who merely strummed the string with a metal thimble on the fore-finger ... Commercially the banjo at present ranks below the others in numbers made and sold. I say at present, because ten to fifteen years ago it was far ahead of the mandolin, and quite up to the

guitar. ”

In Gatcomb's Banjo & Guitar Gazette of January, 1888 - The column "Banjo-Pickings" (p. 2) - mentions the popularity both of the mandolin and the banjo, confirming Post's comments about popularity: "The mandolin is gaining such popularity in Boston that there is a demand for music which exceeds the supply..." - and later, "The banjo mania has broken out again in fashionable society with a virulence that exceeds anything ever known before ... The banjoist, in a word, is the boss of the hour."

Forward to the Cadenza Vol 13 #7 March, 1907, in which we read an early mention of plectral playing:

[Bickford Slide]

Cadenza Vol 13 #7 March, 1907 (pp. 10-11) "Hints on Banjo Study" Written exclusively for The Cadenza BY MYRON A. BICKFORD, SPRINGFIELD, MASS.

"To the experienced mandolin player the subject of plectrum playing on the banjo should offer no difficulties whatever, since the method of procedure is practically identical on both instruments. The banjo is held in the same position as for finger playing, and of course the left hand has its usual work to do. ..." and so on...

A few pages later, A. Nassau-Kennedy coins a new word: "**Banjo-plectring** is a particular style of performance on the banjo which requires use of a plectrum, and is called plectrum playing or plectring" (**Cadenza March, 1907 Vol 13 #7** , pp. 16-17).

[show Schall ad]

In this same 1907 issue J. B. Schall of 146 S. Water St., Chicago addresses readers: "Mandolin Players TAKE NOTICE This Banjorine was designed by Prof. Steptner, the celebrated mandolin soloist, and is played by him in his concert work. It is the only Banjorine on the market that retains the true banjo tone. It has four strings and is tuned like a mandolin, and plays with a pick. To play this instrument it is not necessary for the mandolinist to learn a new system of fingering. The mandolin or violin score can be played" (p. 6).

[Farris patent]

As *Beezaboy* aka John Hoft points out in their history of the tenor banjo on banjohangout.com (<https://www.banjohangout.org/article/7>) Stahl's was is not the first mandolin-banjo hybrid - among those that preceded Schall in combining the banjo and mandolin was John Farris of Hartford, Connecticut, who patented a "Banjolin" in 1885. This article accomplishes much more fully what I was trying to do in my undergraduate project, tracing influences that led to the tenor banjo.

[Shaw / Orpheum Slide]

Players with all forms of banjo hybrids were using the pick left and right. In The Cadenza, March 1912, Vol 18, no. 9 an advertisement from A. J. Shaw of Chicago, asserts that "Playing the Banjo with the Pick or Plectrum has come to stay. New converts are being made every day. Mandolin players are taking it up. The banjo is just starting on a great boom and the next two or three years will be the best the Banjo has every had. The Plectrum System is doing it, so don't wait, begin now. It's a great thing and brings out all there is in a Banjo" (p.3). In The Crescendo, December, 1913, we overhear a discussion about the origins of plectral banjo, in the BANJOISTS ROUND TABLE conducted by George L. Lansing and Thomas J. Armstrong, Eminent Authorities on Matters Banjoistic. ... Question: (a) Who originated the mandolin or pick style of

playing? (b) Is it gaining or losing in popular favor? ..." The answers are, in short, "we don't know," and "it is gaining favor," in case you were wondering.(p. 24). " And in the *Cadenza*, May 1915, p. 45) we see an ad that indicates the momentum of plectral banjo (or at least, of its boosters):

[Shaw - Easy Money]

"The Tango Has Got 'Em Going! Learn to play the BANJO with a PICK AND GET SOME OF THIS EASY MONEY - More banjos being used than ever, but remember, you must play it with a Pick for tango work.

My Pick book and 8 Pick solos with piano accompaniment \$2.00. C Notation. A.J. Shaw, 432 E. 43d St., Chicago, Ill."

In the *Crescendo*'s September 1916 BANJOISTS ROUND TABLE, George L. Lansing penned a piece entitled "VERY MUCH ALIVE":

"I met an old friend not long ago who I had not met for several years. When I told him that I was still teaching banjo, he seemed surprised and said, why I had an idea that the banjo was dead, and buried ... In many ways the banjo is very much in evidence just now. ... H. B. Allen, next year's leader of the Mass. Inst. of Technology Banjo Club will use three or four tenor-banjos together with regular banjos and guitars. The tenor-banjo is very effective in combination with regular banjo and piano or guitar. The **tone** quality being more characteristic than the mandolin-banjo. From present indications the tenor-banjo will become very popular.

By May 1921 the *Crescendo* BANJOISTS ROUND TABLE by George Lansing a note of plectral banjo fatigue. We learn that a "...gentleman is been doing dance work for the past five years and is one of the most expert tenor-banjo players. He says he plays the tenor when he has to do so, but never when he wants to demonstrate the musical quality of the instrument. ... Recently, in conversation with a teacher who gives from eighty to one hundred lessons a week, he said that his studio reminded him of a boiler shop, but that it was not as bad as it had been, for most of his pupils were returning to the **legitimate** banjo. I firmly believe that when the jazz craze dies, the mandolin-banjo and the tenor will soon follow likewise" (The *Crescendo*, p. 22 MAY).

[Comet]

Now, on to "**Tone**"

In the *Cadenza*, March 1912, Vol 18, no. 9 on p. 3 - we see an advertisement for "THE NEW NOVELY BANJO 'THE COMET' With patent vibrating Tone Box Attachment. The most wonderful device for vibration and volume of **tone** the Banjo has ever known..." In the description of his patent application George L. Thayer of Mount Upton, NY, we read that a "supplemental ring" and "vibratory or sounding member connects the lower edge portions of the said rim and ring together and is adapted to materially assist the head in producing vibrations and **increasing the volume** of the banjo." Thayer proposes that an additional skin head, or alternatively, a wooden sound board" would be placed behind the main circular skin head. "By this arrangement of parts," the application states, "it will be seen that the vibrating surfaces of the instrument are increased in extent and at the same time the appearance and balance of the instrument is not affected or marred. By this arrangement **the tone and volume** of the instrument are greatly improved."

[Banjoists roundtable / Grover patent drawing]

In The Crescendo's May 1915 Banjoists Round Table, George Lansing writes on "THE PROPER USE OF THE PLECTRUM" for banjoists, addressing the way players shape tone:

"One of the hardest things to master in playing with the plectrum is delicacy of **tone**. Unless the novice begins by striving for the soft quality, it is doubtful if he will ever attain it. "

An advertisement from the May 1917 Cadenza for the [Grover Vibrator](#) shows a device to improve tone. In the 1920 patent application for a more advanced version of this device, Grover explains:

"Should the player find that the head of his **banjo** is becoming loose or flabby, he simply tightens the screws... (1920 patent - <https://patents.google.com/patent/US1338076A/en?q=grover+patent+banjo&oq=grover+patent+banjo> ;

I am not sure, reading these pieces, about the tonal qualities that banjo tinkers from this period were seeking. It is clear, though, that builders were concerned the tones banjos produced - how much "thump," and how much "twang." Grover as well as Farris include ways for the player to alter the tone themselves, a point that I will return to later.

[1918 Vega News.]

I perceived anxiety in discussions of **Legitimacy**

In 1903, Charles Post used the phrase: "the trio of the lighter stringed instruments" to refer to the BMG three, and proposes that they should be called the "...serenade' instruments, thus indicating our recognition of the less serious field of music they occupy, but at the same time according them, as they deserve, a place very close to the heart of the people." **This sentiment was echoed through the following years. December 1918's Cadenza includes** this "Vega News": "It will please many of our friends to know that there is a big demand for Tenor Banjos, Mandolin Banjos, and even Guitar Banjos are beginning to make themselves heard. The regular long neck banjo, which is really the **legitimate** instrument, is also in constantly increasing demand (Cadenza Vol 25, no. 12 - December, 1918 p. 2). The Crescendo's November 1918 BANJOISTS ROUND TABLE (p. 20) includes an article "MORE LIGHT ON THE SUBJECT OF SIGHT READING," in which George Lansing indicates the lower status of the banjo: "If the banjo ever reaches the standard attained by the violin family, more adequate methods than those we now have will become an absolute necessity. ...

[Jazz - problem prober]

In addition to concerns about legitimacy of instruments, the material played could cause concern. **"The Problem Prober" was a regular contribution, "Conducted by Zarh Myron Bickford, Eminent Teacher, Performer, and Literateur" In The Cadenza of April 1919 [Vol 26 #4, pp. 5-6] We meet with a question that leads Bickford to clutch his pearls a bit - : "Q. 1. Just what is meant by the term "jazz" and how would you "jazz" a piece like "Sweet Little Buttercup, for example?"** Bickford addresses the ways players might depart from a written score: "The three terms "jazzing," "ragging," and "filling in" seem to have about the same significance in the average mind. In the writers opinion, *jazzing* is more appropriately applied to such instrumental combinations that use the saxophone or slide trombone, as the peculiar "moan" of the saxophone and the "groan" of the trombone give the proper "off-color" effect which seems to be so much enjoyed, although just why lovers of real music should like it I have never been able to understand.... The average popular hit is written

or arranged by a man who knew exactly the effects which he wanted, and for each individual performer to interpolate his own views into its execution is, to say the least, not in good taste.”

Many plectral banjoists might be playing jazz and other things that would offend Bickford, but at the same time, the instrument can also be effective for “legit” playing. [Hale’s dichotomy between XXXX and Yyyy]

In the 1915 Crescendo George Lansing explains that the clarity of the banjo’s sound when a pick is used won him over: “...For years it was the custom for nearly all teachers, myself included, to condemn banjo playing with the pick, but after using it for three years and developing tone quality, I see many advantages in its use, not the least of which is the fact of being able to play the melody of any song written for piano” (Crescendo May 1915, p. 20).

[Stahl advert]. - BUSINESS

In *The Cadenza* , April 1919, (Vol 26 #4, p. 7) **“A new Tenor Banjo Method” [Advertisement] lays out how technique can be translated into business:** “Introduced a dozen years ago by Wm. C. Stahl, its first manufacturer, the Tenor Banjo has risen rapidly in favor until today. It is the “lead” instrument of every jazz band and of half the cafe and dance orchestras. For any plectral ensemble it supplies quality and sonority of tone that adds immeasurably to the general effect. **By the NEW STAHL TENOR BANJO METHOD**, any Mandolin teacher can learn the instrument thoroughly in remarkably short time—and teach it to others almost as quickly. The method is remarkable in every way—and covering the entire technique of the instrument in 72 pages. Price \$1.00 Teachers and dealers have the opportunity of a lifetime to double patronage. Teachers can double their classes—and every student of another plectral instrument or violin can double his income or pleasure by taking up the Tenor Banjo—the hit instrument of today. Several pages devoted to chord charts to eight different ways of “ragging” in **TWO LESSONS!** William C. Stahl, Milwaukee, WI.”

This ad references the triple role of professionals in plucked music: performers, teachers, and dealers - what Tony Williamson in his blog “Breaking News 1922: What was Lloyd Allayre Loar doing one hundred years ago today?” has called the “Gibson artist/teacher/agent” (<http://www.mandolincentral.com/breaking-news-1922>). This model is one that serves the growing sector of Americans with the resources to invest in leisure and self-improvement activities like musical instruction.

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I’ll transition here from the world of business and periodicals to that of performance, with a shift from the white BMG world to that of the working world of the theater and stage that some BMG writers refer to disparagingly.

Elevation-minded BMG guild members (along with Henry Ford, but that’s another kettle of monkeys) were in the minority in rejecting or disparaging the “ragging” and “jazzing” that Black musicians were creating in the popular sphere. African American violinist and composer Will Marion Cook addressed the attention white America paid to black entertainers in the song “Swing Along “ from “In Dahomey,” “the first black-produced show to run at a regular Broadway theater” in 1903 (Crawford 534):

Swing along, Chillun, swing along de lane,
Lif' yo' head an' yo' heels mighty high,
Swing along, Chillun, 'taint a-goin' to rain,
Sun's as red as a rose in de sky.
Come along, Mandy, come along, Sue,
White folks watchin' an' seein' what you do,
White folks jealous when you'se walkin' two by two,
So swing along, Chillun, swing along!

[Europe's Octett]

James Reese Europe (1881-1919) was a bandleader, composer, and organizer who started his career in the Big Apple in African American musical theater in the 1900s. After establishing himself on the scene, Europe's bands, equipped with stringed instruments (including a variety of banjos) were among the hottest in New York City. Europe's groups negotiated between their virtuosity and desire for recognition as artists — meanwhile their audiences balanced their admiration with condescension. Eubie Blake recalls how the Europe groups would work hard to “pass” as uneducated to meet the expectations of attendees at their society gigs:

Now the white bands all had their music stands, see, but the people wanted to believe that Negroes couldn't learn to read music but had a natural talent for it. So we never played with no music. Now this is the truth. Europe's orchestra was filled with readin' sharks. That cornet player, Russell Smith! If a fly landed on the music, he'd play it, see, like that. But we weren't supposed to read music. . . . All the high-tone, big-time folks would say, "Isn't it wonderful how these untrained, primitive musicians can pick up all the latest songs instantly without being able to read music?" (Blake in Brooks p. 269).

[Europe's Octett - with sound recording]

[image of Clef Club printed matter]

In addition to his performing, Europe was also an advocate for black musicians, who were often engaged to perform in establishments, but only paid the wage of a menial worker, etc. Theater and musicians' unions were whites only, so Europe joined with colleagues to found the Clef Club in 1910. In addition to helping set up work for decent pay and other advocacy, Tim Brooks explains that the Clef Club served as **a venue to showcase a** more polished and large-scale version of African-American music:

"The first order of business was to organize a Clef Club Symphony Orchestra and then make arrangements for its well-publicized debut. The gala benefit at Manhattan Casino on May 27 was a smashing success. Europe led a one-hundred-piece orchestra ... The instrumentation was unique, consisting of ten pianos and dozens of mandolins, banjos, and related string instruments, This did not look or sound like the "normal" white orchestra and it attracted a good deal of attention" (Brooks 269).

[Clef club band with banjos]

A note on instruments: There were Clef Club instruments made by the New York City firm of McGinnis & Shaw. McGinnis apparently "...made many instruments for

Clef Club members and was quite well known for his Clef Club Bandolins (a Melody Banjo with a radiused fretboard and violin peg box)” (KyleB, banjohangout - 05/24/2016: 10:51:15. <https://www.banjohangout.org/archive/318756>).

As Europe explained in a *New York Post* interview in March of 1914, the instrumentation was intended to signal difference:

“...although we have first violins, the place of the second violins with us is taken by mandolins and banjos. This gives that peculiar steady strumming accompaniment to our music which all people comment on, and which is something like that of the Russian Balalaika Orchestra, I believe. Then, for background, we employ ten pianos. That, in itself, is sufficient to amuse the average white musician who attends one of our concerts for the first time. The result, however, is a background of chords which are essentially typical of negro harmony . . . we have developed a kind of symphony music that, no matter what else you may think, is different and distinctive, and that lends itself to the playing of the peculiar compositions of our race” (Europe in Brooks 276).

[Image of Europe with Clef symphony]

In this famous image of Europe with one of his orchestras from, we see that Europe “mixed” the sonic qualities of his ensemble to emphasize the plucked instruments, using banjo and mandolin-family instruments, as well as harp guitars - with a gang of ‘cellos who are flanked by (as my 8-year-old son pointed out in surprise) ONLY TWO violins. The European orchestral sound is there, but further back in the mix than the plectral instruments that Europe chose as a sonic marker of difference.

Thanks to patrons such as star dancers Vernon and Irene Castle, Europe had many advantages; he was the likely first black bandleader to be recorded on phonograph (Gilbert 207), and was able to work outside of the dominant paradigm that confined black artists to the commercial production of traditionally “black” material, instruments, and situations. **Karl Hagstrom-Miller’s study of race and the folk/pop music indicates that folklorists and recording executives contributed to a framework of ideas and business practices that** limited possibilities for artists—as he says: “Purist visions of American folk culture developed at the same time that Jim Crow segregation put its stranglehold on southern states... The musical color line emerged out of ...processes that combined to replace minstrel notions of authenticity ... with folkloric ones that valued isolation” (Hagstrom Miller 276). This paradigm “...identified authentic song as a product of racial isolation rather than contact,” (Hagstrom-Miller 257).

Thinking about the banjo tone as “twang,” and as a black sound, we might see the banjo as a way to contain blackness in music - thinking this way makes me cringe at all of the thumbscrews and brackets used to alter and “improve” the tone of the instrument ca. 1900.

The BMG publications’ discourse on legitimacy and artistic quality seems to have valued banjo forms and musical practices that **resisted** the incorporation of newer (African-American) sounds, dances, and so on. That’s why James Reese Europe’s stance is so compelling - he claims the fretted instruments as a way to articulate a distinct new voice with a mix of roots and meanings.

Elizabeth Hale proposes that “Passing and mimicking and masking—the creation ... of a ‘miscegenated’ style—became by the late 1920s the ultimate resistance to the

racial polarities whites set at the center of modern American life. For segregation, as metaphor and as law, depended upon a myth of absolute racial difference. Any public staging by African Americans of a space between black and white subverted the fantasies of an absolute division ..." (Hale 1998:40).

[image of Europe and 369th band, etc.]

Europe's projects in mixing were altered by a trend and a war. The popular trends of the 1910s were away from string ensembles and towards wind instruments. It is likely that Europe would have continued the transition from strings to winds that his recordings for Victor in 1913 and 1914 indicate (Brooks 271-272). The war stepped in and sped things up, when in 1916 Europe signed up to serve as bandleader for the 15th Infantry Regiment (Colored) of the New York National Guard, and then the 369th Division of the French Fourth Army - also known as the "Hell Fighters." His career leading this wind band was stellar, but was cut short, shortly after the triumphant return to New York in 1919 with his death by violence at the hands of his drummer (Badger 214). There were other black bands that highlighted the banjo and BMG instruments, but they were no longer in the mainstream of popular music. Europe's visions for equity among performers, and distinctively "black" string band / orchestral sounds **existed in a specific moment**.

In his essay "The Dilemma of the Negro Author" of 1928, James Weldon Johnson states that "White America has some firm opinions as to what the Negro is ... In the brighter light, he is a simple, indolent, docile, improvident peasant; a singing, dancing, laughing, weeping child . . . a pathetic and pitiable figure. In a darker light, he is an impulsive, irrational, passionate savage, reluctantly wearing a thin coat of culture, sullenly hating the white man, but holding an innate and unescapable belief in the white man's superiority" (Johnson, 379). I sense that white participants in the BMG movement often felt similarly about the banjo - it was accepted in the "fraternity," but only grudgingly. It was a way of making money, but wasn't a legitimate or serious instrument, especially the hybridized forms played with a plectrum which lacked the propriety and provenance of the finger-picked "long-necked" five-string.

Here it is useful to remember Ralph Ellison's comment: "...whatever the efficiency of segregation as a socio-political arrangement, it has been far from absolute at the level of *culture*" - a truth nowhere more evident than in the banjo (Ellison 163). Looking at the hybrid forms of the banjo in their context of the 1910s reveals anxieties on the part of white players, teachers, and manufacturers. We can also discover black Americans **making formative music and forming community resilience** through the BMG instruments.

Today I wonder how we might reconsider our own engagements with a revived **BMG world** in light of these things that were going on back then—at some points we might need to follow the protest march in silence, or follow Europe and play the heck out of the banjo.

[END]

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The Product of Our Souls: The Sound and Sway of James Reese Europe's Society Orchestra (Archeophone, 2018)

Too Much Mustard

Down Home Rag

Amapa (maxixe)

The Castles in Europe

Castle's Lane Duck