

## “Banjo Women in West Virginia and Eastern Kentucky”

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### Preface

In the fall of 1997, we began our search for women banjo players in Appalachia; primarily in eastern Kentucky and West Virginia. Our equipment was light—a Marantz tape recorder and a Nikon camera. Our intellectual baggage weighed even less— anecdotal evidence that Appalachian women had historically played what is considered to be America’s first musical instrument.<sup>1</sup> I had read the two major monographs on the banjo available at the time: Karen Linn’s *That Half-Barbaric Twang*, and Cecilia Conway’s *Black Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*, neither of which included banjo women in the southern mountains.<sup>2</sup> As a traditional, or “clawhammer” banjo player and maker, most of Geoff’s familiarity with the five-string banjo came from recordings and live performances by men.

Since my teaching and scholarship has always focused on women, my initial intellectual curiosity regarding the possibility of finding women banjo players was piqued when I read that folklorist and musician Mike Seeger was told by traditional musicians in the southern mountains, that “their fathers *and* mothers picked the banjo before the turn of the century.” From this curiosity came the challenge implicit in Seeger’s follow-up question: “Why do we not have accounts of this—either visually or in the literature?”<sup>3</sup> I knew that if I strummed beneath the surface, the banjo music of multiple generations of undocumented and invisible Appalachian women might finally be heard. This article is thus an affirmation of Seeger’s statement and a response to his query.

In the popular imagination, the five-string banjo is typically associated with white men and bluegrass music. Yet ironically, the instrument's origins can be traced to West Africa. When slaves arrived in the Americas, they re-created their indigenous instrument by fashioning a wooden neck onto a gourd and animal hide head, or resonator. In his *Notes on Virginia, Written in the Year 1781*, Thomas Jefferson observed that "the instrument proper to them [black slaves] is the Banjer, which they brought hither from Africa."<sup>4</sup> While it probably remained an instrument played almost exclusively by blacks until the beginning of the nineteenth century, by 1806 the banjo had crossed into present-day Wheeling, West Virginia, where it traveled south via the Ohio River and its tributaries in eastern Kentucky and West Virginia, en route to New Orleans, where the instrument eventually played a role in the evolution of jazz. Another strain of banjo music, variously referred to as "clawhammer" "old time," "downstroking," or "frailing," stayed in Appalachia, where cultural contact and exchange between blacks and Euro-Americans soon transformed the simple, gourd and gopher-skin banjo of the slave into its modern-day five string metal-rimmed equivalent.<sup>5</sup>

From the 1840s-1890s, the banjo emerged as the preeminent instrument in the minstrel show, the most popular form of mass entertainment in the era. As whites blackened their faces with cork and played upon the romanticized genre of slave plantation life, and later as blacks themselves participated in this self-parody, Americans could both condemn and, after the Civil War, sentimentalize the "Lost Cause" as a happier era when wide-grinning black faces strummed obviously away on their "banjers."

By the late nineteenth-century, African Americans had largely disassociated themselves with an instrument tainted with slavery. By then, the minstrel show had

waned in popularity and commercial manufacturers and promoters of the banjo attempted to shift its cultural appeal to middle-class whites by “elevating” the banjo as a parlor or “classical” instrument. Women figured most prominently in this movement. As one well-known banjo player and proponent of this new ethos announced : “The advance of the banjo began when it was taken up by the ladies, and by them introduced into the home circle... Before that it was heard most frequently in bar-rooms and out of the way places . . . .”<sup>6</sup> This quotation signals a historic shift from the banjo as an instrument of masculinity, played in public by both black and white men in a stylistically bawdy, brash manner (with lyrical components associated with the musical themes of the rounder, roustabout, and hero-outlaw) to one associated with femininity and sentimentality.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the banjo aesthetically went from a plain folk instrument to a mass produced object of refined ornamentation and taste. The “Whyte Laydie”, (purportedly so-called because of its light maple wood) manufactured by A.C. Fairbanks of Boston and the most popular banjo model in 1901, included elaborate mother-of-pearl inlay work, ebony fingerboard, and intricate wood carving on the back of the neck and heel stock. The name itself was obviously carefully chosen to appeal to its intended users, as the banjo was “no longer considered only a Nigger instrument; it is now being used by the most intelligent gentlemen and ladies.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, “by the 1880s, according to banjo scholar Karen Linn, “the banjo was a fad among young women from the upper classes in many parts of the country.”<sup>8</sup> . Women even brought their new instruments of leisure out of their parlors and into public. For example, an illustration in *Harper’s Magazine* from 1888 shows a white middle-class female vacationer to White Sulphur Springs in Greenbrier Co., West Virginia, playing her banjo outside in the fresh mountain air.<sup>9</sup>

Yet Appalachian women, both black and white, had surely been playing their banjos in their own parlors—or most likely front porches—long before this popular appeal began. As conservators of traditional culture, Appalachian women also kept alive

both the Celtic ballads and African-inspired blues and shouts as they sang and strummed to soothe and entertain their children.

Photograph evidence, literary references and interviews we conducted with male and female banjoists all reveal a strong historical link between Appalachian women and the banjo well before the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps because they did not play in public and thus failed to gain the visibility or fame of their male counterparts, banjo-playing women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have remained invisible and difficult to document. As Linn notes “[b]oth men and women played instrumental music, but playing outside of the home for community or commercial occasions was largely limited to men.”<sup>10</sup> Sylvia Cottrell O’Brien, well over ninety, was the oldest living player we met. She had learned to play the banjo when she was “just a tadpole,” although in her younger years she never played in public. Even though she was never commercially successful, her now-deceased brother, Jenes Cottrell, did become well-known in West Virginia as a banjo maker and player. She lives alone in a house in central West Virginia her parents built in 1907. In the spring of 1997 she had finally gotten electricity, and the exposed wiring was strung along weathered chestnut walls. On her bed lay a rifle, a pistol and two banjos “manufactured” by her brother, using parts of a Buick transmission for the metal rim. She was proficient with all four items, and had used her “high-powered rifle” to scare off poachers on her property, which covers one hundred hilly acres. She mused poetically that “The Deadfall Mountains they are my home; where the wildcats holler and the wild deer roam. Instead of a pistol, she picks up her banjo for two new interlopers and frails out the melody to “John Brown’s Body.” She doesn’t sing anymore, but she remembers the lyrics as if the martyr of Harper’s Ferry had been hung yesterday. “John Brown lies in old Virginia but his spirit goes marchin’ on.” Sylvia told us that when musicians in the area of Clay County used to come to their home for “midnight suppers,” Sylvia opted for playing banjo in the living room over cooking in the kitchen.<sup>11</sup>

Other women musicians interviewed for this study claimed that it was considered improper for women to perform in public, particularly on the banjo. Jean Ritchie of Kentucky, who comes from a musical family well-known for both ballad singing and dulcimer playing, admitted in an informal interview that her family considered the banjo a “low instrument.” Additionally, one banjo-playing woman identified in our research was told by her father that “nice girls don’t play the banjo.” Thus it is probably impossible to determine the extent to which Appalachian women picked up the instrument. Still it is clear that they were strumming the banjo in the late nineteenth century, and quite possibly even earlier than that.

Wilson Douglas, a well-known Clay County, West Virginia fiddler who passed away in 1998 remembered his grandmother Rosie Morris as a fiddler who tried to teach him to play as well as one of the finest banjo pickers ever.<sup>12</sup> In addition, many of the women interviewed for this work testified to the fact that it was other women who gave them their first banjo lessons. Dora Mae Wagers, who will be detailed later, stated that it was her grandmother from Hyden, Kentucky, who taught her how to pick the banjo.

The list of well-known male banjoists who credit a woman for their own musical abilities or inspiration is also quite extensive. In 1936, then sixteen year-old Pete Seeger would hear his first five-string clawhammer banjo, being played by Samantha Bumgarner, of Sylvania, North Carolina. Seeger, of course, went on to become the country’s most influential promoter of the five-string banjo during the folk revival movement of the late 1950s and early 60s. Grandpa Jones, of Grand Ole Opry fame, learned to play frailing style from Cynthia May Carver (“Cousin Emmy”) from Lamb, Kentucky.<sup>13</sup> Northwestern North Carolina banjoist Clarence “Tom” Ashley (who popularized the song “The Coo Coo”) also learned clawhammer-style banjo from his aunts Daisy and Ary.<sup>14</sup> Legendary bluegrass banjo player Ralph Stanley, who also plays frailing style, learned from his mother, Lucy Smith Stanley. Lucy had eleven brothers and sisters, all of whom played clawhammer banjo. In fact, Ralph Stanley’s first banjo was

given to him by one of his mother's sisters.<sup>15</sup> National Heritage Fellow and banjo player Morgan Sexton of Linefork, Kentucky, got his first lessons from his older sister Hettie.<sup>16</sup> And Earl Scruggs's two older sisters, Eula Mae and Ruby, both played the banjo and obviously taught their younger brother a tune or two.

With the exception of Samantha Bumgarner, none of these women players were ever commercially recorded. Nor have they been fully researched. Their mention in the literature generally comes from their association with male musicians who garnered recognition through their recordings. Yet by the 1920s, some banjo women in Appalachia came out of their parlors and porches and began to emerge in public to perform and record on their own.

Samantha Bumgarner, dubbed by musicologist Charles Wolfe as "The Original Banjo Pickin' Girl," was probably the first Appalachian banjo player of either sex to cut a commercial record.<sup>17</sup> In 1924 she traveled to New York City where she recorded ten songs for Columbia Phonograph Company, playing frailing-style banjo on six of the tunes, including "Shout Lou" and "Fly Around My Pretty Little Miss." Her April 1924 recording was made only one month after Okeh records had produced tracks by Fiddlin' John Carson and his Virginia Reelers, considered the first "hillbilly" recordings to be commercially marketed in the United States. Thus not only should Bumgarner be considered the first "banjo-pickin' *person*" to record and reach a mass audience, but one of the earliest southern mountain musicians to make it to the studio as well.

Although she never received critical acclaim (even though she performed at the Roosevelt White House in 1939, where the king and queen of England were being entertained with authentic American music), Bumgarner was obviously an inspiration for other women in the southern mountains, who would emerge a decade later as some of the nation's most popular entertainers.<sup>18</sup>

Virtually all of the women banjo players who came to national attention in the 1930s were from eastern Kentucky. For women in the mountains, marriage or music

provided the only viable alternative to an isolated and inevitable hard-scrapple existence. Three women in particular—Cynthia May Carver (aka “Cousin Emmy”), Lily May Ledford, and Laverne Williamson (aka “Molly O’Day”) all chose music as their mode of escape.

Cynthia May Carver (1903-1980) was born in Lamb, Kentucky to a sharecropping family that raised tobacco. As early as age eight, Cynthia worked in the fields, staking, stripping and curing Kentucky’s principal cash crop. Although the work was arduous, young Cynthia entertained her family in the fields by crooning, clowning around, and creating musical skits. She once told an interviewer that she “thank[ed] God that He gave me the talent and the good common sense to get out of there. . .”<sup>19</sup> Like Samantha Bumgarner, her first instrument was the fiddle, and in 1936 she became the first woman to win the National Old Fiddler’s contest in Louisville, Kentucky. While she became proficient playing fifteen instruments, (including the saw) she began her career in West Virginia as a banjoist with Frankie Moore’s Log Cabin Boys in the mid-1930s. By 1938 she had formed her own band, called the Kin Folks, and toured in a Cadillac with four other women players.<sup>20</sup> Cousin Emmy’s banjo playing has been described as a hard, fast-driving eastern Kentucky frailing style. Her stage presence was apparently electric, as she danced, strutted, and strummed just as she had in the tobacco fields years ago. Even over the radio, her dynamic style surged over the airwaves. Playing on WWVA in Wheeling, West Virginia in 1937, she caught the attention of a young Louis Jones, later known as “Grandpa Jones.” “Her five-string picking fascinated me to the extent that I would follow her around the studio to watch and listen. I worried her so much that she finally said, ‘Okay, I’ll show you how it’s done.’” In his autobiography, *Everybody’s Grandpa*, Louis Jones noted that it was “sad that such people are hardly ever mentioned in books on country music by these so-called experts.”<sup>21</sup>

Like Cynthia May Carver, Lily May Ledford (1917-1985) was also born in a remote region of Kentucky, in an area so inaccessible that it was called “Pinch-‘em-

Tight”holler, located in the Red River Gorge in the east-central part of the state. All of her eleven siblings fought over the family banjo, crafted out of green hickory with a groundhog-hide head. Apparently, it was her mother who didn’t approve of Lily May’s banjo picking. As she noted in her autobiography *Coon Creek Girl*, by the age of eight she had “learned to steal out the banjo and hide way up on a hill behind a big rock where Mama couldn’t hear me and where I pretended not to hear her hollering for me to do chores.”<sup>22</sup>

At the age of nineteen, Lily May stoled away for good, leaving the hills for the highway north. She was coaxed away by John Lair, radio promoter and later developer of the RenfroValley Barndance in Kentucky, who wanted her as a regular on his radio show in Chicago. Mr. Lair would become Lily May’s manager throughout her career with the Coon Creek Girls, the first commercially-successful all-female Appalachian string band in the United States, whose radio broadcasts from Renfro Valley lasted until the breakup of the group in 1957. Not only did he choose the name of Lily May’s musical group but the names of the individual performers, as well as their apparel. “In the long old-fashioned dress and high top lace shoes that Mr. Lair had me wear, I felt like an old lady and not at all pretty. Mr. Lair discouraged my buying clothes, curling my hair, going in for make-up or improving my English. He told her to ‘Stay a mountain girl, just like you were when you came here. Be genuine and plain at all times.’” Like many of her female predecessors, Lily May preferred the fiddle, yet Lair also insisted that she “stay on that banjo from now on and let the fiddle be incidental, for we’ve plenty of good fiddlers, but that banjo is what you’ll make it on.” Ledford replied that she would “rather fiddle” because she didn’t “know many banjo songs.” Still, she had her own ways of subverting Lair’s attempts to control her. In spite of his instructions, Lily May “did a little fixing up . . . and would not wear my hair pulled back in a bun except on stage.”<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, Lily May bought a Whyte Laydie banjo and soon developed the same hard-driving eastern-Kentucky frailing style that had characterized the music of

Cousin Emmy. There is no evidence that she was directly influenced by Cousin Emmy's recordings or radio performances, as the phonograph and radio were both strangers to the Red River Gorge. Still, she might have seen Cousin Emmy perform during one of her Kentucky stops. She not only learned many banjo tunes but modified them in proto-feminist fashion, taking an old standard tune "Going 'round the World," for example, and changing the lead-in line from "With a banjo pickin' girl" to "*I'm* a banjo pickin' girl." According to her granddaughter, Cari Norris, she is purported to have written forty new verses to the song, with lines like the following:

I'm goin' to Chattanooga and from there on to Cuba"

I'm goin' cross the ocean if I don't take a notion"

"Im goin' to Tennessee, don't you try and follow me"

Molly O' Day, nee Laverne Williamson, was born in 1923 in McVeigh, Kentucky, near the West Virginia border, in a holler so far back in the hills, as she once quipped, "that you had to break daylight with a sledgehammer, and the groundhogs carried the mail."<sup>24</sup> Like the banjo-playing women before her, she left her home in the hills at a young age, after writing to ask a musician in Bluefield, West Virginia named Lynn Davis if he needed a female singer. Laverne had already made a musical name for herself on a nearby radio station in Williamson, West Virginia, where she played guitar in a stringband that included her two brothers—one on banjo and the other fiddle. When Lynn Davis went to visit Laverne in her "little log cabin" in eastern Kentucky, she was just seventeen years old.

I heard a lot about her, you know, how she was singin'. And I had two girls—a sort of cowboy band; a western type. And one of the girls got married and the other was going home. So she wrote me and asked if I would like to have a girl singer. So I went to see her in the little log cabin. When she walked out I turned flips. . . So her brothers came out and her mother and dad and we talked awhile. Her mother said, 'Now she can't go at seventeen without her brother goes with her.' So I hired her and her brother [fiddler "Skeets" Williamson].<sup>25</sup>

Molly and her band, The Cumberland Mountain Folks, which included her brother Skeets and Lynn Davis, began a regular radio program in Beckley, West Virginia, sponsored by Dr. Pepper. Molly quickly picked up the banjo style and songs that had been a part of her everyday life in Kentucky, and her hard-driving frailing style closely resembled that of Lilly May Ledford, who she had obviously heard through the radio. Between 1946-51, Molly O' Day and the Cumberland Mountain Folks recorded thirty-six sides for Columbia Records. Art Satherly, the legendary producer for the recording company, called her "the greatest female country singer ever."<sup>26</sup>

Molly was not only a great Appalachian singer, but a great banjo player as well. One of her most popular recordings, the old ballad "Poor Ellen Smith" gives aural evidence not just of her vocal ability but her frailing banjo technique. According to Lynn Davis, at one time in London, Kentucky, she even beat the legendary Earl Scruggs in a banjo contest: "Earl Scruggs, you know, he never did care about her beatin' him in a banjo-pickin' contest. He said it was because she was a girl. Well, if you know Earl, he seldom ever smiles; very sober. Well Molly would get out and she'd just about go berserk pickin' the banjo 'cause she really put on a show. She would talk with her eyes and she just put in on."<sup>27</sup>

Laverne Williamson and Lynn Davis were married in 1941, just before Laverne turned eighteen. The marriage lasted until her death in 1987, but Molly O' Day's career was short lived, after she suffered a nervous breakdown in 1949 and turned her back on secular songs and the music business. After her 1951 recording session, she never appeared in public performances, unless it was in front of the congregation pastored by then Reverend Lynn Davis.

Thus even though her career was short-lived, Molly O' Day's voice and banjo playing have been kept alive by Lynn Davis through his daily radio program called "Hymns from the Hills" in Huntington, West Virginia, where Molly and Lynn lived most of their married life.

Long after they were in the musical limelight, Cousin Emmy, Lily May Ledford, and Molly O' Day, would inspire a younger generation of female banjo players, many of whom were interviewed for this project. Cari Norris, Lilly May's granddaughter, grew up in the 1970s with little knowledge of her grandmother's famed past. We met Cari at Berea College in Kentucky, where she was conducting a workshop on frailing-style banjo. Cari didn't pick up Lilly May's "Whyte Laydie" until after her "Mamaw" died in 1985. Cari was just fifteen years old. Now she holds not just her grandmother's instrument, but her entire musical history as well. Her repertoire includes many of her grandmother's standards; songs she learned from Lily May's records and from a dim remembrance of being rocked to sleep by "Mamaw's ballads. "I didn't hear her play a lot when I was growing up," she admits, since she and her parents were more inclined towards the Beatles than the banjo. "But the way I play "Pretty Polly" and "East Virginia," and "White Oak Mountain," are just about how she played them." ("Pretty Polly," one of the most popular murder ballads still played and recorded by both male and female banjo players today, is an Anglo-American variant of a 1750 English song entitled "The Gosport Tragedy.") According to Cari, "Pretty Polly," one of Lilly May's most popular songs, was a way for Ledford to subtly recount her own symbolic annihilation as a woman. As she explained it:

[“Pretty Polly] expressed her own feelings about her career under John Lair, in a way. Because she was controlled in many ways. And I think she felt powerless in a lot of ways as to what to do. She came from a very poor family. She had an eighth grade education. While she was an extremely intelligent, extremely smart and talented and gifted . . . . I don’t really believe that she knew how to strike off John Lair if she wanted to, and manage her own career. And I’m not sure any woman would have known, in her situation, how to do that at that time, in the 1950s. It’s like you didn’t have to say it directly. And that’s what art does. You say things in metaphors which are more powerful anyway.<sup>28</sup>

When we left Cari after our interview she was getting ready to move into a cabin she had bought near the gorge where her grandmother grew up. We found other young women banjo pickers like Cari trying to move closer to the roots of traditional Appalachian music as well. Pam Lund of northern Kentucky, and Helena Triplett of New Zealand, both moved to Poconhontas County, West Virginia in order to absorb the old-time banjo style of the musically-influential Hammons family. The older Hammons, including Maggie, the matriarch of the family, who played frailing banjo and sang unaccompanied ballads, are gone now. Ironically, Pam finds herself teaching the Hammons’ grandchildren how to clawhammer, a musical style that fell out of favor with a generation raised on pop music.

Our final stop and story from Kentucky brought our banjo pilgrimage back to its origins in the African-American experience. Although she never gained the national recognition or recording status that other banjo-playing women in Kentucky achieved, Dora Mae Wagers, was—as the title to her self-produced cassette proclaimed—“A Legend in Her Own Time.” For forty years she played banjo on the stage of the Renfro Valley Barndance, and was often billed as one of the Coon Creek Girls. We first met Dora Mae

at her home south of Berea, Kentucky, which could only be described as a private banjo museum. Instruments hung from the walls of her living room as thick as fleas on a stray dog's back. One belonged to her grandmother. Another was bartered off of Grandpappy Callahan, a Renfro Valley performer. The oldest instrument in her collection was rescued from the wrecking ball and found in a dumpster after an old house in Lexington was torn down.

Dora Mae Wagers was born in 1927 in Oller's Branch, Kentucky, near the Red River Gorge. When she was a young girl her grandmother, Sally Smith Young, taught her how to play frailing style. Dora Mae credits her grandmother with being "one of the finest banjo players that ever picked," and even though she didn't read music, she taught her all her tunes in the key of C. "[W]hen she was teaching me to play she'd sing 'Sheeps in the cornfield, cows in the clover. Tell them pretty girls I'm a comin' over.' When she was teaching me to do clawhammer she'd brush the strings that ways, she would. She played with two fingers and I couldn't use my thumb. She'd say, 'Now honey, let your strings sound out for you.' Shake that little hand, honey' " From her grandmother Dora Mae learned Appalachian ballads like "Pretty Polly," "Young Edward," "Shady Grove," and "Little Birdie."<sup>29</sup>

Dora Mae grew up around Appalachian music, with songs, square dances, barn raisings, and corn shuckings always being accompanied by the sound of the fiddle and banjo. She remembered musical gatherings in her grandparent's home, with her grandmother playing banjo when neighbors would visit each other "and they'd move all their furniture out. They didn't have no rugs on the floor. Just plain boards. Just move everything out . . . and leave the chairs. Everyone danced until they dropped."<sup>30</sup>

When she was a teenager, Dora Mae formed a band called “The Happy Holler Boys & Girls,” the Appalachian equivalent of a “garage band,” or more appropriately “barn band.” They played on a local radio station in Corbin, Kentucky in the early 1940s, and sometimes “they’d bring Molly O’ Day to London [Kentucky] and they’d bring us in like a side band to rest ‘em between shows. . . .They’d had them at the courthouse.”<sup>31</sup>

From there it was on to Renfro Valley, where Dora Mae played with Lily May and her sister Rosie during their last four years as the Coon Creek Girls. She claimed that “John Lair told you what to do” and that since his death “I do what I want to do.” During our visit with Dora Mae she did just that, playing (although she would not sing, due to throat surgery) all of the old ballads her grandmother had taught her. After playing her version of “Poor Ellen Smith” she exclaimed that “*Everybody’s* grandfather murdered Poor Ellen Smith and got away with it!”<sup>32</sup>

In addition to her grandmother, Dora Mae reluctantly admitted that her other banjo muse came to her in the form of her “haunted banjo.” When pressed to explain why she thought it was haunted, she replied as follows: “Why I’ve got up in the middle of the night. It’ll play . . .old tunes. One time that thing communicated with me and I could just close my eyes and just see as far ad I could see; like a stacked-rock fence, you know. It belonged to a black man and that was his only possession that he had. When they cleaned out one of those houses in Lexington . . .they threw it in the trashcan. . . .It had an old hide head. It was old, it was.” Questioned further about how she knew the banjo belonged to a black man she replied that:

It’d get me up at 1 o’clock in the morning’ and I’d have to get up and sit up sometimes till 3, just ever when it’d turn me loose. Let me go lay back.

Oh, I suffered from loss of sleep till I'd get up and sit with that thing! It just played tunes that I never heard before in my ears. And then I was sitting one day playing and it just crossed my mind, 'I think I'll play "Golden Slippers." I was sittin' around here and I said 'Well, I'll tune and play it in a few minutes, and it [the haunted banjo] said 'you can play it in this tune and this tune.' So I'd start in a play it. I used to just cry like a baby that thing affecting me so much when I'd try to talk to you about it. 'Cause I was afraid somebody didn't believe and they'd think I was crazy or something. There's a ghost in this little banjer.<sup>33</sup>

Whether the interviewer or the reader remains skeptical of Dora Mae's haunted banjo is beside the point. What is important is that Dora Mae not only believes in her spiritual muse but that it has affected her playing style.

On most of the tunes she shared with us, Dora Mae played the same hard-driving frailing style that is a hallmark of Kentucky women like Cousin Emmy and Lily May. But when she picked up and played her haunted banjo, Dora Mae seemed transported into an earlier time and place—pre-Appalachian and Euro-American. Her playing style became slower, bluesy, and much less notey, and had the simple rhythmic quality of earlier African-American banjo playing. Whether she was aware of the history of the banjo is unclear. Yet Dora Mae's songs, stories, and banjo style literally and figuratively bridge the musical gap between the Appalachian and African experience with the instrument.

Dora Mae passed on the summer after we first met her. Perhaps she is in music heaven, strumming the same strings as her musical muse from Lexington. Given the growing popularity of a new generation of banjo women—like Alison Brown, Emily Erwin of the Dixie Chicks, and Gillian Welsh—Dora Mae and all the other women banjo players, past and present, certainly deserve their rightful place in the history of Appalachian music.

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<sup>2</sup> Karen Linn's *That Half-Barbaric Twang* does analyze the late nineteenth-century banjo craze among women in the Northeast. Interestingly, In 1985, Linn had interviewed and published an article on a female banjo player from western North Carolina named Bertie Dickens, who began playing clawhammer style around 1908. Yet her major monograph doesn't mention mountain women's banjo legacy. In her *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*, Cecelia Conway claims that "women banjo players have been about as hard to find as black banjo players." (9) Ironically, Conway herself identifies several black women who played the instrument, including Etta Baker and Elizabeth Cotton. Conway's assumption that "women" and "black players" are mutually exclusive categories falls into the historical fallacy that all blacks are men and all women are white. See Cecilia Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study of Folk Traditions* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995) and Karen Linn's *That Half Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Mike Seeger, "In Praise of Banjo-Picking Women," *The Old-Time Herald* (Spring 1990), p. 13

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia, Written in the Year 1781* (Paris: 1782), 257 f.n. The earliest iconographic evidence of slaves playing banjo and fiddle comes from a Lewis Miller watercolor painted in Lynchburg, Virginia in 1853 (see Conway, p. 79. ) In fact, most reports of black banjo players before 1840 come from Virginia. Conway specifically mentions that two early West Virginia blacks reported to have learned to play banjo from their slave grandfathers ( see Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*, 61-63).

<sup>5</sup> It was a white Virginian from Buckingham County named Joel Walker Sweeney (1810-1860) who would add the characteristic fifth drone string to the banjo of late nineteenth-century minstrel fame. Sweeney claimed to have learned to play the banjo from his father's slaves. (see Conway, 107-8. )

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> The quote is from a catalogue of musical instruments. See Linn, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. Linn has argued that the mass cultural appeal of the banjo in the late nineteenth-century urban North represented an unconscious rejection of the values of industrialization and thus a "sentimentalization" of all that was the antithesis of modernism. According to Linn, the appeal of the banjo thus lay in a larger "popular idea of Appalachia [as] in a way a feminine one;

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its changeless nature-bound self contrasting with the urban-masculine restless search for progress and power." (p. 130). Linn proposes a typology which classifies such "sentimental" values as nature, emotion, leisure, blacks, the South, and the feminine as juxtaposed with the following correspondings characteristics: civilization, rationality, work, whites, the North, and masculinity. (p. 61)

<sup>9</sup> See *Harper's Magazine*, 4 August, 1888, p. 576.

<sup>10</sup> Linn, 118-19.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Sylvia Cottrell O'Brien by Susan A. Eacker and Geoff Eacker. 8 October, 1997. Deadfall Mountain, Clay County, West Virginia.. Copies of all the interviews we conducted during the fall of 1997 have been deposited in Special Collections at the Marshall University Library, Huntington, WV.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Wilson Douglas by Susan A. Eacker and Geoff Eacker. 20 September 1997, Gandeenville, West Virginia.

<sup>13</sup> Mary A. Bufwack and Robert Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: The Saga of Women in Country Music* (New York; Crown Publishers), 101.

<sup>14</sup> See liner notes by Ralph and Richard Rinzier on the recording *Old-Time Music at Clarence Ashley's* (Folkways FA2356, 1961)

<sup>15</sup> See Ralph Stanley's recently-released CD *Songs my Mother Taught Me & More*.

<sup>16</sup> See liner notes by Nancy Adams on Morgan Sexton's CD *Shady Grove*, June Appal Recordings, 1992.

<sup>17</sup> Charles K. Wolfe, "Samantha Bumgarner: The Original Banjo Pickin' Girl" *Old Time Herald* (Winter 1987-88), pp.6-9.

<sup>18</sup> According to Wolfe, Samantha Bumgarner appeared at a command performance for King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, hosted by Franklin D. Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor in 1939. The occasion featured Lilly May Ledford and the Coon Creek Girls.

<sup>19</sup> Wayne W. Daniel, "Cousin Emmy: A Popular Entertainer Country Music History Almost Forget," *Bluegrass Unlimited* (Oct. 1985, Vol 20, no. 4) p. 64.

<sup>20</sup> Charles K. Wolfe, *Kentucky Country: Folk and Country Music of Kentucky* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982), p. 87.

<sup>21</sup> Loius Jones, (with Charles K. Wolfe) *Everybody's Grandpa: Fifty Years Behind the Mike* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press), p.67.

<sup>22</sup> Lily May Ledford, *Coon Creek Girl* (Berea: The Berea College Appalachian Center, 1980), p.7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-16.

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<sup>24</sup> Bufwack & Oermann, p. 193.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Lynn Davis by Susan A. Eacker and Geoff Eacker. 17 September 1997. Huntington, WV.

<sup>26</sup> Wolfe, *Kentucky Country*, p. 139.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Lynn Davis by Susan A. Eacker and Geoff Eacker. 17 September 1997. Huntington, WV. Earl Scruggs was contacted about this apparent indignity, after an article related to our research was published in the *Huntington Herald-Dispatch*. Scruggs still denies the story.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Cari Norris by Susan A. Eacker and Geoff Eacker. 25 October 1997. Berea, Kentucky.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Dora Mae Wagers by Susan A. Eacker and Geoff Eacker. 26 October 1997. Livingston, Kentucky.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. "Poor Ellen Smith" is purportedly based on the true story of a pregnant woman who was murdered by her "lover" in Mt. Airy, North Carolina in the 1880s.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.