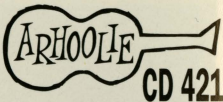


# MASTERS of the BANJO

*A National Tour of Traditional Banjo Styles*



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# Masters OF THE Banjo

Seleshe Damessae

Kirk Sutphin

Tony Ellis

Seamus Egan

Carroll Best

Will Keys

Ralph Stanley

WITH

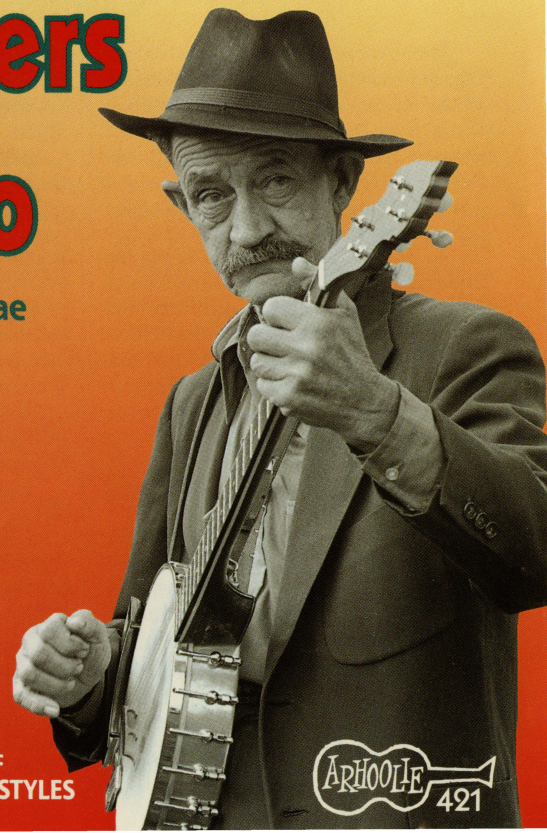
Laurie Lewis

Dudley Connell

Jimmy Trivette

& John Doyle

A NATIONAL TOUR OF  
TRADITIONAL BANJO STYLES





## CREDITS

These live performance digital recordings are from the acclaimed tour **Masters of the Banjo**, organized by the National Council for the Traditional Arts (1320 Fenwick Lane #200, Silver Spring, MD 20910; 301/565-0654). This tour is one of a series of tours celebrating virtuoso traditional musicians. It offers only a glimpse of the many ways the banjo is played. Styles include bluegrass, clawhammer, two-finger, Appalachian melodic, African *krar*, Irish tenor and an individual style. There are even two songs here that have no banjo accompaniment. They remind us that the banjo has been an ensemble instrument in North America for three centuries or longer, and that ensembles sometimes ask this most brash of instruments to be still.

*Cover photo:* 89 year old Willard Watson of Watauga County, North Carolina: banjoist, flatfoot dancer, timber man, mountain farmer, carpenter, toy maker, dependable neighbor and keeper of good jokes. His younger second cousin, Doc Watson, rode to many musical gatherings on Willard's back. Willard's companion for 68 years, Ora Watson, is an extraordinary quilt artist. This recording

is dedicated to Willard and Ora Watson with love and with respect. Photo was made by Jesse Winch at Galax, Virginia in 1972.

Recorded direct to DAT two track for the NCTA Archives by Steve Fisher. Digital edit by Dave Glasser at Airshow. Recording produced by Joe Wilson and Andy Wallace. Major tour support from the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund and the Folk Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts. Tour organization by Julia Olin. Tour director and MC, Andy Wallace. Tour producer, Joe Wilson.

Thanks to Kathy James, Sally Wilson Billiard, Larry MacBride, Bob Bell and Stephen Wade.

*Recording sites:* 1, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 18, 21, 23 and 24 at Montgomery County Community College, Blue Bell, PA, Nov. 14, 1993. No. 5, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20 and 22 at Smith Opera House, Geneva, NY, Nov. 11, 1993. No. 2 and 6 at the Grand Opera House, Wilmington, DE, Nov. 6, 1993. No. 7 and 25 at the Smith-Baker Center, Lowell, MA, Nov. 7, 1993. No. 8 and 26 at the Maryland Center for the Creative Arts, Annapolis, MD, Nov. 13, 1993. No. 4 at Baird Auditorium, Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., Nov. 12, 1993.

## MASTERS OF THE BANJO

**Seleshe Damessae** is a singer and performer on the *krar*, a six-string instrument which dates back to the ancient civilizations of the Nile. A native of Ethiopia, Seleshe learned the instrument from his father. He also spent four years studying the traditions of his people, the Azmari, in northern Ethiopia. The *krar* seems to be the oldest form of banjo still in use, but there's no way to be sure it is ancestor to the *banza* brought to colonial America. It is certainly related and it deepened and lengthened the context of this tour.

**Kirk Sutphin** is a young clawhammer style banjoist and fiddler from Walkertown, North Carolina. Kirk was reared in a family of traditional musicians well-known in this area which has been richly productive of great string band musicians during this century. While in his mid-teens he was fiddler and leader of the Old Hollow String Band,

a group much respected in these Blue Ridge foothills.

**Tony Ellis** is the son of a North Carolina old-time fiddler who learned banjo from his grandmother, who played clawhammer style. He learned Scruggs style in his teens and worked in Bill Monroe's band as a young man. After marriage he performed with local oldtime and bluegrass groups in Virginia and Ohio. Continuing to grow as a musician, Tony developed a solo personal style, a slowed down, deeply introspective and highly melodic way of playing. He is noted for his compositions; stunningly beautiful tunes that are a contribution to the future of the music. He is also heard here on fiddle and mandolin, and singing. Tony Ellis appears courtesy of Flying Fish Records, 1304 W. Schubert, Chicago, Ill. 60614.

**Seamus Egan** is a virtuoso player of the Irish tenor banjo. He is creating



a new and driving style influenced more by Irish uilleann piping than by previous banjoists. Born in Philadelphia, Seamus moved to County Mayo, Ireland with his family at age 4. He began playing at age 7 and soon mastered several instruments. By age 15 he had won all-Ireland championship titles on flute, whistle, banjo and mandolin. Now age 22, Seamus lives in New York and has his own band which performs nationally and internationally. Mr. Egan appears courtesy of Shanachie Records, 37 E. Clinton St., Newton, N.J. 07860.

**Laurie Lewis** of Berkeley, California, is a fiddler whose playing is filled with graceful turns and lilting phrases and she can turn up the heat when it is needed. A superb vocalist and songwriter, Laurie heads the *Grant Street* band, one of the best in bluegrass. Laurie has also performed with oldtime musicians for many years.

**Dudley Connell** is lead singer and guitarist for the *Johnson Mountain Boys*, a Maryland-based group of neo-traditionalists who stormed onto

bluegrass stages some fifteen years ago performing with a fire and verve not seen in bluegrass since its beginning years. Dudley has good connections to oldtime music through his West Virginia family.

Laurie Lewis and Dudley Connell both appear courtesy of Rounder Records (One Camp Street, Cambridge, Ma. 02140.)

**Carroll Best** of Clyde, North Carolina, developed an influential three-finger style that echoes the fiddle note for note during the 1940s and 1950s. He learned the rudiments of the style from his father, but he has made major contributions of his own. Carroll calls it "fiddle style," but a more common term is "melodic" as the fifth string is integrated into the melody to play such tunes as hornpipes. He uses an open-back banjo and does not use picks. Carroll worked on WLOS-TV in Asheville during the mid-1950s with the Morris Brothers band (who also gave first jobs to Earl Scruggs and Don Reno). He was a favorite of banjoists, but

didn't like the travel and went back to farming. Carroll Best accompanied by Kenny Baker, will soon have a recording available on County Records, Main Street, Floyd, Va. 24091.

**Will Keys** of Gray, Tennessee performs a two-finger up picking style that is notable for a graceful quality, unerring timing and a quality usually called "drive" even though most of Will's tunes are relatively slow. Will's playing is extraordinary to other players because it combines the elegance of the parlor styles of the last century with the rhythms of a dance musician.

**Ralph Stanley** is a legendary banjo player and singer, a pioneer of bluegrass whose music epitomizes the haunting "high lonesome sound." Ralph and his brother Carter grew up in southwestern Virginia and achieved fame as the Stanley Brothers during the 1950s. When Carter died in 1966 his quiet younger brother surprised their fans by continuing and expanding their tradition of emo-

tional singing and fine musicianship.

At a time when bluegrass and country music was becoming more urban and less emotional, Ralph introduced traditional Appalachian unaccompanied church singing to the sound and soon bands everywhere were singing *a cappella*. This and other injections of "Appalachian soul" into the music and his training of younger musicians have made Ralph a hero to those committed to the traditions of the banjo.

Ralph Stanley appears courtesy of Friedland Recording Co., Rt. 12, Asbury, WV 24916. His most recent recordings are **Saturday Night And Sunday Morning** and **Back To The Cross**.

**John Doyle** grew up in Dublin, Ireland, and is noted for his wonderfully energetic Celtic guitar style, rock-solid timing, innovative use of tunings and instant grasp of musical dimension. At the top of the heap in his trade, John lives in New York and performs most often with Seamus Egan.





*Front row (L-R) Ralph Stanley, Tony Ellis, Laurie Lewis, Will Keys. Back row (L-R) Seamus Egan, Jimmy Trivette, John Doyle, Seleshe Damessae, Carroll Best, Dudley Connell, Kirk Sutphin.*



**Jimmy Trivette** lives in Boone, North Carolina, and is the vocal leader and bassist in *Richocet*, a

bluegrass band that is much respected in the high part of the Blue Ridge.

## THE BANJO

No one knows exactly when the banjo came to North America, but there's no doubt about where it came from. Banjo-making skills were introduced by west Africans brought here to work on tobacco and sugar plantations. The instrument had existed in a bewildering array of forms in Africa for hundreds of years, and had moved across Africa from east to west.

According to John Rolfe (husband of Pocahontas), the first Africans were purchased from "a Dutch man-of-warr" at Jamestown, Virginia, "about the latter end of August" in 1619. This was 12 years after the founding of this first permanent English-speaking colony in North America. Africans were treated as indentured servants

during their first decades in colonial America. A major portion of the first European settlers were also indentured; they had sold their services for a period of years in order to buy passage to the New World.

No one knows even approximately when whites took up banjo playing. There is speculation, but guesses vary over a 200 year period from about 1620 to 1820.

The European fiddle and the African banjo met in the hands of black players in the Virginia Tidewater. It was the first American ensemble, the root of the root, the beginning of rock, country, jazz, bluegrass, blues and all the rest. It is clear from travellers' accounts that black fiddle and banjo play-

ers, sometimes with other rhythm performers, provided music for dancing in several areas of the Southeast for many generations.

Among historians to comment about black banjoists was President Thomas Jefferson who knew a tuning for the banjo and its African origins. Jefferson was a fiddler, as was his younger brother Randolph. Randolph is said to have performed with black players.

After 1800 the instrument began to be used by white comics who impersonated black banjoists, creating racist caricatures by using burnt cork to blacken their faces and by wearing ragged clothing. Some of these performers worked in early circus troupes.

A group of these self-styled "Ethiopian delineators" formed an ensemble, *The Virginia Minstrels*, in New York in 1843. They told jokes, sang comedy songs and performed on banjo, fiddle, hand drum and bones.

They set off the first international pop music fad, the so-called *minstrel era* which lasted until the end of the century. No other dominant popular music style has lasted as long as minstrelsy. (But rock and roll is getting close and only needs another twenty years.)

During the minstrel period an instrument that had been used by an underclass was adopted by elites. The new upper class players could afford fine instruments, so banjo construction improved and the instrument as we know it today was created.

As in all popular fads, material was left behind when minstrelsy passed. A part of that material is repertoire; many of the older banjo tunes have minstrel roots. Another part is the instrument; the fad spread the banjo to various folk populations who have put it to good use.

Almost everyone knows the wonderful North Carolina Piedmont folk style that Earl Scruggs



and Don Reno burnished and passed to the world during the 1940s and 50s. Scruggs is the most imitated American banjo player of our time — and possibly of any time. Bluegrass music has become one of the main providers of steady employment for banjoists since minstrelsy.

During a 6-year period that began in 1958 burr-headed “we-got-together-on-campus” groups singing folk songs were suddenly at the top of the pop music charts. Some used a rudimentary banjo accompaniment.

An interest in oldtime string band music arose at about the same time. Suddenly kids from Brooklyn to Berkeley were trying to walk, talk, dress and play string band music like old tarheel farmers. This continued until the 1970s.

That the banjo was prominent in these “revivals” can be largely attributed to Pete Seeger. A Harvard dropout and union activist with an abiding interest in pro-

gressive causes, Seeger made the banjo visible to an intellectual elite. His how-to-play-the-banjo book has been in print for 46 years.

The banjo continues to have regional and ethnic ties. The clawhammer style is still centered in a small area of Virginia and North Carolina. There’s a Hawaiian plectrum style, a ragged style on a tiny banjo from the U. S. Virgin Islands, and a rip-snorting new Irish style that is improving the market for good tenor banjos.

Banjo is not currently popular with the larger public, but it is very healthy. This historic instrument is likely to be around when most of the current musical fads have gone to the land of the hula hoop.

*Joe Wilson*

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*Seslehe Damessae, left.*

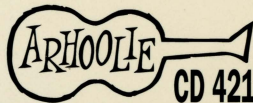


*Ralph Stanley, right.*



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