

A brief history of Classic Banjo style banjo.

The banjo is an instrument of African origin that became popularized in the USA with the start of the travelling “Black Face Minstrel Shows” during the early 1800s.

Almost immediately upon their creation, the American minstrel shows travelled to the UK, bringing the five-string banjo with them, in what was possibly the first example of a genuinely American musical phenomenon influencing the British musical scene.

The first American banjoist to be heard in Britain is believed to be Joel Walker Sweeney, who was also probably the first white man to play the five-string banjo in America, having learned the technique from slaves on his father's farm in Virginia. He traveled on his own and with circuses throughout the Southern USA as a blackface banjo player and singer. He was extremely important in popularizing the banjo in the United States and in Britain when travelling with the “Sands Great American Circus”.

Another American who brought a new "guitar" style of banjo playing to England in the 1860s was Charles E. Dobson who joined Sam Hague's “Georgia Minstrels” in London in 1867, and also toured the provinces. Dobson was a skilled player playing many magnificent arrangements.

In 1878 Horace Weston visited England. Weston was the first African American banjoist to achieve a significant reputation. He worked as a stage musician in the UK throughout the 1880s.

Weston originally played with minstrel shows such as “Buckley's Serenaders” and the “Georgia Coloured Minstrels”. His popularity became enormous, and his stage work and private engagements helped separate the banjo from its normal place in the minstrel shows.

The new "Guitar Style" technique ultimately changed the nature of banjo playing in both countries. A whole new repertoire developed, including many arrangements of popular and classical music. No longer would the banjo be confined to minstrel jigs, reels or as accompaniment to the singer.

This new level of artistic performance had begun to separate the old folk minstrel style from a new "Classic Style" of playing.

In 1881 three American banjoists, E. M. Hall and the brothers James and George Bohee travelled to perform in the UK. Hall is said to have been the first to play banjo solos with orchestral accompaniment without blacking his face. He and the Bohee Brothers were credited with raising the status of the banjo as a solo instrument and were described as the finest banjo soloists ever to play in England.

The Bohee Brothers decided to stay in England and James became a banjo teacher. He gave banjo lessons to The Prince of Wales, who was soon to become King Edward VII. Maybe as a result of this, the banjo became the craze of high society in England.

Around this time in both the USA and England many banjo clubs and orchestras were formed and it was rare to find a major city or institution without its own banjo orchestra.

A particularly British phenomenon early in the 1890s that helped to boost the instrument's popularity, was the formation of a troupe of banjo performers dressed in Pierrot costumes and with white face makeup.

Started by banjo teacher Clifford Essex the "Clifford Essex Pierrots" were invited to play for the Prince of Wales and went on to become immensely popular touring the country with their banjo shows.

Many of the big name professional banjo players of the "Classic Banjo" era played with the Pierrots. The greatest of British banjo players and the most prolific composer was Joe Morley who played with the Pierrots for thirteen years. He is to this day the most highly regarded of all Classic Banjo composers. There were many other fine banjoists recording at the time and Olly Oakley is probably one of the most famous.

At the beginning of the 20th Century in America the top names of Classic Style were probably:
Parke Hunter, Vess Ossman, Alfred Farland and Fred Van Eps,

In 1897 Parke Hunter and his banjo partner Cadwallader Mays travelled to the UK and played the most spectacular renditions of the classics. They also played one the first performances of a composition written in "rag time", a style where the music is written in syncopated rhythms. This "ragtime" music was new to the UK and was just starting to be recorded in America. Ragtime was soon to become very popular, as it still is to this day.

Vess Ossman made two trips to the UK. Ossman was a virtuoso of Classic Style Banjo and his playing brought audiences to their feet. He played mainly Ragtime pieces, many of which became the most popular recordings of the time.

Alfred A. Farland, who championed the playing of Classical music on the banjo, made a visit to England around the turn of the century but despite his technical mastery of the pieces his performances were not well accepted. It appeared the music was just too "High Brow" for the banjo.

Often "Classic Style" is incorrectly called "Classical Style", a name that implies that only classical music is played on the instrument. The name "classic" is used to separate a more "Classically" presented style from that of the early

minstrel performers. The music played can be anything including popular, ragtime and even some classical compositions.

Of all the American Classic Style Banjoists my favourite has to be Fred Van Eps. His bright, rhythmic and lively playing encapsulates all that is "Classic Banjo".

From the 1920s, interest in and performances of classic banjo began to wane as the focus switched to Plectrum and Tenor Banjo playing as required by the big bands.

This change occurred much more gradually in England than in the United States. British banjo clubs and magazines have helped to preserve an interest in "Classic Style" playing. Most of the world's greatest players and composers since the 1920s to the modern day have been British.

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www.classic-banjo.ning.com

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