

Artists on Tour

Russ Childers

Banjo from Africa to America



STUDY GUIDE

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PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Banjo from Africa to America reveals the cross-cultural transport and continental drift of the 5-string banjo from its African origins to the southern Appalachian Highlands. Contrary to popular belief, the banjo is not an American invention from the Appalachian Mountains but is, in fact, an African instrument. Examples of its evolution are exhibited: a West African style gourd banjo, a hand-carved fretless mountain banjo, a 1922-manufactured resonator banjo. Different playing styles are demonstrated showing African, Celtic, and Native American influences. As an illustration of African syncopation, audiences learn to *pat juba*. Or they may learn to drone like a bagpipe, another cultural import that effected a change in banjo construction. Even banjo construction materials—from gourd to real-life groundhog skin to recycled tin can—help audiences understand how early banjo creators made music with what was at hand. A fascinating mini-history lesson comes with the banjo: who were its first players? What negative impact during the Minstrel Era changed all this? And what does Rock-and-Roll have to do with it? With a live performance of the music to illustrate the migration of the banjo from Africa to the Appalachian highlands, audiences gain an insight into the rich cultural diversity reflected in one of America's oldest traditional music forms.

RUSS CHILDERS' BIO

For more than 35 years, Russ Childers has been making music in the Southern Ohio/Northern Kentucky area. Whether as a banjo player with the Rabbit Hash String Band or a fiddle player with the husband-wife team Bear Foot or as a one-man-band-and-storyteller, his music defines him. His banjo playing has won many state awards, including Kentucky State Clawhammer Banjo Champion, an honor that also snagged him a Kentucky Colonelship! Mr. Childers even took his music to New York in 1983 for an off-Broadway production celebrating Appalachian poetry, music, and dance called *Close Harmonies*. In his 15 years of professional storytelling, he engages in a time-honored tradition: the oral passage of information interspersed with the songs his mother sang to him. As he once learned aspects of his Eastern Kentucky heritage from his parents and grandparents, so Mr. Childers now passes it on. But he continues to be a student of banjo player Elmer Bird of West Virginia and fiddler Tommy Taylor of Northern Kentucky. Just as Mr. Childers' own Appalachian music and stories are recycled from an earlier time, he demonstrates instrument building to teach children how to make music on reclaimed materials. This echoes the lifestyles of his ancestors who often found it necessary to fashion useful things from reused objects.

ACTIVITIES

1. MAKE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

- Make a tin canjo. Visit Russ Childers' website at <http://home.fuse.net/russchilders> for directions.
- Make an oatmeal box banjo. See the DVD *Making and Playing Homemade Musical Instruments* by Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer from Homespun Video.
- Make a bleach bottle banjo. Find instructions in *You Can Teach Yourself to Make Music with Homemade Instruments* by Mark Nelson, Mel Bay, 1995.

2. TRY ONE OF THESE GOURD PROJECTS

- Grow long-handled dipper gourds from seed. Check with a local organic gardener or order old-fashioned long-necked gourd seeds online from one of the websites current at time of printing:
 - 1) Landreth Seeds – The African American Heritage Collection http://www.landrethseeds.com/catalog/african_american.php
 - 2) Sustainable Seeds - <http://sustainableseedco.com/Dipper-Gourd-Seeds.html>
- Craft your own gourd project. Besides banjos, other things have traditionally been made from gourds, i.e., birdhouses, soap dippers, drums, rattles, and drinking gourds.
 - 1) Gourd Birdhouse <http://familyfun.go.com/crafts/gourd-birdhouse-672092/>
 - 2) Water Gourd Drum <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kRdKx3jVWDY>
 - 3) Gourd Rattle http://www.ehow.com/how_2049189_make-gourd-rattle.html
- Learn a code song from Underground Railroad days: "Follow the Drinking Gourd." Slaves found their way to freedom by following landmarks and stars given as directions in the song. Jean Winters' book *Follow the Drinking Gourd* gives a brief history along with the music for the song.
- *Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians* by Jean Ritchie describes "The Old Soap-Gourd" as a play-party dance and song. Learn to dance the play-party from directions in *Jean Ritchie's Swapping Song Book*.

3. EXPERIMENT WITH MUSICAL/RHYTHMIC EXERCISES; DEMONSTRATE THE BANJO'S PERCUSSIVE HERITAGE

- Practice Celtic droning. One half of class sings tune while other half drones a sympathetic note, e.g., like bagpipes. This imitates the droning effect that the short fifth string on the banjo has from the influence of its Irish-Scots players.
- Work on some body percussions from African tradition (see Bessie Jones' *Step It Down; Making Musical Things* by Ann Wiseman; *Traditional American Dance Book* by Rick Meyers) in order to understand the banjo's syncopation:
 - (a) Juba
 - (b) Hambone
- Teach the "Indian," a mountain clog dance step inspired by Eastern Cherokee dance tradition. *Traditional American Dance Book* by Rick Meyers and *Clog Dance in the Appalachians* by Jerry Duke both describe the Eastern Cherokee/African tie-in to Appalachian music.

BIBLIOGRAPHY – TEACHER RESOURCES

Here are some useful sources for historical research on the gourd banjo. Since some are out of print, be sure to contact your public library.

Altamont: Black Stringband Music from the Library of Congress. CD. Rounder Records.

Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia. Produced and annotated by Cece Conway and Scott Odell. CD. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1998.

Conway, Cecelia. *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study of Folk Traditions*. University of Tennessee Press, 1995

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Gura, Philip F. and James F. Bollman. *America's Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century*. University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

Linn, Karen. *That Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture*. University of Illinois Press, 1994.

Thornburg, Robert. *About Gourd Banjos*. <http://www.gourdbanjo.com/GBhtml/intro.html>

Webb, Robert Lloyd. *Ring the Banjar! The Banjo in America from Folklore to Factory*. MIT Museum, 1984.

Wigginton, Eliot, ed. *Foxfire 3*. Anchor Books, 1975.

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Wunderlich, George. *Wunder Banjo Company – The Finest Handcrafted Early Banjo Reproductions*. <http://www.wunderbanjo.com/index.htm>