

# The Multicultural Roots of American Music: Three Musical Instruments

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# Three Musical Instruments that Influenced American Music

- Banjo
- Steel Guitar
- Acoustic Guitar

# Banjo

One of the oldest musical instruments in the United States.



# Origins of the Banjo

- The banjo has its origins in West Africa and is one of the oldest African musical instruments.
- The banjo first made its way to America via the slave trade during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- While today the banjo is mostly associated with bluegrass music today, it has a long history in American music.
- Many of the innovations of the modern banjo (e.g., the fretboard, tuning pegs, etc.) were invented in West Africa.

# Origins of the Banjo

- The banjo carried spiritual and cultural symbolism rooted in African religious traditions.
- Banjos spread widely during and after the Civil War; they remained an important part of rural African American culture and in early jazz.
- By the 1930s, the banjo became associated with Appalachian and bluegrass music in popular American culture.

Country/bluegrass music was primarily marketed to White audiences.

“Race music” was a term used by record companies to market certain artists exclusively to Black audiences starting in the 1920s.

This practice appears to have had some influence on the growth of banjo in country/bluegrass and the decline of banjo in blues music.

Artists like Taj Mahal and Rhiannon Giddens embraced the banjo again later.

Improved condition. 1 Inn. Playing around town there.

# "Competition Bed Blues"

by **Blind Lemon Jefferson**

Poor Blind Lemon! He says, "Competition pops up in every man's life—it even worries him in his dreams." Here he stops in "to comb his hair," and look what he sees. What does it all mean? You'll know when you hear this new Paramount record "Competition Bed Blues," and when you hear it, you'll know something good. Ask your dealer for No. 12728, or send us the coupon.

**12728—Competition Bed Blues and Bed News Blues, Blind Lemon Jefferson and His Guitar.**

12729—Growder Sadder Blues and Bead's Progress Five, Will Earl (All By Himself); vocal and piano.  
 12730—Gathering Town Blues and Separated Blues, 1st Co; Piano-Banjo-Trumpet Acc.  
 12731—Familiar Small Blues and The Rough Blues, Blind Blake; Guitar and Harmonica Acc.

12732—Gloameth Underworld Women and Your St Down (Bed Blues and All) Bob Coleman; instrumental acc.  
 12733—Going South Blues and Rowdy Man Blues, Eddie Johnson; Piano Acc. by Will Earl.  
 12734—Jungle Man Blues and Core Linger Blues, "Papa Charlie" Jackson and His Blue Beans.

12735—Poor Boy Blues and Rambler's Moon, Rambler's Thomas and His Guitar.  
 12736—Rolling That Devil and Beedle On Down, The Hobson Boys; Piano and Guitar Acc.  
 12737—South Down Blues and Cold-Hearted Man Blues, Blind Blake and His Guitar.

**Favorite Spirituals**

12666—His Eye Is On The Sparrow and I Wouldn't Mind Dying If Dying Was All, Merkle Jublet Quartet.  
 12667—Father, Prepare Me and My Lord's Gonna Move This Wretched Town, Merkle Jublet Quartet.

**SEND NO MONEY!** If your dealer is out of the records you want, send us the coupon below. Pay postage 75 cents for each record, plus small C. O. D. fee when he delivers records. We pay postage on shipments of ten or more records.

The New York Recording Laboratories  
 127 Decatur St.  
 Send me the records checked (✓) below 75 cents each.

<input type="checkbox"/> 12728	<input type="checkbox"/> 12731	<input type="checkbox"/> 12734
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<input type="checkbox"/> 12731	<input type="checkbox"/> 12734	<input type="checkbox"/> 12667
<input type="checkbox"/> 12732	<input type="checkbox"/> 12735	<input type="checkbox"/> 12668

**Paramount**  
 The Popular Race Record

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

# Early American Gourd Banjo

This picture shows an enslaved person playing an 18<sup>th</sup> century gourd banjo. The banjo is strikingly similar to earlier West African gourd banjos.



“The Old Plantation” by John Rose c. 1800

# The Steel Guitar

Prominent instrument in country, bluegrass, rock, and other genres



"Baldwin Crossover"  
(pedal steel guitar)  
Knoxville, Tennessee, USA, 1930s  
The Baldwin Crossover guitar is a  
precursor to the pedal steel



# Hawaiian and European Origins of the Steel Guitar

- The guitar made its way to Hawaii via Spanish sailors and workers who came to the islands.
- After Hawaii was annexed by the U.S. in 1898, Hawaiian steel guitarists started touring the U.S. mainland with ukulele and steel guitar expositions.
- Hawaiian music was very popular in the mainstream U.S. in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1916, 78 rpm records featuring indigenous Hawaiian steel guitar outsold every other genre of music in the United States.

# Joseph Kekuku

Often credited as the inventor of the Hawaiian steel guitar.



# Hawaiian and European Origins of the Steel Guitar

- Hawaiian musicians drew large crowds in the early 1900s as they traveled the country playing expositions, including in the segregated South.
- Native Hawaiians were barred from staying at White-only hotels. They often found lodging in boarding homes with African-American musicians.



Awai's Royal Hawaiian Quartette

Which delighted thousands during the Panama Pacific International Exhibition at San Francisco in 1915.

*A photograph of George E. K. Awai (seated) and his Royal Hawaiian Quartette*

*at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco, 1915.*

*Standing (left to right): Ben Zablan (8 string ukulele), Bill Kaina (ukulele), and Henry Komomua (guitar).*

<http://www.ganz.org/HawaiianWeb/Hawaiian6.htm>

- **Hawaiian steel guitar** music influenced African-American blues and jazz musicians, as well as White country and bluegrass musicians.



Photo of Son House, from

[https://www.discogs.com/pt\\_BR/artist/313078-Son-House](https://www.discogs.com/pt_BR/artist/313078-Son-House)

# Hawaiian and European Origins of the Steel Guitar

- The Dobro resonator guitar was invented in 1926 in the U.S. by the Dopyera brothers who were immigrants from eastern Europe.
- Dobro resonator guitars were quickly adopted by Hawaiian musicians, African American blues players, and country and bluegrass musicians as they helped circumvent the problem of amplification (compared to traditional acoustic guitars).
- The first electric lap steel guitar was invented in 1931 by George Beauchamp (pre-dating the invention of the electric guitar).
- Adolf Rickenbacker and Leo Fender continued to develop electric steel guitars during the 1930s and 1940s.

# Dobro Resonator Guitar

Invented in 1926 by the Dopyera brothers. The dobro has played a prominent role in bluegrass, country, and blues music.



# Evolution of the Steel Guitar

- Early electric steel guitar players (e.g., Noel Boggs, Herb Remington, and Joaquin Murphy) played nonpedal steel guitars with multiple necks (each tuned differently).
- The pedal steel guitar was invented in the 1950s by a Connecticut machinist and musician named John Moore.
- The pedal steel guitar uses a complex system of cables, pulleys, and rods connected to foot pedals and knee levers that allow players to change the pitch of individual strings (allowing for moving harmonies and unique chord voicings).

# First Electric Steel Guitar

The “frying pan” electric steel guitar was invented by George Beauchamp in 1931.



Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com



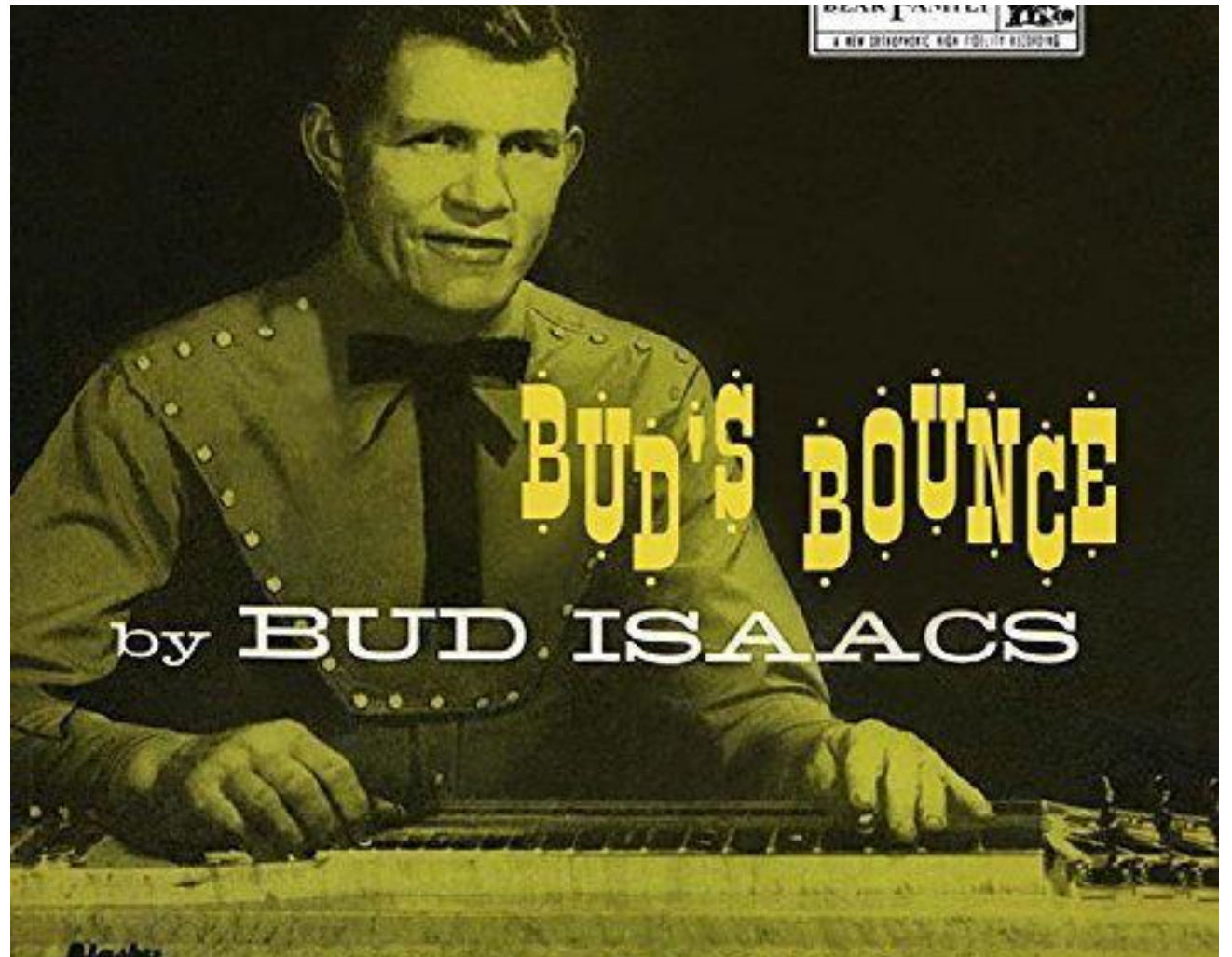
# 1940's Electric Nonpedal Steel Guitar

This guitar was created by Leo Fender in the late 1940's. Each neck of the steel guitar was tuned to a different open chord tuning (e.g. C6th tuning).



# Bud Isaacs

First helped to popularized the pedal steel guitar in the 1950s in his recordings with country singer Webb Pierce.



# Robert Randolph

Contemporary blues and gospel artist who is a master of the pedal steel guitar.





# Acoustic Guitar

Popular instrument in multiple American music genres



# Multicultural Origins of the Acoustic Guitar

- The word “guitar” has its origins in India. The word “tar” in Sanskrit means “string” (e.g., the “Sitar”).
- The origins of the guitar stem from central Asia and the Middle East (e.g., “Chatar” [four strings] in old Persian).
- Earlier forms of the guitar eventually made their way to Europe.
- The modern American steel string guitar was largely influenced by a German immigrant named Christian Fredrich Martin.
- Steel strings allowed for great amplification. Martin was instrumental in developing X-braced guitar tops (which allowed acoustic guitars to support the tension of steel strings).

# Early European 5-String Guitar (Antonio Stradivarious)

Early European guitars used “gut” strings as opposed to modern steel strings.



# Martin X-Braced Acoustic Guitar

Martin's X-brace allowed for the use of steel strings on the modern guitar—which enhanced amplification.



Christian Frederick Martin, unknown photographer, from WikiCommons





# Summary

- American music genres (e.g., blues, rock, bluegrass, jazz, country, folk, etc.) would not exist in their current form without multicultural influences.
- Culture not only influenced this music, but also the evolution of the instruments used to play it.
- Many of the cultural influences on these forms of American music have been ignored or misrepresented in accounts of American music history.

# Brief Demonstration of Instruments

# Thank You!

What questions do you have?

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# Recommended Videos

See YouTube links on the following slides

# Sacred Steel and African American Churches



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRZS86tmvDA>

# Other Videos Featuring Banjo, Dobro, Steel Guitar, and Guitar

- <https://youtu.be/Uc34ThH7srk> (some top bluegrass artists)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkGSns7-e0> (Rhiannon Giddens—lost history of black American banjo)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u23sl0-Faa0> (Hawaiian steel guitar history)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vp7mrUzMgeo> (steel guitar on Spongbob—Jeremy Wakefield)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4ck4aDgj8E> (Western swing steel guitar—jazz influence)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKZ72OWX2dM> (fast pedal steel playing)