

Retracing the Roots of Bluegrass Music through an Affrilachian Aesthetic¹

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In recent years, schools of music in North America have begun to diversify and differentiate their curricula by offering performance programs in folk and bluegrass music—musical traditions that have long been considered unfit for (or at least outside of) academia. The objectives behind the creation of these programs align with efforts to make postsecondary music schools more relevant to the contemporary cultural landscape and to help music students navigate career paths beyond the conventional boundaries of classical and jazz. However, the popular misconception of bluegrass music as a *white* American folk tradition makes it appear as if these programs would offer yet another arena in which white students can excel, leaving young black and brown students behind. As bluegrass music goes to college—without much support from critical studies—the music history curriculum needs to bring its rich, multi-cultural history to our attention. In addressing the origins of bluegrass and its predecessor old-time music within the undergraduate music history sequence, we have an opportunity not only to correct misconceptions about the tradition and its associations with whiteness, but also to learn how people of color have been written out of the story and how we can rewrite it, and why we need to, as informed musicians and educators.

In 2017, the University of Northern Colorado—where I teach the one-year (two semester) music survey course—began to offer a Folk and Bluegrass Music Studies major. For the majority of the classically-trained music majors, bluegrass seems foreign, and, to a certain extent, its traditions of oral transmission, aural acquisition, and casual performance style seem contradictory to their music literacy training and their belief in notation. Jazz majors share some attitudes and experiences with those who play folk and bluegrass. They learn with little to no written music, regularly work with complex rhythmic layers, develop acute aural skills, and rely heavily on improvisation in composition and performance. These students believe, however, that jazz has already departed from its origins

1. My sincere thanks go to Sara Haefeli and my peer reviewers for giving comments on drafts of this article. Also, I would like to thank Lyle Nordstrom for helping discover my passion and love for teaching music history while a graduate student at the University of North Texas.

as “folk” and “popular” music in North America and has taken a position as “learned” music—as lofty as classical music. In our school of music, especially reputed for its longstanding history and highly lauded jazz program,² bluegrass music can appear relatively “trivial.” For both jazz and classical majors, it is an “Other.”³

Although the ensembles formed to support the bluegrass major have to date attracted about ten students from the classical and jazz areas (barely two percent of our music student population), the presence of the Folk and Bluegrass Studies degree has enriched our students’ performance opportunities and diversified the concert culture, helping foster an inclusive learning environment across the campus. Simultaneously, this program provides an opportunity for students whose musical interests and training have not prepared them to be either classical or jazz majors. Charlie Stevens, the first graduate of the program, represents a whole group of student-musicians who are passionate about music but do not have the fundamental skills required for admittance to a conservatory-style performance degree program.⁴ Despite their differences, many of these non-traditional music students, including our first banjo performance major, are in effect viable candidates for postsecondary music education and eligible for careers in music.

I believe that bluegrass music deserves attention in the music history and theory classrooms, not just for this new demographic but also for the existing body of classical and jazz students. As they learn about the diverse roots of bluegrass music, students can realize that multiculturalism is not a latter-day invention but an inherent trait of this country and its culture. Folk and bluegrass styles can help teach important aural skills and improvisational techniques. Through these folk styles alongside their classical and jazz counterparts, students can expand their musical vocabularies and expressive responses. Above all, bluegrass is an important part of our roots-music cultural history and has value for students who study and experience life in this country. It should be viewed as a topic that inspires inquiry into the vastly changing definition of

2. The program has won more than 100 *Downbeat Magazine* Awards over its thirty-year history. “Jazz Studies,” <https://arts.unco.edu/music/jazz-studies/> (accessed May 21, 2019).

3. Reba Wissner has pointed out a similar problem in students’ perception of Jewish music in the music history survey courses. See Reba Wissner, “Teaching Christian Chant in a Jewish Music Context,” this *Journal* 8, no. 2 (2018), 74–75.

4. Charlie Stevens, interview by author, Fort Collins, CO, April 7, 2019. Stevens was homeschooled or, as he candidly put it, “unschooled.” He learned the rock guitar under the influence of his campfire-guitarist father, and after getting basic lessons in class piano, theory, and aural skills at community colleges and freelancing in rock bands, took an eventual route to our university. He graduated in Spring 2019 with a Bachelor of Music: Instrumental Performance with dual emphasis on classical and folk/bluegrass guitar.

what it means to be an American (and an American musician) in our time and place.

In teaching the early history of bluegrass music, however, it is vital that we address how it has been perceived as a homogeneously white tradition, and students are just as likely to hold this misconception as the rest of the American public. Without a correct understanding of the roots of bluegrass music, we run the risk of perpetuating the popular definition of it as music that belongs to rural, working-class, and white Americans, further distorting the history of America's music. Theresa L. Burriss and Patricia M. Gantt, in their study *Appalachia in the Classroom: Teaching the Region*, claim that the multicultural history and the importance of African American contributions to the region and its culture are primarily unknown, not only to my students in the Rocky Mountain West, but also to students in Appalachian states.⁵ This is why I chose to teach bluegrass music, with an emphasis on its heterogeneous history.

Bluegrass Music in the Conventional Narrative of the Undergraduate Music History Sequence

Bluegrass music, and country music more generally, is typically a topic outside of the conventional narrative of the undergraduate music history sequence. Most music history textbooks do not address its foundational genres. Even if the textbook does acknowledge country music as a style stemming from many different sources and traditions—a significant one of which is African American—the limited length and scope of the text cause it to be explained rather briefly and sparsely, reinforcing the narrative that country music belongs to the Southern rural white.

Mark Evan Bonds's textbook, though it is the most inclusive among the standard texts available in my opinion, identifies Anglo-American folksong, hymnody, and traditional dance tunes as the origins of country music.⁶ While describing white music of the rural South as "decidedly uncultivated," "energetic and sometimes rough-edged," and thereby "emotionally authentic," Bonds

5. Theresa L. Burriss and Patricia M. Gantt, eds., *Appalachia in the Classroom: Teaching the Region* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013). In the collection, Emily Satterwhite has in particular diagnosed that even students in Appalachian states have unexamined assumptions and romantic views on the region. See her article, "Intro to Appalachian Studies: Navigating Myths of Appalachian Exceptionalism," 3–32. With regard to the issue of resistance to acknowledging African Americans as "originators" of the cultural products of America, see Erika Brady, "Contested Origins: Arnold Shultz and the Music of Western Kentucky," in *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 100–118.

6. Mark Evan Bonds, *A History of Music in Western Culture*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education Inc., 2013), 619 and 622.

relegates what would have originated with black musicians of the same region to secondary, outside “influences.” He acknowledges to an extent the similarity between white and black performance styles and yet, in keeping with a 1920s commercially-motivated point of view, he locates them in separate social and cultural settings of the past. More problematically, despite the banjo’s African heritage and its considerable impact upon American folk music, Bonds discusses this instrument with the traditions of early American art music and introduces it in the chapters on white American minstrel song, piano music, and small-ensemble music.⁷ In his accounts of old-time and bluegrass, he fails to recognize the significance of African Americans’ foundational and creative achievements. Instead, he singles out three-finger banjo picking as a technical feat of bluegrass music, along with “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” as a representation of the genre, performed, of course, by white musicians.

Similarly, the Burkholder-Grout-Palisca textbook associates country music primarily with white southerners, downplaying African American traditions, again, as “influences,” suggesting that they came from outside of, and chronologically later than, (Euro-)American traditions.⁸ By using Thomas Hart Benton’s mural *The Sources of Country Music* (1975) as a visual representation, just as in the Bonds, Burkholder underscores the abundance and diversity of influences on country music; however, the only recognizable black figure in the mural is a lone banjo player pushed far to the back.⁹ Though likely reflecting his chronological distance from contemporary country-and-western musical scenes, Benton’s depiction seems to reduce his historical significance altogether in contrast to the white female dulcimer player on the left and the white cowboy guitarist on the right, both standing up front strikingly tall and large in size.¹⁰

In addition to emphasizing the importance of white Appalachia in the early history of country music, the conventional music history narrative views “Appalachia” as a distinctively American trope with overtly positive, white connotations. The backdrop of Aaron Copland’s *Appalachian Spring* (1944), and Hollywood’s continuous appropriation of it as a pastoral trope, set a marked tone in portraying the region as an idyllic and spiritual place.¹¹ Despite the

7. See Bonds, *A History of Music in Western Culture*, 413, 428, and 466.

8. J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, ninth ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 910.

9. Beyond him, on the other side of the railroad tracks, a group of black women dances on the distant riverbank, which is however too small to be detected without the artist’s, or an expert’s, explanation.

10. Benton was conscious of African American contributions to American industrial life, as found in the two panels “City Building” and “Deep South” of *America Today* (1930–31), on which the black workers loom larger; however, it is not the case in *The Sources of Country Music*.

11. See Neil Lerner, “Copland’s Music of Wide Open Spaces: Surveying the Pastoral Trope in Hollywood,” *The Musical Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 477–515.

likely representations of “the clichéd image of white geezers in overalls picking banjos on the front porch”¹² and the negative connotations that might follow, Appalachia remains a repository of “pure white,” Anglo-American folk song and dance traditions. Saturated with outsider’s nostalgic sentiments that often cause the reality of the region and its people to be unseen, Appalachia has become “the Other” giving rise to what Emily Satterwhite calls “myths of Appalachian exceptionalism.”¹³

Although this distinction reflects the music’s history to an extent, it begs a scholarly and pedagogical intervention. The institutionalization of “Appalachia” as “white,” “pure,” and thereby “distinctively American” has a long and dense political and cultural history.¹⁴ If we fail to correct this prevailing misrepresentation, Appalachian music’s diverse history in terms of race, class, gender, and style would remain concealed, further hindering the diversification of its practitioners. In my view, when folk and bluegrass music studies in college are denaturalized and decentralized from their own white, hillbilly canon, the field will become more accommodating to all practitioners—regardless of gender, class, or race—without losing the music’s character.¹⁵ Questioning the myths of country, bluegrass, and Appalachian music—created by the accumulation of commercial interests, cultural segregation, and public assumptions since the 1920s—can help broaden the range of makers and consumers of this music, as well as invite to this field student-musicians of all cultural and racial backgrounds.

Redefining Bluegrass Music in College

Ted Lehmann, a well-known columnist for bluegrass music and the bluegrass experience, has been a skeptic of bluegrass performance studies programs in higher education. In the opening statement of his 2017 column “Bluegrass Goes to College, But Should It?,” he firmly defines bluegrass as “a musical genre that

12. Elizabeth A. Carlson, “Preface” to *North Carolina String Music Masters: Old-Time and Bluegrass Legends* (Charleston: The History Press, 2016), 10.

13. See Elizabeth Catte, *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia* (Cleveland: Belt Publishing, 2018), 35–38; and Emily Satterwhite, “Intro to Appalachian Studies: Navigating Myths of Appalachian Exceptionalism,” in *Appalachia in the Classroom: Teaching the Region*, 3–32.

14. This view of Appalachia dates back to the 1700s when Thomas Jefferson succeeded in making the “Agrarian Myth” by associating Appalachia with the American dream of freedom and equality. For more details, see Satterwhite, “Intro to Appalachian Studies.”

15. George E. Lewis sees black and white musical practices as “historically emergent rather than ethnically essential, thereby accounting for the reality of transcultural and transracial communication” between performers of different ethnic backgrounds. See Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996), 93.

grew out of white working-class America.”¹⁶ Especially drawing on the portrait of the region from J. D. Vance’s best-selling memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), he idealizes the struggles of the people as the source of their strength and conflates the people of Appalachia with the essence of American values. Lehmann views postsecondary schools’ engagement with bluegrass as an elitist challenge to its perceived authenticity and essentialism. For some of his readers, bluegrass will likely remain white, “tribal” music rather than “popular” music for all, but Lehmann’s opinions are in effect outmoded to the mission of the bluegrass community represented by the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA),¹⁷ an institution that promotes diversity and closer engagement with the public educational system.

Rather than a “white” and “tribal” tradition, bluegrass is, according to Robert Cantwell, “a musical synthesis in which diverse folk and popular traditions, sacred and secular, black and white, and urban and rural, combined to form an altogether new strain of American music.”¹⁸ In this process of amalgamation, black musicians were not, and are not, mere “influences” on their white peers—and thereby obscured from view and aesthetically suspect—but have had, and continue to have, a vital role in creating the music’s unique sound and style.¹⁹ In restoring this view in both scholarship and pedagogy, the paucity of information on the diverse history of bluegrass becomes a challenge. Much of black bluegrass music was neither culturally institutionalized nor amply documented due to the commercially-motivated association of bluegrass with whiteness and its oral transmission.

The poetic concept of “Affrilachian” (a portmanteau of Appalachian, African, and American) provides a guiding light for teaching black old-time and bluegrass music in a historico-cultural context. Using the concept for a discussion of the music in tandem with poetry helps students assess African American old-time and bluegrass music’s different sound and style on its own

16. Ted Lehmann, “Bluegrass Goes to College, But Should It?” *The Journal of Roots Music: No Depression* (July 5, 2017), <https://www.nodepression.com/bluegrass-goes-to-college-but-should-it/>. Several authors, including Nick Roll and Jocelyn Neal, have since released their thoughtful responses. See Nick Roll, “Examining Bluegrass’s Move from Hollers to University Halls,” *Insider Higher ED* (July 13, 2017), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/07/13/examining-bluegrass%E2%80%99s-move-hollers-university-halls>; and Jocelyn Neal, “Should Bluegrass Go to College? Yes,” OUP Blog (September 17, 2017), <https://blog.oup.com/2017/09/reflections-on-country-and-bluegrass/>.

17. IBMA lists “diversity and inclusiveness” as one of its seven key values. For more information, see the website of International Bluegrass Music Association, <https://ibma.org/about>.

18. Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), xi.

19. Pamela Foster, *My Country: The African Diaspora’s Country Music Heritage* (Nashville: My Country, 1998), quoted in “Introduction: Country Music and Racial Formation,” in *Hidden in the Mix*, 1.

terms and according to its own musical logic and value system. In so doing, the students can not only learn about Appalachian African American music but also help find it a better place in our historical narrative. With these goals, I have drawn from Affrilachian history, literature, and music and, following Douglass Seaton's primary mode of presentation,²⁰ formed my pedagogical strategy around the notion that we must understand the concerned music's own motivating set of ideas and values. Below I summarize the Affrilachian aesthetic and the key elements of Affrilachian music, and then describe how I teach Affrilachian music in the music history survey.

The Affrilachian Aesthetic

The term "Affrilachian" was coined by the Kentucky native and writer Frank X Walker and has become a style marker for a poetics that gives writers of African descent from Appalachia (and many others) voice, identity, and a meaningful place in literature.²¹ Struck by the absence of African Americans in the old dictionary definition of "Appalachian," Walker's coinage of the term has been a constructive contribution to his community. Indeed, Affrilachia has emerged as a compelling cultural consciousness and arts movement similar to the 1920s Harlem Renaissance and the 1960s Black Arts Movement. It serves a significant backdrop for reconstructing African American literature, history, social studies, and music of the Southern mountain region. Especially given that there were no "good old days" in American history for African Americans, as there are for whites, Affrilachia offers an alternative to the folk revivals in white counterculture since World War II.²² The Affrilachian aesthetic teaches, as Walker puts it, "a collective commitment to make the invisible visible, to redefine the literary landscape of the region as one that is more diverse than mass media portrays it as."²³ It helps illuminate individual experiences and the regional culture and history in Appalachia. Simultaneously, it inspires many

20. Douglass Seaton, *Ideas and Styles in the Western Musical Tradition*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), xv.

21. Frank X Walker, *Affrilachia* (Lexington: Old Cover Press, 2000). For more details about Walker's experiences as a writer of the Appalachian region, as well as his writing community, see "The Affrilachian Poets," <http://www.theaffrilachianpoets.com> (accessed April 14, 2019). *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 3rd ed., defines "Affrilachian" as "An African American who is native to or resides in Appalachia." See <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/affrilachian> (accessed April 14, 2019).

22. Tony Thomas, "Why Black Folks Don't Fiddle," Bluegrass West! Blog, entry posted January 29, 2007, https://www.bluegrasswest.com/ideas/why_black.htm (accessed May 12, 2019).

23. Walker's email message to Theresa L. Burriss on March 17, 2003. See Burriss, "From Harlem Home to Affrilachia: Teaching the Literary Journey," in *Appalachia in the Classroom: Teaching the Region*, 213.

others to define themselves, their families, and their communities, using their own philosophical and aesthetic lenses, and to document their stories and cultural traditions with a sense of responsibility.²⁴

In music history courses, especially under the current political climate since the 2016 election, the concept of Affrilachia can help spark and guide discussions on reevaluating the region, its people, and their realities. This inclusive mode of presentation provides an important point of departure from conventional, “Western” standards. Demanding continuous interpretation and negotiation between questions of cultural and political equalities in history, literature, and music,²⁵ the Affrilachian aesthetic in music history pedagogy inspires us to refuse a nostalgia for the past and the constant justification of it within an ideal of “refinement”: that is, the removal of unwanted elements from what is claimed to be “music” or “art” by a select few. Delivering itself from the norm, “the space of whiteness” in George E. Lewis’s term,²⁶ the Affrilachian aesthetic leads us to see “raw” and “uncut” as a powerful, valuable sound, voice, and identity. It encourages us to teach topics that have been left out of Western or pan-European music history, such as folk song and dance, amateur music making, performance, improvisation, unwritten tradition, and music of non-European descent. Beginning to learn folk song alongside art song, social dance alongside ballet, and jazz improvisation alongside indeterminacy, our students will have a fuller understanding of music history, its affective and socializing power, and will have more influences for their own creative music making.

Key Elements of Affrilachian Music

The signature hard-driving sound of bluegrass music owes much to its instrumentation, of which I discuss here the banjo, guitar, and fiddle, as well as their playing styles, with particular reference to Affrilachian styles. The five-string banjo often symbolizes Appalachia and its people, and is overwhelmingly associated with whiteness in modern public consciousness. To the surprise of many students, however, the banjo itself, with four strings, originated in Africa, most likely West Africa. Cecelia Conway’s article “Black Banjo Songsters in Appalachia” and her earlier monograph, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study for Folk Traditions*, detail the history of the banjo, its arrival in North America no later than 1740, and its subsequent dissemination through the

24. Burriss, “From Harlem Home to Affrilachia,” 214.

25. See Shauna M. Morgan, *Preface: “25 Years of Revolutionary Art: Cultural Cartography and the Expanding Landscape of Affrilachian Poetics” to Black Bone: 25 Years of the Affrilachian Poets*, ed. Bianca Lynne Spriggs and Jeremy Paden (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2018).

26. Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950,” 100.

Upland South, including Tennessee, West Virginia, and western Kentucky, as well as travelling further down to New Orleans's Congo Square in the late 1820s.²⁷ Until about 1830, when whites began to adopt and popularize it in the minstrel show, blacks were the only ones who played the banjo for their family, friends, and white audiences on plantations, primarily for occasions that involved dancing.²⁸

Most of my students regard the banjo as a string instrument equivalent to the ukulele, mandolin, and guitar. Multi-instrumentalists in Folk and Bluegrass Studies often can play them all or at least have tried all as if they were of the same family. Much of what they know as the sound of the banjo (its twangy, bright, metallic timbre and the rolling texture it creates) is from the five-string banjo adapted by white players during the development of minstrelsy. In white tradition, the banjo is a string, melodic instrument, but Robert Cantwell takes issue with this white adaptation of the instrument and insists that the banjo is visibly a drum, a drum with strings, without much capability of sustaining a tone. The top, fifth-thumb string, though known as "short-drone," does not function as a drone string in black tradition; it does not drone, but it rather "chimes," "tolls," "peals," or "rings like a bell."²⁹ This sound of chiming, along with that of beating the body of the instrument and its lower strings, was meant to provide a rhythmic, percussive background for music, dance, and song, resonating far more with an African than a European character.³⁰

Although most African American banjo pickers play the five-string banjo today, the downstroking playing-style, also known as "thumping," "knocking," "mountain frailing," "rapping," or "clawhammer," originated with players from Africa and continues to remain a distinctively Affrilachian style.³¹ This picking style, combining a percussive melody with syncopated or "off-beat phrasing" layers, articulates the underlying principles of African, more precisely West African music.³²

27. Cecelia Conway, "Black Banjo Songsters in Appalachia," *Black Music Research Journal* 23, no. 1/2 (2003): 149–66; and see idem., *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study for Folk Traditions* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995). E. P. Christy, a banjo player and leader of one of the most famous minstrel troupes, heard the banjo in New Orleans's Congo Square. See Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 91.

28. "Cecelia Conway: A Brief History of the African Banjo/Black Fiddle Players," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YF4cjGIV2OM> (accessed April 14 2019).

29. Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 103. See also Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje, "The (Mis)Representation of African American Music: The Role of the Fiddle," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 10, no. 1 (2016), 25.

30. A. M. Jones, *Studies in African Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 206, quoted in Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 103.

31. Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 93.

32. Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 93–95. The African American musicologist and composer Olly Wilson sees that West African and Afro-American musical cultures share a number

In demonstrating the difference between black and white banjo-picking styles—or in other words between clawhammer style and three-finger, Scruggs style—three different renditions of the popular ballad “John Henry”³³ would serve as good examples: Joe and Odell Thompson’s old-time string band, Bill Monroe’s bluegrass, and Snuffy Jenkins’s banjo solo without vocal.³⁴ Each version is distinctive not only in the picking style but also in the treatment of the melody and the rhythm and texture created by improvisation. The Thompsons’ Affrilachian old-time banjo-fiddle string band version has an unpolished sound with a constantly pounding banjo, a wailing fiddle, and a casually added vocal line hovering over the two instruments. Students find the resulting syncopated rhythm, heterophonic texture, and unconstrained manner of expression unique and intriguing. Monroe’s bluegrass version, on the other hand, produces a still unassuming but more organized pairing of banjo and fiddle alongside the other instruments of the ensemble. The Monroe version is melodically rolling and rhythmically syncopated, but emotionally smoothed-up and in a much faster tempo. Unlike these two, Jenkins, an early proponent of the three-finger style predating Earl Scruggs and a white practitioner of the clawhammer style, focuses on the interworking of the tune itself rather than the narration of the story. Combining the ringing quality of the instrument with melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic possibilities created by his fluid technique, this performance features the banjo as an independent instrument. Jenkins’s integration of melody and countermelody, and pinging and rolling, demonstrates the interconnectedness of Affrilachian and Appalachian music.

of common musical characteristics. See Olly Wilson, “The Significance of the Relationship between Afro-American Music and West African Music,” *Black Perspective in Music* 2, no. 1 (1974), 16, quoted in Tony Thomas, “Why African Americans Put the Banjo Down,” in *Hidden in the Mix*, 146. The “off-beat phrasing” is DjéDjé’s words. See, Jacqueline Cogdell DjéDjé, “The (Mis)Representation of African American Music,” 25.

33. John Henry was a young Virginia convict who came to be a steel-driver on the Chesapeake & Ohio (C&O) railway and died working on one of the most dangerous enterprises of the time, the first rail route, one-mile Lewis Tunnel through the Appalachian Mountains. He must have been a hero of trackliners, in that there are dozens of versions of the ballad and two hundred recorded versions of the song of John Henry, ranging from blues, through country and bluegrass, to folk. His death remains a mystery, but the symbolic representation of Henry as a hard worker with notable sexual prowess has been important politically, socially, and musically in both white and black cultures throughout American history. For more details, see Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin’ Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

34. *Old Time Music from the North Carolina Piedmont: Joe and Odell Thompson*, CD, released on October 1, 1995 (Global Village Music, 2007); *The Music of Bill Monroe: from 1936 to 1994*, CD Box Set, released on July 19, 1994 (MCA Nashville Records, 1994); and *American Banjo: Three-Finger and Scruggs*, CD, released in 1957 and 1990 (Smithsonian Folkways Records, 1990). In the last recording, Jenkins features two versions of “John Henry” on Tracks 12 and 15. Both are similar in style and sound, but my focused reference is the second version on Track 15.

The guitar's better resonance and chordal quality had replaced the banjo in black folk culture by the late nineteenth century, and the clawhammer style gradually shaped the thumbpicking style of the guitar.³⁵ Against the myth that folk/country guitar belongs to white, American, cowboy culture, this thumb-picking or thumb style is credited to the African American multi-instrumentalist Arnold Shultz (1886–1931). His thumb-style influenced a long lineage of modern guitarists from Ike Everly, through Kennedy Jones, Mose Rager, and Merle Travis (with his “Travis” picking style), to Chet Atkins.³⁶ Additionally, Shultz played with the Monroe brothers for square dances in the 1920s, and Shultz's sound and musicianship served as a crucial model during Bill Monroe's formative years.³⁷

As a counterpart to the black banjo and picking style, black fiddling also presents students with an alternative sound and playing style. Different from white fiddling, which is frequently described as “smooth,” “clear,” or “notey,” black fiddling tends to involve “rough,” “scraping,” “sawing,” and “jerky” sounds and playing techniques.³⁸ R. P. Christeson describes the style of Bill Driver (1881–1985) with the words such as “rough” and “vigorous.” With regard to the fiddle playing of Joe and Odell Thompson, the folklorist Alan Jabbour and the banjo player Tommy Thompson, in their conversations with Conway, agree that black fiddling incorporates seemingly less organized rhythmic patterns with “moaned and wailing notes” in a heterogeneously interwoven texture.³⁹ Black fiddling displays a particular sense of timing and disposition of rhythmic forces originating from African dances that are under “separate laws of motion from white music,” according to the banjo scholar Tony Thomas.⁴⁰

35. Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 93–95.

36. Erika Brady, “Contested Origins: Arnold Shultz and the Music of Western Kentucky,” in *Hidden in the Mix*, 106–7.

37. Charles Wolfe, “Rural Black String Band Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 10, no. 1 (1990), 32, quoted in Jim Rooney, *Rossmen: Bill Monroe and Muddy Waters* (New York: Dial Press, 1971).

38. Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje, “The (Mis)Representation of African American Music,” 13. For more details about black fiddling, see also Alan Jabbour, “Fiddle Music,” in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Jan Harold Brunvand (New York: Garland, 1996); Paul F. Wells, “Fiddling as an Avenue of Black-White Musical Interchange,” *Black Music Research Journal* 23, no. 1/2 (Spring-Autumn, 2003): 135–47; and Charles Wolfe, “Rural Black String Band Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 10 (1990): 32–35. For Bill Livers's music, see Guthrie T. Meade, John Harrod, and Mark Wilson, *Traditional Fiddle Music of Kentucky, vol. 2: Along the Kentucky River*, Rounder CD 0377, 1997.

39. Cecelia Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*, 13–15, 11n. According to Conway, the information was gathered from her conversations with Alan Jabbour and Tommy Thompson.

40. Tony Thomas, “Why African Americans Put the Banjo Down,” in *Hidden in the Mix*, 146.

The instructor must be careful not to oversimplify Blackness as a distinction between Africanness and Europeanness located in a few specific elements or traits, however. As Sule Greg Wilson, Olly Wilson, and Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje warn, the conventional binary belief that “Africa contributed rhythm and Europe melody to what became known as ‘American’ fiddle music” is misleading: “there are many musical traditions in Africa that can be described as melodic just as European culture is not completely devoid of musicking that emphasizes rhythm.”⁴¹ As DjeDje has pointed out, this simplistic view is one of the repercussions resulting from cultural practices and music marketing strategies set in place during the time of slavery that played up the difference between black and white music in America. The segregation of black and white styles has continued because of its convenience, and we have failed to embrace the actual syncretic stylistic history of black and white practices, nor have we updated information about America’s diverse musical history in public education.⁴²

Teaching Narrative, Repertoire, and Class Application

I have explored the early history of bluegrass music in courses for both music majors and non-music majors with a particular sensitivity to similarities as well as differences between black and white musical practices. This bluegrass/Affrilachian unit primarily takes two 75-minute or three 50-minute class sessions. While the scope and depth are slightly different in the courses for music majors and non-music majors, the multidisciplinary nature and contemporariness of the topic—involving music, literature, and political and social issues—create a broad range of discussions, participatory activities, and various learning points from music-historical facts to moral responsibility in both groups of students. At the completion of the unit, previously unexamined assumptions about the Appalachian region and its music, whether based on negative stereotypes or positive romantic views, are reexamined. Our roles as musicians, listeners, and consumers in current music history can be reflected on in light of this study.

The basic outline of the three 50-minute class sessions is as follows: first, I assess the students’ perceptions about country, bluegrass, and Appalachian music followed by an overview of bluegrass music and its stylistic characteristics; second, I introduce the concept of Affrilachia and the Affrilachian aesthetic

41. Sule Greg Wilson, Review of *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study in Folk Tradition* by Cecelia Conway (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), *Banjo Newsletter* 23, no. 1 (August 1996): 7–10, quoted in Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje, “The (Mis)Representation of African American Music,” 15.

42. Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje, “The (Mis)Representation of African American Music,” 24.

in literature and music; and third, we study the key elements of Appalachian music with a focus on repertoire identification.

As an introductory activity on the first day of the unit, I hand out a short questionnaire that asks the students to define “country,” “bluegrass,” and “Appalachian” music, according to their own knowledge and experiences. Following J. Peter Burkholder, I ask the students throughout the semester to define each musical style we study by:

- the people who created, performed, heard, and paid for this music,
- the choices they made and why they made them,
- what they valued most in the music, and
- how these choices reflect both tradition and innovation.⁴³

This schema helps students avoid profiling each musical style immediately in terms of race, class, and gender; however, we soon discover that our definitions do primarily come from conventional, commercially-motivated and racially-charged associations with these musics.

In response, most of the students frankly say that they do not know much about country, bluegrass, or Appalachian music, or have not had time to explore them either inside or outside an academic setting. They do, however, often point out that Appalachian music seems to belong to a white, rural, lower working-class community in the Southern Mountain region and thus that it is folk music and one kind of authentic music in America. Some students who are from that region or involved in folk and bluegrass ensembles bring up the commercial labeling of the regional music (“hillbilly”), candidly commenting that in reality “hillbilly” is a better term, pointing to the ongoing issue of opioid/substance addiction in the community. Other students who focus their studies primarily on classical music naively remark that Appalachia seems like a peaceful and uncontaminated place, defined by the values of family, hard work, Christianity, and patriotism. These views are influenced by representations of the region in mass media.

After sharing what they know about country, bluegrass, and Appalachian music, the students examine stylistic characteristics and varieties of bluegrass by watching video clips of a tribute concert to the late “Father of Bluegrass Music,” which was held at the Raymond Auditorium, the home of the Grand Ole Opry, Nashville, Tennessee, forty-seven hours after Bill Monroe died on

43. J. Peter Burkholder, “Changing the Stories We Tell: Repertoires, Narratives, Materials, Goals, and Strategies in Teaching Music History,” *College Music Symposium* 49/50 (2009/2010), 121; see also Burkholder’s article “The Value of a Music History Survey,” this *Journal* 5, no. 2 (2015), 63.

September 9, 1996.⁴⁴ Bluegrass music traditionally involves five acoustic string instruments (fiddle, banjo, mandolin, guitar, and double bass), high-pitched vocals, a primarily happy-go-lucky affect, a breakneck tempo, and melodies borrowed from spirituals, the blues, and folk music. In the video, the musicians attempt to demonstrate with their prowess bluegrass's great evolution and diversification since its inception in the 1940s, retracing the pathway from traditional story-telling with a high lonesome voice in a family-like group setting, through varied ensemble types, to a purely instrumental solo with dazzling virtuosity and improvisation comparable to that of jazz. The students note, nevertheless, that based on the evidence in the video it is still apparently white music: the musicians on the stage and the fans in the audience were almost all white. Before the students can come to the conclusion that whiteness is part of its tradition, I point out that country music on the whole has been artificially marketed as white music and that it has been culturally constructed and normalized as such, and therefore we have an intellectual and moral responsibility to challenge this divisive construct.

The second lesson begins with reading Walker's poem "Affrilachia"⁴⁵ in class and answering questions on the likely time, place, and theme of the poem.⁴⁶ As the students share their findings from the poem, they understand that the protagonist of "Affrilachia" directs our attention to Blackness in Appalachia that is hidden in modern consciousness. The protagonist candidly opens the poem with his personal struggles with public images of his home, Kentucky, as homogenously white—images that ignore the presence of African Americans, including himself. Walker notes, "thoroughbred racing and hee haw are burdensome images for kentucky sons venturing beyond the mason-dixon." The students are perhaps too young to recognize all the metaphorically embedded titles of the long-running television series (such as *Hee Haw*, *The Dukes of Hazzard*, and *The Beverly Hillbillies*) that portrayed stereotypes of rural white folk as awkward in manner and backward in time. In fact, the theme songs of the latter two—the country-sounding "Good Ol' Boys" and the bluegrass-style

44. *The Legend Lives On: A Tribute to Bill Monroe*, DVD, produced and directed by Robert Swope (Nashville: A Sunrise International Production for Audium Records/KOCH Vision, 2003).

45. Frank X Walker, "Affrilachia," in *Affrilachia* (Lexington: Old Cover Press, 2000), 92–3.

46. As J. Peter Burkholder suggests, I provide a questionnaire sheet at the beginning of each class that asks about a piece of music, a short reading excerpt—taken from a historical document, recent article, or biography of musician—a list of musical terms, or political and cultural events and their approximate dates. Arriving at the class at least five minutes early, the students grab the sheet and start to answer the questions. They are encouraged to chat with their classmates or google terms, events, or dates they are not sure about. In so doing, they get their mind ready for the class topic and have their answers written for later class discussion. This daily activity has been effective in helping the students discipline themselves and engage in class discussion. See Burkholder, "Changing the Stories We Tell," 124–25.

“The Ballad of Jed Clampett,” respectively—reaffirmed the union of white mountaineers and country music in public consciousness. Taking issue with this type of longstanding media representation, Walker brings it to our attention that “some of the bluegrass is black,” pointing to the existence of Affrilachia and its people and culture in the Mountain region.

The interdisciplinary nature of Walker’s poetry—each poem is, I find, as musical as it is cultural and historical—leads the students to see that music is an important part of Affrilachian identity, through which the communities are identified, distinguished, and contested. Walker’s poem “Amazin’ Grace”⁴⁷ provides an eye-opening experience for my students, and they finally understand why Affrilachian identity matters in a study of American music. The sweet melody the slave-ship captain heard is neither the sound Walker wants to share with us, nor is it John Newton’s belated apology, but the noise of cracking, popping, and breaking bodies and souls of the hundreds of unidentified Africans under the deck. It is not the melody tuned to God’s grace but the outcry of human misery once real to too many in America’s past. It is not Newton’s “Amazing Grace,” but the enslaved blacks’ and now Walker’s “Amazin’ Grace.”

As I steer our discussion to the stylistic components of Affrilachian music, Walker’s poem “A Wake” beautifully summarizes what is distinctively Black and African American in the Mountain music. Pointing to a common reaction to grief in his community that is more personalized and directly expressed, Walker describes that black music is not “just quiet respectful organized sobbing” but “to moan and wail,” not “nice passive latin chanting” but “to reach deep inside,” “scream,” and “get up and fight.”⁴⁸ Walker’s sensitive choice of the verb forms used for black mourners leads us to differentiate the quality, sentiment, and spirit of black music, commonly located in the present, in reality, and in action, and expressed in a direct, often blunt manner. The resulting improvised sound and heterogeneous action resist being measured by the reticence of European Western music.

The last lesson of the unit focuses on the participatory experience of Affrilachian music by listening to, humming, and tapping along. The questionaire of the day asks about Joe and Odell Thompson’s fiddle-banjo string band rendition of “John Henry,” which plays as they enter the classroom.⁴⁹ Without giving the students a song title or genre designation, students exercise their active listening skills to identify the performing force(s), manner of delivery, timbre, texture, rhythm/meter, melody, harmony, form, content, affect, and venue. They are also expected to write down any other findings or reactions to

47. Frank X Walker, “Amazin’ Grace,” in *Affrilachia*, 59–61.

48. Frank X Walker, “A Wake,” in *Affrilachia*, 62–64.

49. *Old Time Music from the North Carolina Piedmont: Joe and Odell Thompson*, CD, released on October 1, 1995 (Global Village Music, 2007).

the music. After more than five minutes of repeated listening, we go through our answers, review most of the key elements of Affrilachian music—including clawhammer-style banjo picking, black fiddling, and syncopation—and discuss in particular how the song relates to the examination of Walker’s musical poems from the previous lesson.

The unusual sound of banjo, fiddle, and voice encourages the students to find out more about the music. They quickly detect the heterogeneous timbre of the three forces working together under the principles of percussiveness and rawness, and the heterophonically interwoven and highly syncopated layers. As for the music’s dominating lively dance affect, we investigate more about an African American’s sense of syncopation and linear approach to it. Instructor resources, and possible reading assignments, include Robert Cantwell’s chapter “Banjo: African Rhythms and the Bluegrass Beat” in *Bluegrass Breakdown* and Paul F. Wells’s article “Fiddling as an Avenue of Black-White Musical Interchange.” Both readings provide thorough information about African American syncopation and fiddling with their close relationship to the steps of “patting juba.”⁵⁰ Alan Lomax’s examination of black traits in fiddling and their association with Tommy Jarrell’s playing style in the film *Appalachian Journey* is also a good source for a visual demonstration.⁵¹ Knowing about this different approach to syncopation can help dissuade students from attempting to listen for a vertical synchronization of rhythm. Rather, they find that each of the performers has his or her own off-beat phrasing, resulting in the grouping of three and two notes, respectively, in a likely duple metrical framework: ♪♪ ♪. This basic rhythmic figure has survived from indigenous African practice, heard in whole or part throughout the Americas, particularly in the Caribbean.⁵² In North American black music, it has become the characteristic form of syncopation underlying blues, old-time fiddle, minstrel banjo, cakewalk, piano ragtime, and jazz styles.⁵³

By translating this pattern into the rhythmic solmization syllables “taka-mi tadi,”⁵⁴ we sing and clap this rhythm repeatedly before listening to the music

50. Robert Cantwell, “Banjo: African Rhythms and the Bluegrass Beat,” in *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 110–13; and Paul F. Wells, “Fiddling as an Avenue of Black-White Musical Interchange,” *Black Music Research Journal* 23, no. 1/2 (Spring-Autumn, 2003): 135–47.

51. *Appalachian Journey* is one of five films made from footage that Alan Lomax shot between 1978 and 1985 for the PBS American Patchwork series (1991). Narrated by Lomax himself, it offers songs, dances, stories, and religious rituals of the Southern Appalachians. For more details and the transcript of the film, see “Folkstreams,” www.folkstream.net.

52. John Storm Roberts, *Black Music of Two Worlds: African, Caribbean, Latin, and African American Traditions* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), 164, quoted in Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 102.

53. Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 102.

54. Richard Hoffman, William Pelto, and John W. White, “Takadimi: A Beat-Oriented System of Rhythm Pedagogy,” *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 10 (1996): 7–30.

again. As the students swing through the simultaneous process of tension and release, they internalize the African American syncopation, and the classroom fills with an old-time, square dance vibe. For further listening (and as examples for later writing assignments), I recommend the Thompsons' other fiddle-banjo tunes, including "Georgia Buck," "Pumpkin Pie," and "Donna Got a Rambling Mind." The Carolina Chocolate Drops' rendition of "John Henry"⁵⁵ is another example that uses this rhythmic pattern, but at a breakneck speed and with improvisation typical of bluegrass music. They also have their own vocal style and explores a contemporary, upbeat rock-and-roll feel with the addition of a resonator guitar.

As we finish up our week-long journey of old-time music, I include the Carolina Chocolate Drops as an exemplary model of contemporary musician-ship. The group is a banjo-fiddle based string band that demonstrates old-time music's African roots through a modern interpretation. Mentored by the late Joe Thompson, this group revived the black string-band tradition, while incorporating blues, jazz, and folk balladry. Although each of the founding members now actively pursues a solo career, the group's mission has been to demonstrate "the central role African-Americans played in shaping our nation's popular music from its beginnings more than a century ago."⁵⁶ The Carolina Chocolate Drops' presence in the music history classroom inspires the students, regardless of their racial and cultural backgrounds. Upon listening to the Carolina Chocolate Drops' lively rendition of "Don't Get Trouble in Your Mind,"⁵⁷ the students realize that the old-time music conceived centuries ago can sound as cool as the most recent favorites of their playlists.

55. *Carolina Chocolate Drops & Joe Thompson*, CD, released on May 26, 2009 (Music Maker, 2009).

56. Michael Hill, "The Carolina Chocolate Drops," <http://www.carolinachocolatedrops.com/band/about.html> (accessed April 14, 2019). For more details about each member's current pursuit and mission, see "Rhiannon Giddens and What Folk Music Means," *The New Yorker*, May 13, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/05/20/rhiannon-giddens-and-what-folk-music-means>; about Dom Flemons, interview by Ann Powers, NPR World Café Nashville, April 12, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/05/682318409/dom-flemons-presents-a-new-image-of-the-american-cowboy>; and about Justin Robinson, <http://first-avenue.com/performer/justin-robinson>.

57. About the tune, Rhiannon Giddens writes, "Justin [Robinson] learned this from the Old Hat Records' release 'Music from the Lost Provinces.' The Lost Provinces are a very isolated plateau in North Carolina's far northwestern corner, west of the Blue Ridge Mountains, with easier access to Virginia and Tennessee than to the rest of the state. This region nurtured a great wealth of local talent, including White fiddler Frank Blevins and his guitar-playing brother Edd who formed the Tar Heel Ramblers with neighbor Fred Miller on banjo, and recorded this song for Columbia in the spring of 1928. Barely 17 at the time, Frank Blevins borrowed this melody from a popular folk song, 'Mollie and Tenbrooks.'" See the liner notes to *Carolina Chocolate Drops: Heritage* (Dixiefrog Records, 2007), 9.

Student Learning Outcomes

At the completion of the unit on Affrilachian/Appalachian music, just as with other units of the survey, I expect that the students will have a base of knowledge and skills with which to approach the music and to continue to develop outside the classroom. However, what I really expect from them through this case study is that they challenge themselves to constantly interrogate the ways we tell our stories, and how we categorize, represent and misrepresent objects and figures in music history. As I often remind the students, as we teach, learn, compose, perform, and listen to music, we *write* history together. Music history should no longer be a single first-person story of the visible, vocal, and powerful, but should be a collection of many stories that grant places not only to the dominant but also to the seemingly invisible, silent, and powerless. Music history should neither be filled with museum pieces sitting in a textbook nor be crafted by a single glorious theme of “the experimental.” Music history should involve many music makers and buyers from many spheres of music, if not all, through a diverse range of repertoires and approaches.⁵⁸ This way, we can narrow the gap between people’s lived (and living) repertoires and the historical canon, and between an ever-changing musical world and postsecondary music education.

As I introduce Walker’s poetry and the Carolina Chocolate Drops’ music to my students, moreover, I hope that these two models will motivate them to find their future niche. The goal that I have for my students is larger and more expansive than simply equipping them with knowledge and skills for employment; I find that the purpose of higher education lies in building good character and depth of understanding. As Bethany Zecher Sutton argues, skepticism of higher education often causes us to lose sight of the higher goals of postsecondary school as “preparation for citizenship, civic engagement, contributions to society, and community leadership.” We focus instead on “employability” and look for “a tangible ‘return on investment.’”⁵⁹ Sutton argues that education is “more than knowledge of a particular field, training in a discipline, or even achievement of certain learning outcomes and critical skills.” As Johnnetta Cole puts it, the purpose of higher education is to learn “scholarship,” “service,” “creativity,” “matters of the mind,” and “matters of the heart and the soul.”⁶⁰

58. As an example of the recent scholarly efforts to expand the boundaries of music history with relevancy, see John J. Sheinbaum, *Good Music: What It Is & Who Gets to Decide* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019).

59. Bethany Zecher Sutton, “Higher Education’s Public Purpose,” *Association of American Colleges & Universities* (June 20, 2016), <https://www.aacu.org/leap/liberal-education-nation-blog/higher-educations-public-purpose> (accessed April 14, 2019).

60. Johnnetta Cole, “What’s the Value of Higher Education?” *Yale Insights* (April 11, 2018), <https://insights.som.yale.edu/insights/what-s-the-value-of-higher-education> (accessed April 14, 2019).

In pursuit of these goals, music-major students should think outside of their own self-interests and be aware of issues that matter for others. With a better awareness of marginalized sectors of America's music and its history, the students will ideally seek to find ways to contribute to making a better world, while reminding themselves, again, that their purpose as music students in higher education is not limited to establishing themselves as competent, working individuals, but nurturing themselves to be successful members of a society that creates music, or anything, in harmony with their peers.

Conclusion

In teaching the undergraduate music history sequence, our job is to make it more current and relevant to our students' time and place, and to the changing culture of their own postsecondary music school. Reflecting our musical world, the music history classroom should embrace diverse musical spheres and voices. As bluegrass music enters higher education, we not only have a responsibility to teach technical performance skills, but we also have an ethical and intellectual responsibility to teach the music's history accurately and inclusively. This effort is not meant to diminish the history of European art-music traditions, but to make the whole curriculum richer and fuller for our students who no longer identify themselves as European descendants but as "Americans" with more diverse ethnic and cultural heritages, experiences, and influences than ever before. In this intellectual and pedagogical framework, American music is neither an outsider nor a late-comer to "Western," European art music but, with its pluralistic styles and forms, plays a central role in a new narrative of music history for future generations.