GLOBAL
BANJAR
POLITICS, RACE, & EMPIRE IN ANTEBELLUM BANJO MUSIC WORLDWIDE!
ALBUM NOTES BY MAREK BENNETT
A FAMILIAR AMERICAN STORY:
Deep musical traditions gestate for generations in African-American communities, dismissed by white outsiders as nothing but noise. Then, at some particular historical moment, that “noise” suddenly becomes “music” to working-class whites, who apprentice to black masters, absorb techniques & styles, & go public; their new/old music bursts forth seemingly fully-formed in the white “mainstream” as a cry of rebellion, protest, dangerous alliances & ambiguous messages – only to fall under increasing commercial control, ultimately to be exported abroad as a complex symbol of, among other things, the political & economic might of the United States. Pick your pop genre – ragtime, blues, jazz, rock, hip-hop – and the same rough outline will apply.

TRACE THIS PATTERN BACK

to its modern roots, and we find ourselves in the early 1800s, at the outset of the American Industrial Revolution; conditions are ripe for cultural revolution, too. Old lifestyles & traditions disappear or transform as rural populations migrate to growing cities & collide with diverse waves of immigrants – Political parties dissolve & re-form around emerging new class identities – Emancipation arrives in Northern states, all too often with correlating race-based restrictions on civil rights & expression – Space & time collapse before onrushing trains, steamships, telegraphs – boundaries & identities dissolve as escaping slaves rush north, would-be gold miners clamber west, filibusters march south, revolutions shake the old empires of the East, & reform movements ferment within new mass media environments: abolition, women's rights, health, diet, temperance, science, religious revivals, &c., &c.

& AMIDST IT ALL, THE “BANJAR.”
An ancient musical idea carried West from Africa in the dark hearts of slave ships centuries earlier, the “Banjar” (or “banza,” or even “banjo”) by the 1830s becomes suddenly strikingly audible to white listeners. Audible? Heck, they go crazy for it. Forged in a transatlantic economy driven by slavery, the banjo bears the distinctive voice & face of the slave; donning both, early white banjo performers cross over to become something new: captivating tricksters, musicians between worlds, neither black nor white, signaling difference & identification. In “low” theaters & improvised stages all around the globe, blackface banjo performance goes viral to announce:

**THE BIRTH OF AMERICAN POP CULTURE.**

Of course, these eccentric performers & their diverse marginal audiences leave few written texts outside of their songs, so history often sees them through the biased pens of their more literate & often liberally contemptuous contemporaries; no wonder so much early banjo music comes down to us as clearcut base racism & appropriation. But a look behind the burnt cork surface reveals complicated undercurrents & alliances that question – even threaten – the foundations of white supremacist society. Indeed, antebellum Americans of all stripes proclaim this new trans-racial pop music to be, in the reluctant assessment of abolitionist & former slave Frederick Douglass, “our national music,” & they set about busily exporting it to the wider world. This album presents artifacts of that process. That so much of this music reeks of the racism of its society & era, we readily acknowledge – which is not to say accept or endorse. We propose here to exhume & examine other less-recognized forces at work in the playing: cross-racial fascination, democratic debate, political & class identities formed through folk/pop cultural forms – all sounding deep truths from the roots of American identity. Careful listeners may note certain contemporary connections; modern discomfort with this music, & with our own national history in general, proves that we as a society still have much to learn here. ~ **The HARDTACKS / Henniker & Bradford, NH / 2016**
PICAYUNE BUTLER'S COME TO TOWN

SOURCE: *Phil. Rice's Correct Method for the Banjo: With or Without a Master* (1858)

JAPAN, SUMMER OF 1853: Our story begins with Commodore Perry's menacing black battleships arriving in Japanese harbors to “open” the island nation's isolated economy to global trade. After impressive demonstrations of American weapons and industrial products, Perry hosts *shogun* officials on his flagship USS Powhatan to enjoy a minstrel show put on by the sailors, who apparently open their first set with a tune called “Picayune Butler.” Japanese artists paint the banjo at center stage, surrounded by massed guitars, fiddles, bones, tambourine, triangle, & whirling blackface dancers.

For an eyewitness account, we turn to Perry & Co.'s 1856 report: "After the banquet, the Japanese were entertained by an exhibition of negro minstrelsy, got up by some of the sailors, who, blacking their faces and dressing themselves in character, enacted their parts with a humor that would have gained them
unbounded applause from a New York audience even at Christy's [a reknowned minstrel venue]. The gravity of the saturnine [scholar & diplomat] Hayashi was not proof against the grotesque exhibition, and even he joined with the rest in the general hilarity provoked by the farcical antics and humorous performances of the mock negroes. It was now sunset, and the Japanese prepared to depart with quite as much wine in them as they could well bear. The jovial Matsusaki threw his arms about the Commodore's neck... repeating, in Japanese, with maudlin affection, these words...: 'Nippon and America, all the same heart.'” [Hawks, Jones, Perry: Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan (1856) p. 376]

More than mere show-biz diplomacy takes place here – the concert introduces Japanese dignitaries to a new world order of industrialized global trade, inviting them to take their place near (but not at) the top of the racial hierarchy, enjoying the spectacle of “mock negroes” frolicking on the warship's decks. Significantly, African-American members of Perry's expedition are not invited to perform for their Japanese hosts; American culture as presented here means the imitative appropriations of blackface banjo music, pink wigs, oriental print jackets and all.

And who was this Picayune Butler? The lyrics place him in the 1830s, with his old-fashioned pre-industrial African-inspired instrument: “a gourd, three string'd, and an old pine stick...” His playing style is evidently the percussive “stroke” style of antebellum banjo players – he “hit” the banjo, instead of strumming it.

We base our performance loosely on Rice's 1858 Method. Of course, Rice was not present in Japan, nor did the Powhatan Minstrels have access to Rice's yet-unprinted sheet music for rehearsal, so in the spirit of Mr. Butler's itinerant eccentricities, we have taken certain interpretive liberties and given free rein to the rollicking band shown in those Japanese paintings. Ah-ooooooh!
UNITED STATES IT AM DE PLACE

SOURCE: Phil. Rice (1858)

Another selection from Rice's wide-ranging *Method*, which book Joseph W. Ayers calls “a most far-flung hodgepodge of musical influences, possibly the greatest ever bound together under one cover.” Here, Rice presents hokum history masquerading as nationalist pride, with dashes of international entertainment and domestic policy points. Note the blackface militarist myth of racial inferiority: “If I was a soldier I'd be some / I'd beat the fife, I'd blow the drum.” This mask of comedic bufoonery runs contrary to military reality – but any image of African Americans in uniform carries certain, shall we say, political and historical tensions for diverse antebellum audiences (see also Jim Crow, below)...

We combine Rice's text with lyrics from an undated Library of Congress song sheet: “Good Bye, John! ... As Composed and sung by Dr. J. B. Kimball, (Magic Oil Man),” including Kimball's commentary on antebellum sectionalism, stateside: “fire-eaters” vs. “crazy abolitionists” indeed!

ETHIOPIAN CRACOVIENNE

SOURCE: Briggs' Banjo Instructor (1855)

“Cracovienne” is the French name for a folk dance from Krakow, Poland. “Ethiopian” signifies that back in Briggs's day, the dance would be performed on African-American instruments by European Americans in blackface. Our instrumentation: a four-stringed gourd banjo & four cow shin bones. Enough said; let's dance.
DANCING FOR FEELS.
MANHATTAN, 1820: Slaves row daily across the Hudson from Jersey & Long Island, ferrying vegetables to city markets and improving spare moments to dance for money & eels in the urban crowds. T. D. Rice grew up around Catherine Market, ground zero for these early scenes of cultural transmission as Irish b'hoys hunker down to absorb dances and other gestures from blacks, free and otherwise (see image). The same transatlantic dances shared (or stolen? copied? Emulated? “evolved”?) here will, years later, form the nucleus for Rice's future theatrical success touring the United States and Europe, and will fuel the blackface craze of the 1840s and its pop cultural progeny around the world thereafter.

EVERYWHERE, 1830s: Mixing such native dance forms with race/gender/identity-bending roles of English farce, Rice hits grotesque paydirt with “Jim Crow.” Period songsheets list hundreds of slippery verses from the “extravaganza” – a subversive Jacksonian verse-novel. Our version here carefully selects a dozen couplets to emphasize Rice's reaching for cross-racial class identities; another sampling could create an entirely different impression. Such is the many-faced nature of blackface. In an era of working-class theater riots and mob justice, contradictory verses may provide yet another screen behind which itinerant performers like Rice can hide and dodge and snipe (and make a living playing to any audience, be they pro-slavery New Yorkers or abolitionist English).
We have dropped some of Rice's racial slurs, which were common and casual enough in the 1830s but would distract modern audiences from his intended multifaceted allusions and effects. Thus our curated Jim Crow proceeds verse by verse as follows:

1. Jim Crow, a traditional “roarer” type (a la Mike Fink, Davy Crockett) – swims river, drinks grog, etc. Need we point out the biblical imagery of being born among the canes, & laid in a trough?


3. African-American participation in the Battle of New Orleans under General Jackson (1814). “Any other kind of service isn't worth a damn” – We recall that the US Constitution does not mention slaves, except as “persons held to service.”

4. Nullification, as argued in the US Congress (1830s); fraternal bloodshed narrowly averted. Rice's reference to shedding a brother's blood invokes the most ancient Western myth of civil war and punishment. In the Bible, God marks Cain's face to signify a special shunned status, as well as liberation & exemption – a turn not lost on 19th century blackface performers.

5. Whiteness as evidence of wickedness. European (a.k.a. white) folk sources refer to the Cain myth as an origin story for racial difference, claiming God turned Cain's face black in punishment. Some African accounts invert this interpretation – Cain starts out black but turns white in guilt & fear of holy punishment for the crime of fratricide. Here, as in Rice's Jim Crow cant, whiteness marks guilt, evil intention, the forceful containment & sequestration of the black body. “Wheel about & turn about & do just so.”

**IMAGE** = T. D. Rice as “Jim Crow” (London, 1835) [LOC.gov] →
NEW YORK, 1851: Gotham's thriving working-class theaters swell with immigrants from far-flung nations, and with domestic newcomers from remote rural corners; Stephen Foster's romantic “Plantation Melodies” are all the rage, crooning vivid hallucinations of happy slaves singing while they toil in idyllic Southern cottonscapes.

A song like “Old Folks at Home” works on several levels for the crowds that sing along in the pit and in the streets. Blackface sentimental farce holds up slaves for inspection – ridiculing and caricaturing, to be sure, but at the same time constantly reminding the audience of slaves' existence & plight. Crucially, by donning the blackface mask, immigrant and native performers alike signify their new American identity, a sharp contrast to the identities offered by elite performance modes imported from Europe. For the working-class Irish (who have already experienced centuries of enforced servitude and oppression under English colonization), blackface banjo burlesques provide a tool to lampoon and subvert imported English theatre and opera. And looking beyond racial and national distinctions, a song like “Old Folks” speaks to any displaced disenfranchised listener who longs for whatever has been left behind in the upheaval of the early Industrial Revolution; such audiences might very well interpret it as a common lament for family and home.

Furthermore, as Frederick Douglass reminds us from his own experience, “Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is
relieved by its tears.” Perhaps Foster inadvertently achieves this effect in the best of his blackface balladry: holding up rough puppets of caricatured slaves to reveal the common humanity of diverse displaced persons in a changing age. “Old Folks” traces the connections between specific theaters of societal change & romantic removal – the old rural homestead, the new metropolis, the plantation, the lonely emigrant's distant frontier...

Overseas, African-American singer Elizabeth Greenfield (a.k.a. the “Black Swan”) performs “Old Folks” in London to the delight of an elite abolitionist audience. Writing in 1854, Harriet Beecher Stowe (see “Uncle Tom's Cabin” below) describes with mixed appreciation & condescension Greenfield's “occasional rusticities and artistic defects” as proof of the singer's authentic expression of racial sentiment, in a concert programme otherwise focused on European art music. So go figure.

Foster's lyrics have undergone significant cleansing in recent years. Florida lawmakers designated “Old Folks” as the official state song in the 1930s – a decade rife with Florida Klan violence and the whitewashing of Southern history. In 2008, under pressure from public sentiment, the state legislature revised Foster's original lyrics; “darkies” became “brothers,” and “still longing for de old plantation” became “still longing for my childhood station.” Is this progress? Or could these revisions suppress and obscure the lyrics' origin and historical context, enabling an unsightly past to go undetected, encouraging modern listeners to forget the strife and struggle through which we have arrived at our troubled present? Balancing our modern sensitivities with our intention to document the song's history, we have here discarded much of the original racialized dialect, but we purposefully retain the slur “darkies” in the chorus as a deliberate reminder of the song's source. Meanwhile, in 2015, the song continues to serve (in its deracialized form) as Florida's official state song...
Anonymous rewrite, repositioning Stephen Foster's rookie hit, “Oh Susannah” (1847 – ubiquitous in its time and still common in deracinated “folk song” tradition over a century and a half later), this version presents a (blackface) slave’s experience of forced migration in the California Gold Rush (1848-1855).

In congress, slaveholder and US Senator Jefferson Davis promotes a racialized Gold Rush: “It was to work the gold mines on this continent that the Spaniards first brought Africans to the country. The European races now engaged in working the mines of California sink under the burning heat and sudden changes of the climate, to which the African race are altogether better adapted. The production of rice, sugar, and cotton is no better adapted to slave labor than the digging, washing, and quarrying of the gold mines.” [Jefferson Davis in the US Senate, 29 January 1850]

On balance, Frederick Douglass sketches a global economy based on slave labor and social injustice: “For the present, it is enough to affirm the equal manhood of the negro race. Is it not astonishing that, while we are ploughing, planting and reaping, using all kinds of mechanical tools, erecting houses, constructing bridges, building ships, working in metals of brass, iron, copper, silver and gold; that, while we are reading, writing and cyphering, acting as clerks, merchants and secretaries, having among us lawyers, doctors, ministers, poets, authors, editors, orators and teachers; that, while we are engaged in all manner of
enterprises common to other men, digging gold in California, capturing the whale in the Pacific, feeding sheep and cattle on the hillside, living, moving, acting, thinking, planning, living in families as husbands, wives and children, and, above all, confessing and worshipping the Christian’s God, and looking hopefully for life and immortality beyond the grave, we are called upon to prove that we are men!”    [Frederick Douglass, speech, 5 July 1852]

After attending Gold Rush minstrel shows among the throngs at Sacramento City, Bayard Taylor enthused: “I confess a strong liking for the Ethiopian airs, and used to spend half an hour every night listening to them and watching the curious expressions of satisfaction and delight in the faces of the overland emigrants, who always attended in a body. The spirit of the music was always encouraging; even its most doleful passages had a grotesque touch of cheerfulness – a mingling of sincere pathos and whimsical consolation, which somehow took hold of all moods in which it might be heard, raising them to the same notch of careless good-humor. The Ethiopian melodies well deserve to be called, as they are in fact, the national airs of America. Their quaint, mock-sentimental cadences, so well suited to the broad absurdity of the words – their reckless gaiety and irreverent familiarity with serious subjects – and their spirit of antagonism and perseverance – are true expressions of the more popular sides of the national character. They follow the American race in all its emigrations, colonizations and conquests, as certainly as the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving Day.”    [Bayard Taylor, Prose Writings of Bayard Taylor: Eldorado (G. P. Putnam, 1862) p. 275]

And so we find western echoes of Foster's weary roaming banjo-toting heart – this time as a defining characteristic of American expansionism.
I'M OFF FOR BRIGHTON
SOURCE: Buckley's New Banjo Book (1860)

Just before he absquatulates for England in 1860, banjo star James Buckley publishes a diverse archive of minstrel stage tunes from his previous two decades in American show business – his New Banjo Book. “Brighton” appears on page 35, between “Leavitt's Polka” & “Rail Road Polka”; astute listeners will note that Rice's 1858 “Oh De Law Gals” (below) derives from the same basic melody.

“...the Duchess of St. Albans sent up, from Brighton to London, her carriage and four greys to take Jim Crow down to her marine fête on the sea shore... Jim jumps into the carriage... creates a prodigious sensation.” [NY Herald, 29 July 1837]

I'M OFF FOR NICARAGUA †
SOURCE: Phil. Rice (1858)

NICARAGUA, 1856: Atlantic emigrants rushing for the California gold fields cut corners across the narrow Central American isthmus at Nicaragua via the San Juan river, Lake Nicaragua, and Cornelius Vanderbilt's short Transit Road concession. When European-trained doctor-turned-newspaper-editor-turned-aspiring-dictator William Walker appears in the midst of the Nicaraguan civil war with a hand-picked band of mercenary “ filibusters,” mayhem ensues. Walker manages to get himself “elected” president of Nicaragua, revokes the country's 1824 decree abolishing slavery, and paralyzes the transit route by seizing Vanderbilt's steamships. For the only time in history, all the Central American republics form an allied army (led by neighboring Costa Rica), intent on evicting
Walker's military regime from the region.

As per the shadowy inversions of blackface farce, Rice documents this newsworthy moment through the eyes of a slave songster forced to accompany white gold seekers through Nicaragua. Perhaps to escape his servitude, the narrator joins “General” Walker's forces as a combat musician. Setting aside questions of authenticity & appropriation in 19th century racial delineation, then, this song reveals several intriguing aspects of national identity & global politics:

1. Slaves play an essential role in the Central American transit, supporting the comfortable lifestyle of “de white folks” in a dangerous tropical climate.

2. African-American music – probably a banjo, given the source – reminds the rowdy white filibusters of “home” and stirs them to carouse in high spirits.

3. Said music boosts morale in the outnumbered filibuster army and provides a vital organizing force in military activities — in the case of this song, it even equates with combat. (“Dey shall hab a ball, to set em all a dancin.”)

4. Said music creates such a powerful sense of national identity among the filibusters that the local Costa Rican-led army flees in disarray (presumably to the tune of “Jordan is a Hard Road” & other popular banjo songs), leaving Nicaragua to the North American forces… Of course, that’s just wishful thinking – actually, the cholera did in the Costa Ricans, and a Honduran firing squad eventually did in “General” Walker.

We have here removed casual racial slurs from Rice's original lyrics, so as to focus on the song's narrative of national identity based on racial representation.

*IMAGE = Detail from “Nicaragua - filibusters reposing after the battle in their quarters at the convent” (1856 wood engraving) [LOC.gov] →*
LONDON, 1852: Harriet Beecher Stowe's bestselling novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* fetches fertile material for propagandists and advocates on all sides of the slavery controversy. Even before its 1852 publication in book form, it has been adapted for the stage in multiple (and ideologically opposed) versions. The book finds ready reception in England, where slavery has been abolished two decades past. According to the *London Times* (3 Sept. 1852), “Uncle Tom’s Cabin is at every railway book-stall in England, and in every third traveller’s hand.”

This broadside demonstrates how English anti-slavery activists criticize American slavery in song, combining the widespread acclaim of Stowe's book with the popular minstrel lament “Mary Blane.” Here Mary Blane's passive sentimentalism takes on a more urgently critical (if equally sentimental) tone to lambast “*those sordid knaves / Across th’ Atlantic sea / Who traffic thus in human flesh, / In a land they boast as free!*” The question of American civil rights is more than academic for English citizens; by the 1830s the English textile industry consumes as many as 500 shiploads of slave-grown American cotton annually. In this song, Uncle Tom remains an idealized character, without human complexity – but English abolitionists can use his case to highlight the rotten underbelly of American democracy, invoke transatlantic sympathy, and call out for action to address the injustices described. To quote again the same edition of the *London Times*: “Euclid, [Stowe] well knows, is no child for effecting social revolutions, but an impassioned song may set a world in conflagration.”

Compare the above to the reciprocal criticism levied at British industrialists in...
We have assembled this version from two undated songsheets, “Jordan is a Hard Road to Travel” No. 4 and No. 5, documenting some contemporary responses to English abolitionist “Uncle Tom” attacks. Clearly the crowd endorses most warmly this vigorous vindication of American Democracy, and may very well continue the chorus out into the streets in a decidedly riotous mood; such nativist sentiment in the 1830s and 40s finds expression betimes in musical mob violence enacted against elitist English thespian imports and the theaters that host them.

Song from Phil. Rice's stage show, related to Buckley's “I'm Off For Brighton.” Plays to several popular delusions of racial superiority while demonstrating minstrelsy's manic penchant for wide-ranging geopolitical punditry. Blackface narrator eats possum, sucks honey with bees, plays banjo with power of locomotive, &c. &c. Imperial armies run overbudget in the Crimea. Yankee filibusters grind Costa Rican expeditionary force into airborne chowder. Horse dances on hind legs; polyglot trickster vulture puts moves on reptilian patriarch. Audience invited to join most heartily in proto-scat chorus.
LYNN, MA, 1850s: Jesse Hutchinson, Jr. composes this optimistic invitation using the tune of the popular minstrel number “Walk in de Parlor” (a.k.a. “History ob de World”). Brother John includes it in his 1860 *Hutchinson's Republican Songster* to promote the newly-formed Republican Party's position on Western lands recently captured from Mexico and the Indian nations, which specifically denies anyone's ability “to give legal existence to slavery in any territory of the United States” (8th resolution of “The Republican Platform,” 1860).

At the same time, Stephen Douglas proposes a contrary scheme for the same immigration-fueled expansion of North American “democracy”: “We must bear in mind that we are yet a young nation, growing with a rapidity unequaled in the history of the world, that our national increase is great, and that the emigration from the old world is increasing, requiring us to expand and acquire new territory from time to time, in order to give our people land to live upon. If we live upon the principle of State rights and State sovereignty, each State regulating its own affairs and minding its own business, we can go on and extend indefinitely... The time may come, indeed has now come, when our interests would be advanced by the acquisition of the Island of Cuba. (Terrific applause.) ... So, when it becomes necessary to acquire any portion of Mexico or Canada, or of this continent or the adjoining islands, we must take them as we find them, leaving the people free to do as they please – to have slavery or not, as they choose.”  

[Stephen Douglas debating Abraham Lincoln at Jonesboro, Illinois, 15 September, 1858]

The key question here is, who are “the people” who get to “do as they please”? 

The word “Tycoon” (Japanese: *taikun*) originally denotes the *shogun* ruler of Japan; after Perry's success, the word enters English to mean a mysterious, omnipotent ruler. (Abraham's Lincoln's private secretary John Hay refers to Lincoln as “The Tycoon” in his journals.) “Tycoon Jig” appears in Buckley (1860) credited to Dan Emmett, who is perhaps best known as the composer of “Dixie.” Distinctive in its minor key, it seems closely related to a certain “Jig from French Quadrilles” also found in Buckley.

**MORE TO SEE & HEAR**

A few of the many valuable sources that inform and inspire our work:

- Abrahams, Roger: *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African-American Culture in the Plantation South*
- Cockrell, Dale: *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World*
- Gac, Scott: *Singing for Freedom: The Hutchinson Family Singers and the Nineteenth Century Culture of Antebellum Reform*
- Jamison, Phil: *Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics: Roots and Branches of Southern Appalachian Dance*
- Lhamon, Ward T.: *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*
- Lott, Eric: *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*
- Mahar, William: *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture*
- Twiss, Tim: *Early Banjo Complete Recordings (CD)*
- Winans, Robert, & al: *The Early Minstrel Show (CD)*
ABOUT THE HARDTACKS

The Hardtacks formed in 2012 to perform folk music of the Civil War era. Their wide-ranging programs draw inspiration from the participatory culture of the Lyceum movement and several 19th century American folk traditions, engaging audiences in immersive explorations of history as a sung, spoken, and lived experience.

~ www.CivilWarFolkMusic.com ~

This booklet accompanies The Hardtacks' CD “GLOBAL BANJAR”
All notes ©2016 Marek Bennett / All images public domain