

Community and Connection

Good afternoon. I am honored to have been chosen to present this year's Keynote Speech for the IBMA; after also receiving the Steve Martin Prize in for Excellence in Banjo and Bluegrass last year, it feels incredible to be recognized by my banjo peers for being the die-hard banjo nerd and activist that I am. It was extremely challenging to go from a 3-minute song to a 30 minute speech, but here goes!

"I'm just a hillbilly at heart": That's what my Aunt Ruth said one day, smiling broadly at me, all cheekbones and gorgeous brown skin; to say she surprised me is an understatement. We had just listened to a few tracks off my first album with the Carolina Chocolate Drops when she dropped this bombshell; my elegant great-Aunt, who had lived in the north for decades, but came of age in rural North Carolina. This was in the beginning of my career, when I still hadn't fully come to comprehend just how much the popular notion of the hillbilly stereotype shaped post-war Southern life and culture - the moonshine and the banjos; the overalls and the hay bales; the coal mines and the fiddles. All of these generalizations had left out people like my great-Aunt; people like her sister, my grandma, and her children. And left out people like me - who come from both sides of the track - except, in so many areas of the South, there is no track. There's just people living and influencing each other in spite of what they are told to feel and do; and yes, Southern and American history is unfortunately thickly dotted with instances of the worst of human nature: violence, discrimination and the warping of

our souls; but underneath, and behind and around all of these acts is the strong current of intense cultural exchange, which is the hallmark of American culture.

The ability of musicians and artists to cross artificially-created boundaries and mix and mingle and become something new is exemplified in American string band music, the music that gave birth to the Grand Ol' Opry; the music without which, Bluegrass wouldn't exist. That enormous moment in 1945 when Earl Scruggs joined Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys was, of course, not born of a vacuum - it was a moment that was hundreds of years coming.

So more and more of late, the question has been asked - how do we get more diversity in bluegrass? Which of course, behind the hand, is really, why is bluegrass so white??? But the answer doesn't lie in right now. Before we can look to the future, we need to understand the past. To understand how the banjo, which was once the ultimate symbol of African American musical expression, has done a one-eighty in popular understanding and become the emblem of the mythical white mountaineer - even now, in the age of Mumford and Sons, and Bela Fleck in Africa, and Taj Mahal's "Colored Aristocracy," the average person on the street sees a banjo and still thinks Deliverance, or the Beverly Hillbillies. In order to understand the history of the banjo and the history of Bluegrass music, we need to move beyond the narratives we've inherited, beyond generalizations that bluegrass is mostly derived from a Scots-Irish tradition, with 'influences' from Africa. It is actually a complex creole music that comes from multiple

cultures, African and European and Native, - the full truth that is so much more interesting, and American.

Music has a power to bring us together in ways books, lectures, and indoctrination don't. So the question becomes - are we going to let Bluegrass, as an artform, recognize the fullness of its history? Are we going to acknowledge that the question is not, how do we get diversity into Bluegrass, but how do we get diversity BACK into Bluegrass? How do we reframe the narrative so that it is seen to be welcoming to all - that the impact of Arnold Shultz, for example, on Bill Monroe is not a footnote, but rather recognized as being part of the main narrative of the story?

I have bluegrass in the blood. My uncle Dale plays in a long standing local bluegrass band, Southeast Express, and his father, the grandfather I never met, also played in a bluegrass band. My dad ran from bluegrass and went to the bustling metropolis of Greensboro to become a hippy guitar player, and incidentally, marry a black woman! - only to see his daughter grow up to play the old-time banjo. Life is funny sometimes! Now that's the white side - but as I thought about my upbringing, I realized bluegrass was in the black side, too.

I lived the first part of my life out in the country, I guess you could say- my sister and I lived with our mother's parents in a small town outside of Greensboro. Back then there wasn't much to do other than play this really exciting game my sister and I came up with called "run around the tree till you can go back inside the house" just to get swatted out

again. My black grandparents, retired, farmed their acre, played competitive bridge, listened to jazz and blues records and watched Hee Haw every Saturday night. You didn't get in between grandma and that large cabinet TV on the floor when Hee Haw was on -she was a huge fan of Roy Clark and his bluegrass banjo playing. I realized, as I prepared for this speech, that these are among my first memories of string band music and bluegrass - the 'picking and grinning' latter-day hayseed minstrel show that was Hee Haw - and it was glorious - we laughed at the cornpone jokes, watched the great guest performances, and all round had no notion there was anything odd with any of it, a black rural household in the South being entertained by this commercial idea of Southern music and culture while actually living the real country life.

My sister and I also often visited my dad's side of the family, the white side, on weekends, in another rural part of the outskirts of Greensboro, and there was Hank Williams and old gospel tunes coming out of my other grandma's radio. Now, I listened to plenty of pop music growing up, but it is these early sounds that I connected to when I turned to fiddle and banjo and became a disciple of 86-year-old Joe Thompson, the black fiddler from Mebane and the last in a long line of African American string band musicians. He often compared my banjo playing to bluegrass, probably cause we played at the speed of light whenever we could - and that drove this clawhammer girl crazy! But for Joe, Bluegrass was the new music, and he loved it.

But before Joe, before the Carolina Chocolate Drops, when I first got into string band music I felt like such an interloper. It was like I was 'sneaking' into this music that wasn't

my own. It's a weird feeling - I constantly felt the awkwardness of being the 'raisin in the oatmeal' in the contra dance world, in the old time world, and in the bluegrass world. What was odd to me then but makes sense to me now was the place I felt most comfortable was the bluegrass world. Because there, in the piedmont, I was "Dale's niece" and everybody had an accent I grew up hearing, and an upbringing that I understood. But regardless, whenever I brought out my fiddle or banjo, or my calling cards to call a dance, no matter where I was, I still felt like the 'other'.

I remember so vividly the first time I saw one of Marshall Wyatt's superb compilations called "Folks He Sure Do Pull Some Bow" and seeing a picture of a black fiddler and freaking out - I had stumbled upon the hidden legacy of the black string band and I wanted to know more. Shortly after, I met Joe Thompson and realized that by picking up my banjo and by calling a dance I had joined an enormously long and almost forgotten line of black dance band musicians who helped create an indigenous American music and dance culture; of barn dances, corn shuckings, plantation balls, and riverboat and house parties.

It is now becoming better known that the banjo is an African-American instrument; a hybridization of African construction and tune systems and European adaptation and adoption; Dena Epstein in her book *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* thoroughly documents the undeniable blackness of the instrument from the 1650s to the 1830s when it was known as a plantation instrument. This impression of the banjo continued until Joel Sweeney and his compatriots turned it into a commercial instrument meant for

performing, with a standardized number of strings, tuning and frame construction, and minstrel music, performed in black face, became the most popular form of American entertainment for the next 50 years. It was incredibly racist, but so entertaining and the music was so catchy. It was the first American cultural export to sweep other nations, a full hundred years before rock and roll. It was banjo fever everywhere, and the real birth of the American popular song industry from Daniel Emmett's Dixie to Stephen Foster's O Susanna, and minstrelsy became the bedrock of American popular culture.

But the black to white transmission of the banjo wasn't confined to the blackface performance. In countless areas of the south, usually the poorer ones not organized around plantation life, working-class whites and blacks lived near each other; and, while they may have not have been marrying each other, they were quietly creating a new, common music. The Reverend Jonathan Boucher who emigrated to England after the Revolutionary war wrote a definition of the banjo in his dictionary published in the late-18th century. It says the banjo is "A musical instrument, in use chiefly, if not entirely, among people of the lower classes."

Now, it wasn't just Scots Irish fiddle meets black banjo either - that's too simplistic - one of the earliest recorded instances of banjo and fiddle being played together was in 1756, in Newport, Rhode Island, by black musicians for an "African frolic."

As Phil Jamison says from his book *Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics - the Roots and Branches of Southern Appalachian Dance*,

“ West African fiddlers have accompanied singing and dancing with one-string gourd fiddles since the twelfth century, and many black musicians in America learned on similar homemade fiddles before switching over to the European violin. As early as the mid-1600s, black fiddlers were playing for both black and white dancers at street celebrations in the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam (New York City), and by 1690 slave fiddlers were routinely providing the music at plantation balls in Virginia. As elsewhere, dancing was the chief form of entertainment on the eastern edge of the North Carolina piedmont, and in the early nineteenth century “every town and village had its ball-room, and its musician [was] almost always a negro fiddler.”

So there's this incredible cultural swirl going on here - minstrel music becoming a huge commercial success, with traveling troupes bringing professional songs to different regions of the US; blacks and whites in places like Appalachia, and the piedmont, and other racially diverse areas are beginning to pass the music back and forth, and a wide flung net of black dance musicians are providing the music for communities all over the country, and are becoming the first to call square dances.

This was not the picture I was painted as a child! I grew up thinking the banjo was invented in the mountains, that string band music and square dances were a strictly white preserve and history - that while black folk were singing spirituals and playing the blues, white folk were do-si-do'ing and fiddling up a storm - and never the twain did meet - which led me to feeling like an alien in what I find out is my own cultural tradition.

But by 1900 this cross cultural music was all over the South, not just the Appalachians, and a common repertoire was played by black and white musicians, not to mention regional styles, which often cared nothing for race. My own mentor Joe Thompson constantly talked about white musicians who lived in his area who he learned tunes from, and there was a constant stream of local white musicians who learned from and played with him, in what turns out is the great American tradition.

So what happened to change the paradigm so quickly between the turn of the century and the advent of Bluegrass? Well, to begin with, there was the Great Migration. 6 million Black southerners like my great-Aunt Ruth decided to leave an economically depressed and racially depressing South for the mythical better life up North - and they took their families, food, and folkways with them - but in most cases they left that old time string band music behind. Newly arrived folks to New York, Chicago, and other Northern cities suddenly found that their lives were shaped by a totally different rhythm - an urban rhythm - that precluded corn shuckings and other rural events that would have required the familiar string band sounds they were used to; in addition, in the early 1900s the black community had shifting musical tastes - it was a time of great innovation and a proliferation of styles that would greatly affect the American cultural landscape. African American culture began a pattern of always innovating, always moving on to the next new sounds. The five string banjo became, up north, a dazzling urban instrument that played jazz and ragtime, and, with its cousin the tenor banjo, became a mainstay of the dance orchestras until it was eventually replaced by the guitar by the 1930s, only to be eventually forgotten in the memories of urban blacks.

What is often left out of this story, however, is that not everybody left the south - there were plenty of black folk who remained behind, and there were still black players of string band music, despite the burgeoning popularity of the blues guitar. By some accounts, half of all string bands at the turn of the century were black. So why does it take a diving mission to find them? Were they recorded? It turns out they were - far less than we'd like, but more than people know - but never to be a mainstay of the body of recordings that form the basis of commercial country music and a foundation for bluegrass.

Before the invention of the phonograph and the attendant records, the music industry consisted of sheet music - popular songs of the day to be played yourself, and they chiefly consisted of patriotic and sentimental songs, minstrel songs, and orchestra pieces. But when the record industry was born, a whole new way of consuming American music was invented that was intended to make this new product easier to sell. Ralph Peer led the vanguard of A&R executives who would have a big hand in transforming how we think of our music; in his hands (and others) the musical genre was born. They saw that black consumers were loving the blues, and in 1920 the first 'race' records were put out. Two years later they created the 'hillbilly' market for rural Southern whites. In a musical market that had previously been dominated by professional compositions, it was a triumph for the working man that music 'of the people', vernacular music, began to be recorded.

One can celebrate this shift in the music industry while grieving the fact that in instituting these artificial categories, even if based on observed contemporary trends and assumptions, these record companies had a huge hand in the rapid segregation of American music. Columbia, Vocalion, and others would set up recording sessions, after advertising in local papers, that on one day they would record white musicians, and on the next, black musicians. If a black string band walked up to a session only knowing fiddle tunes, even if, as often was the case, they pulled from a common southern repertoire that both black and white musicians knew, they'd more often than not be sent away if they didn't play the blues. The record companies had the power, and they wielded it at will - as Ralph Peer himself was quoted saying in 1959, "I invented the Hillbilly and the Negro stuff." Except, of course, that he didn't say 'negro'.

There were a number of cross-racial recording sessions, such as Blue Yodel # 9, from the Father of Country Music himself, Jimmie Rodgers, which paired him with a little known trumpeter named Louis Armstrong, and his wife Lil Hardin Armstrong; and the Georgia Yellowhammers recorded with African American fiddler Jim Baxter, but for the most part this artificial sorting at the source was hard to buck. Occasionally black string bands were put on the Hillbilly label but with their name obscured, such as when Vocalion Records released a set of tunes under "The Tennessee Chocolate Drops" for their race records and the exact same set of tunes under "The Tennessee Trio" for the Hillbilly division. It rarely happened the other way around; when Columbia released the white Chattanooga duo the Allen Brothers' second record on their race series, the brothers sued Columbia for \$250,000 for the damage to their reputations. A quarter of a

million dollars In 1927! As they said later, “We were trying to get into Vaudeville back then. It would have hurt us in getting dates if people thought we were black.”

As Patrick Huber says in his essay Black Hillbillies - African American Musicians on Old-Time record, 1924-1932:

“In terms of their actual consumption patterns, southern record buyers of the 1920s were far more omnivorous than record company executives generally seemed to comprehend, and interviews with elderly black and white musicians reveal that many of them purchased records intended specifically for sale to other racial and even foreign-language ethnic groups. Still, much of this appears to have been lost on talking-machine firms, which focused their promotional efforts on marketing race records to African Americans and hillbilly records to rural and working class white southerners.”

These promotional efforts reinforced a simultaneous nationwide movement towards creating a mythic white American history- A 1927 newspaper advertisement said that Columbia’s hillbilly series “Familiar Tunes Old and New” were for those who “get tired of modern dance music - fox-trots, jazz, Charleston- and long for the good old barn dances and the Saturday night music of the South in plantation days.” Seems that everybody ignored the irony that the players for these blessed events would have uniformly been black in the “good old days”. Noted xenophobe Henry Ford founded fiddle competitions, but forbade blacks to enter; likewise White Top and Bascom Lamar Lunsford’s Asheville Folk festivals in the twenties were off limits to the melanin. There was an effort to repaint Appalachia as this completely homogenous society that was a direct unsullied line back

to the old country, whether England, Scotland, or Ireland. This is a region that has always historically had a black population, in some places as high as 20 percent before the great migration, and is clearly a place where musical and cultural exchanges have been going on for a long time.

Folklorists and song collectors at the time also had a huge hand in the creation of this myth; Cecil Sharp, founder of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, was one of the first to brave the Appalachian mountains in search of it. With Maud Karpeles he spent three years in the Appalachian mountains, recording families and making much of what he found there - but only the white folks. Now by the time they got to western North Carolina, the black population wasn't as high as it was, but that's only part of the reason there's no black representation in his collections, which influenced everyone who came after; they just plain didn't like black people. This abounds in their writings - my favorite quote is this one; after a long hard hike looking for the most isolated homesteads to record, they caught sight of some likely looking log cabins. Sharp says: "We tramped - a very hard and warm walk, mainly uphill. When we reached the cove we found it peopled entirely by negroes!! All our trouble and spent energy for naught." Except of course, he didn't say negroes.

My goal here, today, is to say that what makes this Bluegrass, Old-time, and other forms of music so powerful is that there is room for everyone to explore these incredible traditions. I want people to understand – that recognizing the African American presence within these traditions does not come at the expense of trying to erase all of the other

tradition bearers who have already received so much of our attention. I want to celebrate the greater diversity of the people who have shaped the music that is so much a part of my identity. I want the public to appreciate this string band music, this bluegrass music, as a creole music that comes from many influences - a beautiful syncretization of the cultures that call this country home. I don't want to minimize, trivialize, or ignore anyone's passion to explore this music. I just want them to understand, as fully as possible, the entire picture! If we are going to embrace greater diversity in Bluegrass music, then we must be willing to acknowledge the best and worst parts of tradition.

It is important to what is going on RIGHT NOW to stress the musical brother and sister hood we have had for hundreds of years; for every act of cultural appropriation, of financial imbalance, of the erasure of names and faces, of the outside attempt to create artificial division and sow hatred, simply to keep us down so that the powers-that-be can continue to enjoy the fruits of our labor, there are generous acts of working class cultural exchange taking place in the background. These exchanges are indelible parts of this music. It's not about the 'influence' of African Americans; we didn't 'shade' the tunes with some contributions of syncopations and flatted sevenths; in actuality the great stream of string band music that stretches back to hundreds of years ago, and that reaches forward to that great moment in 1945, is part of the foundation of what truly makes America great. It's not just Washington, Lincoln, Douglass and King. It's also

the untold thousands of ordinary folk playing banjos, fiddles, guitars, mandolins, basses and everything else they could get their hands on - to make life a better place.

So that's the legacy - the question now: is that the future? Are we going to let a handful of dead A&R men and white supremacists decide how we feel about our own music? About who gets to play our music? Are we going to stand up to the kind of prejudice that had people warning me and my fellow Chocolate Drops, oh, don't go to the Galax Fiddlers Convention? That fellow in Floyd who said to my husband, oh, you're with that high yellow gal? and I see you got one of them blue gum negroes in the group...Except of course, he didn't say Negro. Are we gonna remember that pioneering hillbilly star Fiddlin' John Carson was a devoted member of the KKK? Or that we remember the Carter Family, but not Leslie Riddle? Hank Williams, but not Tee Tot Payne? Jimmie Rodgers, Hobart Smith, Tommy Jarrell, Doc Roberts and countless others, who freely acknowledged all the black musicians who inspired them, but that we, as a society, don't remember or value? And what about Earl Scruggs' amazing innovation but not the hundreds of years of cross-racial music making that led up to it?

When the Carolina Chocolate Drops became the first black string band to play the Grand Ol' Opry, and let me tell you, it felt amazing, people started calling it a Healing Moment.

But I have to ask - a healing moment for whom? One or two black groups, or one or two black country stars is not a substitution for recognizing the true multi-cultural history of this music. We have a lot of work to do.

We need to build on these moments, on these incredible opportunities to expand understanding. Some of the best times the CCD had were at bluegrass festivals, at the Grand Ol Opry, and when the old time community welcomed us with open arms; Joe Thompson received every accolade possible for an old NC fiddler before he died. Yes, there's so much beauty in this music, and in this, our culture - we have to keep reaching for it. To tear down those artificial divisions and let bluegrass and string band music be the welcoming place that it has, and can be, and, in more and more places, such as here at IBMA, strives to be now.

As Boots Faught said when he was confronted about Arnold Shultz being a colored fiddler in his band, he said, "You don't hear color. You hear music."

I would like to leave you with the words of Paul Laurence Dunbar, eminent African American poet - the last stanza of his poem A Banjo Song he published in 1913:

Now de blessed little angels
Up in heaben, we are told
Don't do nothin' all dere lifetime
'Ceptin' play on ha'ps of gold.
Now I think heaben'd be mo' home like
Ef we'd heah some music fall
F'om a real ol-fashioned banjo,
Like dat one upon de wall.

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