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Banjo: An Illustrated History



Synopsis

(Book). The banjo is emblematic of American country music, and it is at the core of other important musical movements, including jazz and ragtime. The instrument has been adopted by many cultures and has been ingrained into many musical traditions, from Mento music in the Caribbean and dance music in Ireland. Virtuosos such as Bela Fleck have played Bach, African music, and Christmas tunes on the five-string banjo, and the instrument has had a resurgence in pop music with such acts as Mumford and Sons and the Avett Brothers. This book offers the first comprehensive, illustrated history of the banjo in its many forms. It traces the story of the instrument from its roots in West Africa to its birth in the Americas, through its coming of age in the Industrial Revolution and beyond. The book profiles the most important players and spotlights key luthiers and manufacturers. It features 100 milestone instruments with in-depth coverage, including model details and beautiful photos. It offers historical context surrounding the banjo through the ages, from its place in Victorian parlors and speakeasies through its role in the folk boom of the 1950s and 1960s to its place in the hands of songwriter John Hartford and comedian Steve Martin. Folk, jazz, bluegrass, country, and rock the banjo has played an important part in all of these genres. Lavishly illustrated, and thoughtfully written by author, broadcaster, and acclaimed banjoist Bob Carlin, this is a must-have for lovers of fretted instruments, aficionados of roots music, and music history buffs.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Not too many banjo books have been written so far. I understand it is a niche market and not much money to be made, so it must be the labor of love; I appreciate what Mr. Carlin has done. I wanted

to love this book, because I like everything banjo, but I must admit there are some problems with it. Let me explain (sic). The book's narrative roughly flows chronologically, with a frequent breaks of few pages of inserts. These inserts are topical – sometimes about musicians, sometimes about events, sometimes banjo makers. They break the story and are not always related to it. It is distracting. Putting that aside, the early paragraphs are informative; banjo's African roots and early American incarnations in 19th century are described well, and illustrated with good historical photographs, as well as examples of modern banjo reproductions (there was a great resource to draw from: "America's Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century" is a really excellent book). Coming closer to modern times, things start to get a bit muddled. Bluegrass is given its proper due with nods to the most important players. However, if we think of currently alive branches on a banjo tree, and there are a few major ones – bluegrass tradition, clawhammer tradition, contemporary banjo, and a few minor ones (in terms of popularity, not quality) – traditional Irish (Celtic) music, classical banjo, jazz banjo (plectrum and tenor), Mr. Carlin does not cover the ground here fully, his focus is disproportionately on the clawhammer world – banjo players and builders alike. For instance, letting his personal inclinations prevail (Mr. Carlin is an excellent clawhammer player and instructor), the author chooses to ignore most modern resonator banjo builders.

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