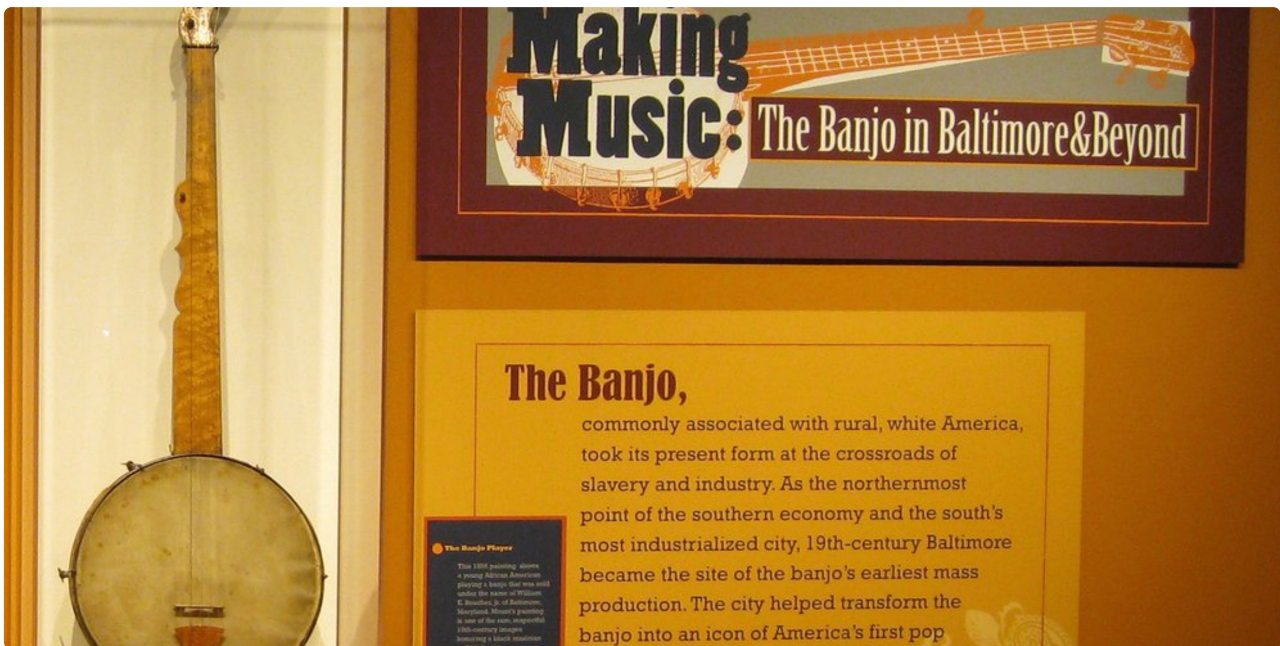


# This is the “Banjo!”

Article published online on December 10, 2019 by PointCulture



**Belgian musician, Gérard De Smaele introduces the banjo, an instrument whose history and repertoire he knows inside out.**

*“When you want genuine music — music that will come right home to you like a bad quarter, suffuse your system like strychnine whisky, go right through you like Brandreth’s pills, ramify your whole constitution like the measles, and break out on your hide like the pin-feather pimples on a picked goose, — when you want all this, just smash your piano, and invoke the glory-beaming banjo!” — Mark Twain. “Enthusiastic Eloquence.” *San Francisco Dramatic Chronicle*, June 23, 1865.*

The basic process is ancient and its scope is universal. The body of a banjo is made up of a circular structure on which a membrane is stretched. The acoustic properties of such a design produce an invigorating sound, which lifts and touches people’s spirits whoever they are. In this way, the banjo grabbed everyone’s imagination, creating its own myths and clichés, sometimes defying historical, even musicological reality. Slaves from plantations in the Southern States, American cowboys, Route 66, commercial country music, emerging jazz... without forgetting the ancient musical traditions of the Southern Appalachian Mountains, bluegrass... will make up its most fertile soil.

For those in the know, however, the year 2019 will be marked by the celebration of the centenary of the birth of Pete Seeger (1919-2014), whom the Smithsonian Institution will honour with the publication of a beautiful book, accompanied by a set of 6 CDs (1). It is, at last, a proper recognition of the man who has enriched the catalogue of the Folkways house with countless recordings. Folkways was founded more than 70 years ago in New York by Moses Asch (1905-1986), father of the non-commercial label Smithsonian/Folkways (2), and is an eminent, official institution of which the United States can be proud. Pete Seeger was an immense banjoist, responsible with Earl Scruggs (1924-2012)

for the new development and revival of the five-string banjo. Let's not allow the press's somewhat shallow portrayal of the banjo make us forget the heroic stance of this artist who, disturbed by McCarthyism in the 1950s, accompanied Pastor Martin Luther King in the march towards Washington in 1963. In the wake of the great folk revival of the 1960s, how many young Americans, following the example of the one who showed them the way (well before the young Greta Thunberg) have, banjo in hand, challenged the society of their time?

In bringing musical elements from the west coast of Africa to the new world, sadly the banjo begins its history with the deportation of millions of slaves. The minstrel show, the Jim Crow laws and segregation are there to remind us that the roots of this rich instrument, which spread across all kinds of musical genres, are embedded in this dark underworld. The international impact of folk music or black music will not let us forget it. But the five-string banjo is also a reflection of the progress of American society in all its guises.

The story of the banjo is never-ending and as complex as the human soul, incorporating a mixture of both good and bad. The stereotypical image of the banjo does not do it justice, but hopefully this brief presentation will reveal a little more and encourage the public to reconnect with its history and discover more about this astonishing stringed instrument and both its prestigious as well as its more down-to-earth authentic players.

Gérard De Smaele,

<https://www.desmaele5str.be/>

Faurceulx, June 4, 2019

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- (1) *Pete Seeger: The Smithsonian-Folkways Collection, Smithsonian-Folkways*, 2019 ; Étienne Bours, *Pete Seeger : un siècle en chansons. Au bord de l'eau*, 2010, 212 p.
  - (2) It features such essential banjoists as Pete Steele, Frank Proffitt, Roscoe Holcomb, Dock Boggs, Clarence Ashley, and Wade Ward, who provide an insight into all kinds of social realities.

**Picture:** The first commercialised version of the five-string banjo, by W.E. Boucher from the 1840s. "The Banjo in Baltimore and Beyond," BMI Museum, Baltimore, MA, 2014. Pete Szego's collection. (photo: Gérard De Smaele)

In the 1830s, it was as part of the minstrel show that white musicians made-up in coal black, 'Europeanised' the primitive instrument of African-Americans and appropriated the banjo. The five-string banjo then became the starting point from which a whole musical evolution would follow. Its most elaborate and most recent form is that of the bluegrass banjo, a hybrid instrument whose body is the same as that of the tenor and plectrum banjos, made in the inter-war period for jazz orchestras and dance music, which have 4 strings of equal length. Meanwhile, from the end of the American Civil War to the First World War, it evolved into a concert and lounge instrument, derived from the classical guitar. At the same time, in the Southern States, it became a pillar of 'country music', a musical tradition with deep Anglo-Saxon roots, given pride of place during the great folk revival of the 1960s.

# Suggestions:



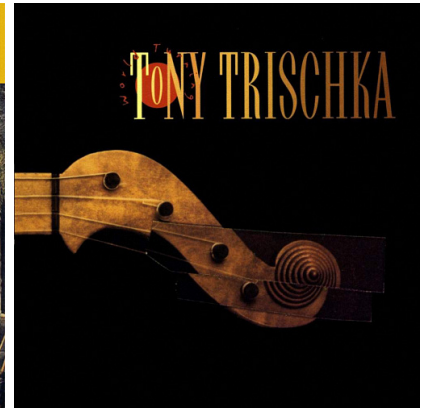
## Southern Banjo Sounds

Mike Seeger. Smithsonian/  
Folkways, CD-40107, 1998.



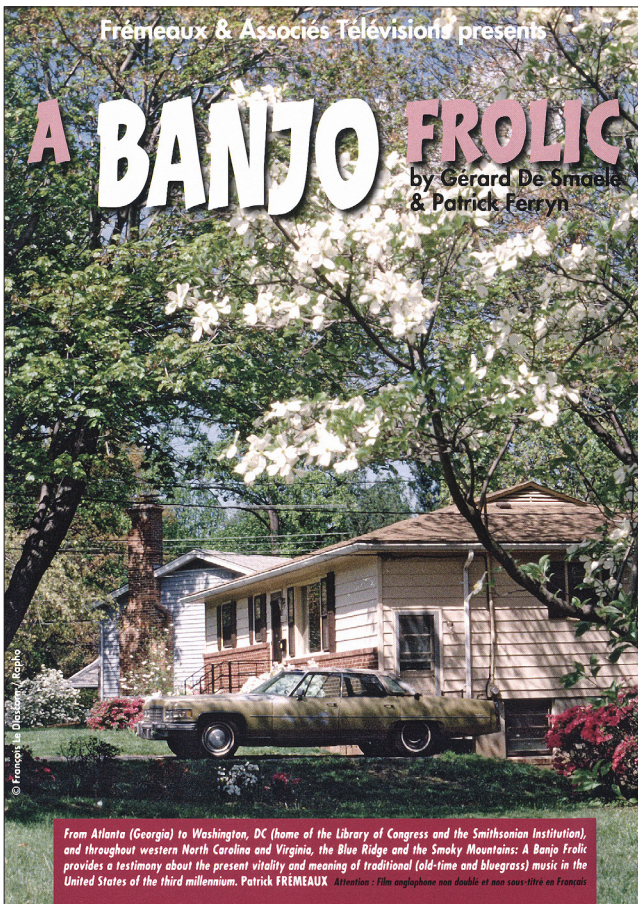
## Banjo. An American Five-String History 1901-1956

Frémeaux & Associés, CD-FA 5179, 2009.



## World Turning

Tony Trischka. Rounder,  
CD-0294, 1993.



From Atlanta (Georgia) to Washington, DC (home of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution), and throughout western North Carolina and Virginia, the Blue Ridge and the Smoky Mountains: A Banjo Frolic provides a testimony about the present vitality and meaning of traditional (old-time and bluegrass) music in the United States of the third millennium. Patrick FRÉMEAUX Attention : Film anglophone non doublé et non sous-titré en Français

Frémeaux & Associés Télévisions presents

# A BANJO FROLIC

by Gérard De Smaele & Patrick Ferryn

We have seen the films "Bonnie and Clyde", "Deliverance", and more recently "Oh Brother! Where Art Thou". These movies took Appalachian music and the five-string banjo to a broader international audience. A Banjo Frolic addresses the same subject, providing testimony about the present vitality and meaning of traditional music in the United States. We drove from Atlanta GA to Washington DC (home of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution, two huge folk-music repositories), and throughout western North Carolina and Virginia, the Blue Ridge and the Smoky Mountains. The Appalachian areas we visited are in the nest of old-time music (also bluegrass), which is distinct from the usual commercial trends of the country music.

A Banjo Frolic raises several issues like conservation, transmission, and transformation of the Southern musical heritage. It surely could be used as a basis for reflecting on the meaning of our own European traditional music, its use and value within the present-day world. The context presented is an America distant from the usual clichés. Gérard De Smaele & Patrick Ferryn

Featuring : Mike Seeger, Pete Seeger, Will Keys, Laura Boosinger, Reed Martin, Alan Jabbour, The Reed Island Rounders, Doc Watson, Geoff Stelling, Kevin Enoch, Lo Gordon, and many others...

Frémeaux & Associés Télévisions met à la disposition du public anglophone la version originale du film de Gérard De Smaele et Patrick Ferryn "A Banjo Frolic", réalisé avec le soutien de l'ambassade des États-Unis à Bruxelles, pour le propos d'une grande exposition sur le Banjo présentée par Gérard De Smaele en 2003.

L'intérêt de ce film documentaire sur l'ensemble de la musique populaire américaine vu par le prisme du Banjo (Bluegrass, Old-time music, "Folk Music"), avec la participation de tous ses acteurs étant supérieur à l'économie du documentaire sur DVD, nous avons décidé de faire paraître ce film extraordinaire, en distribution internationale (format NTSC), dans sa version anglaise originale non sous-titrée et non doublée en Français.

Benjamin Goldenstein

REGION	VERSION	AUDIO	LENGHT
World	NTSC	Stereo	110 min.
LANGUAGE	SUBTITLES	SIZE	PUBLIC
English only	None	4/3	All publics

www.frémeaux.com DVD5 Couleur Durée 110 minutes environ Intériorité à la location et au prêt sauf ADV

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The American Heritage by Frémeaux

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# A BANJO FROLIC

Script by Gérard De Smaele, filmed by Patrick Ferryn, DVD-FA 4020, 2010.

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