

B.M.G. – Winter 2019-12-30 – by David Cotton

[[SEP]] Gérard de Smaele—A Five-String Banjo : A Selected Documentation

In 2015, Gérard de Smaele published *Banjo Attitudes*, which he presented in 2016 at the 19th Banjo Gathering, in Charlottesville VA. The cost of translation from French to English was prohibitive and so de Smaele decided instead to publish separately a selection of the documentary sources which led him and others to a closer understanding of the history and meaning of the American five-string banjo.

The result is *A Five-String Banjo Sourcebook* published by L'Harmattan, a veritable smorgasbord of delights relating to the banjo. [[SEP]] The book is in 12 main sections: 1.

Monographs, and other specialized publications; 2. Antique and vintage banjo catalogues;

3. Biographies—Autobiographies; 4. Encyclopedias—General and reference works; 5.

Periodicals; [[SEP]] 6. Music books and methods (Minstrel style, Classic style, Folk music-Old time

music, Bluegrass, Tenor banjo); 7. Recordings & Liner Notes; 8. Filmography; 9. Banjo

Players (Afro-American style, Minstrel Style, Classic style, Old Time, Bluegrass, Folk revival—long neck banjo, Banjo players from the collection kept at the American Folklife

Center, Tenor & Plectrum banjo (Old generation, New generation); 10. Contemporary banjo

builders; 11. Main documentation centers; 12. Webography. Between chapters are reprinted

album, book and DVD covers and each chapter is prefaced with interesting and well-informed commentary. The sources themselves are annotated and footnotes add interesting historical

and other insights. [[SEP]] I very much liked the inclusion of birthplace, dates of birth and (where appropriate) dates of death of each listed banjo player. This is invaluable in tracing the

development of the music and assessing who may have influenced whom. Whilst you may be familiar with the plethora of magazines devoted to the banjo, I found it astonishing to see just

how many books have been written about the instrument, its history, players and music. The book is full of useful web links and the few I tested were all still live. One I found particularly

fascinating was a 133-page thesis by Greg C. Adams, *Nineteenth-Century Banjos in the Twenty-First Century: Custom and tradition in a modern early banjo revival*

(<http://bit.ly/354tq67>) Oddly, the contents appears toward the back of the book, and would have been more useful at the front. [[SEP]] In any selection of sources the editor has to be highly

selective. The selection of banjo-players is broad and well considered, although some of the new generation movers and shakers in the bluegrass world, such as Chris Pandolfi, BB

Bowness and Matthew Davis are missing. Another omission is the Picky Fingers Podcast,

which is gaining great traction in the bluegrass world. There are many typos which will

perhaps be corrected in future editions—for example, the jazz banjo player Pat Cloud is listed as 'Patty', Terry Baucom as 'Baucon' and Harry Reser as 'Reiser.' I am also unsure why

plectrum and tenor banjos are included in a book about the five-string banjo. These, however, are very minor criticisms of an otherwise hugely valuable and scholarly contribution to the literature of the banjo. Incidentally, de Smaele is himself a fine singer and player, as evidenced by a short YouTube clip of him performing Swanno Mountain (<http://bit.ly/2Kuu84F>). If you love the banjo and want a book to dip into, time and time again, this is for you. Each link is a rabbit hole and it's easy to get lost for hours! For details of how order the book: <http://bit.ly/2Crorjw> And for Banjo Attitudes: <https://amzn.to/2NvCivs>