

# GOLDMINE The Music Collector's Magazine

## Author vividly uncovers the hidden history of the banjo

Kristina R. Gaddy's book "Well of Souls" takes a deep dive into the story of the African diaspora, and the music that it made.

Dave Thompson • Oct 27, 2022

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By Dave Thompson

### ***Well Of Souls - Uncovering the Banjo's Hidden History***

By Kristina R Gaddy

Norton Books

"Anybody who studied the banjo," asserts Rhiannon Giddens in her introduction to this fascinating book, "knows they are walking into a swamp of unknown players, scraps of primary sources, flashes of brilliant understanding and also of utter despair. How," she asks, "is something so integral to American culture so badly understood and widely misrepresented?"

Answering that question, in a nutshell, is the heart of *Well of Souls*, a saga that opens in the late 17th century and closes a little under two centuries later. The 20th century barely gets a look-in; recorded music and names we might know likewise. Indeed, for many of us, this would be musical prehistory, regardless of the instrument under discussion.

Except for the songs. They (or some of them anyway) have survived, and if *Well Of Souls* has any drawback whatsoever, it's the absence of a page or two of recommended listening, pointing us in the direction of at least a few of the age-old favorites Gaddy references.

Or maybe that's not a drawback, for so vividly does she write, and so enthusiastically does she convey her meaning, that many of the songs play unbidden in your mind, through the rhythm of her sentences, the lyric of her vocabulary.

As much as *Well Of Souls* is a gripping, fascinating, story, it is also a beautifully written one... a novel in documentary's clothing.

That much of the tale is rooted in some of the darker chapters of western history is inevitable; man's inhumanity towards man walks hand in hand with the development and popularity of the banjo, even in those places where the sheer joy of music making is most prominent on the page.

We meet our first banjos very early in the story, first through the observations of Hans Sloane, as he arrived in Jamaica in 1687; to take up the post of physician to the island's newly appointed English governor, then via an engraving Sloane published in 1707, described as the earliest known picture of the instrument.

Brought to the island aboard the slave ships, constructed from gourds and pieces of wood, the instruments pass without formal identification in Solane's writings. He refers to them as a form of lute which he calls Strum Strumps — a term, says Gaddy, which “perhaps speaks more to the manner in which they are played, than what the musicians call them.”

Another early observer described the instrument as a “sort of guitar”; yet another compared it to the kitt, a tiny violin, or pochette, favored by period dance teachers. By the time the story reaches 1730s New York, however, one James Alexander is telling of “his Landlord's Black fellow... very busy at the tuning of his Banger, as he call'd it, and playing some of his Tunes”; while a contemporary historian, John Oldmixon, is writing of a lute he saw on Barbados, that he refers to as a Bangil - with a soft “g.” Ban-jil, Banger, Banjo....

Etymology, musicology, social history, cultural specialties all play their part as *Well Of Souls* unfolds, but they do so with only occasional deviation from Gaddy's conversational writing style. Occasionally, too, she interrupts the narrative with interludes describing her own quest to unearth the people and happenstance that play a role in this book.

The musician Joel Walker Sweeney, abolitionist Victor Schœlcher, writer Absalom Aimwell, architect Benjamin Latrobe, judge Robert McAlpin Williamson, artist Eastman Johnson; the names pile up in her history's wake. But never does Gaddy allow us to overlook the real heroes and heroines of the banjo's story — the countless thousands who pass through anonymously, playing or singing or dancing to the music, nailing it into their people's culture, until we reach the final chapter, poised on the edge of Civil War, and a woman named Lucy McKim.

A fervent abolitionist (her family home in Philadelphia was a stop on the Underground Railroad) McKim wanted nothing more than an end to slavery. But her dream was nevertheless tinged with sadness, for she realized, as Gaddy puts it, that “the songs created and passed down during slavery... might [also] be gone.”

Visiting the South Carolina Sea Islands with her father, McKim set about, then, collecting the songs and their melodies, writing them down not only according to words and music, but also “the odd twists made in the throat; and the curious rhythmic effect produced by single voices chiming in at different irregular intervals.”

The result, although it did not see print until after the war, was *Slave Songs of the United States*, 136 songs that represent the first, and perhaps still the most important collection of Black American songs ever published.

*Well of Souls* neither makes, or expects, a similar claim to fame. Yet, in lifting the centuries away from an instrument that was crucial to the creation of many of those songs, it more than merits a place on the same bookshelf.

