

THE BANJO IN 1858

JOE AYERS
© Tuckahoe Music

DAWN OF AMERICAN MUSIC

Early Banjo Classics

Volume IV

from Phil. Rice's

Correct Method for the Banjo

2nd Ed.

EARLY BANJO CLASSICS VOL. IV Rice's Method for the Banjo

By 1858 the banjo had reached a level of popular appeal in the United States justly characterized as phenomenal. Its impact on American music culture was equivalent to that of the electric guitar by the mid 20th century. In fact, the parallels between them are stunning. Both were products of an advancing technology; both became the centerpiece of an otherwise highly percussive musical form that would "rock" the nation; and both relied heavily upon the influence of African Americans. In essence the banjo was "electric" before the fact, and the American public flocked to its pulsating current en masse. This formation of popular American musical taste arrived at during the mid-19th century, though repackaged time and again by commercial marketing evangelicals hyping their new sound like a musical second coming, has remained constant. The past 140 years of pop music in the United States reveals that "we the people" basically like our music to swing with a "... back beat, you can't loose it."

Phil. Rice's *Correct Method for Banjo With or Without a Master* was the first real teach-yourself-banjo tutor. Its publisher, Oliver Ditson and Co., produced many tutors and popular tune collections for mass consumption, and this was the company's third and most extensive banjo work since its first in 1851.

Its namesake, Phil. Rice, presents an illusory image by a combination of obscurity with fame. *Memorials of Minstrelsy* states: "Philip Rice was one of the pioneer banjo players of minstrelsy. In the very early days he constructed an instrument by tacking a skin over a peck measure that had been sawed in half; this attracted wide attention.

June 18, 1856, he was with Dave Reed's Minstrels on board the steamer 'James Raymond,' which traveled on the Mississippi River. He died at Grand Lake, Ark., December 4, 1857." He is listed as a participant in a banjo tournament on Oct. 19, 1857, in N.Y.C., but received no recognition in the account of that event. Of course, at the time of copyright registration he was dead and so another hand produced the final work. The circumstantial evidence suggests James Buckley as the actual author. The method taught the "banjo style" right hand striking down with the index fingernail and thumb only. All the selections recorded here are played in this style in strict adherence to the music notation.

SIDE 1 • Green Corn. Variations of this tune appear in the *Briggs' Instructor* (1855) and *Converse's New and Complete Method* (1865) under the title "Philadelphia Reel" and "Jig" respectively. A nearly identical version "Buckley's or Green Corn" appears in *Buckley's New Banjo Book* (1860). *Cettin up Stairs* appearing in the Rice method as an instrumental was a popular song as well. A lyric version appears in *Howe's 100 Ethiopian Songs* (1877) which begins: "On a Suskehanna raft, I cum down de bay. . . ." Ballrooms and dance floors were commonly on the second floor in the 18th century. **Old Virginia Jig.** A clear example of African influence upon a British folk melody. By reversing the beat emphasis an otherwise identifiable strain of Old Molly Hare (or Fairy Dance) becomes a totally different tune. The title itself is indicative of the cultural phenomenon emerging from that area and explains why the first acclaimed Ethiopian minstrel troupe took the name Virginia Minstrels even though none of the members were native to that area.

Rattlesnake Jig or Hoop de Dooden Doo. This melody and title appear in both Buckley's and Converse's methods during the 60's. A similar lyric version, credited to A. Nish, appears as late as 1909 in *Heart Songs*.

Sandy Boy / Hill Ho! *de Charleston Gals / What's goin on.* All of these melodies are "arranged by Phil. Rice." Only "Charleston Gals" reappears later in *Buckley's Banjo Guide* (1868). The bones were an early and frequent accompaniment to banjo. Frank Brower and Dan Emmett made use of this combination in their initial performances together (in Virginia) several years before the formation of the Virginia Minstrels.

Robert Ridley: "Composed by John Smith." *Memorials of Minstrelsy* describes Smith as "One of the earliest and best negro delineators ante-dating minstrelsy proper, although he was later associated with several prominent organizations." It also states: "William Farrow, who was with Joe. Sweeney's Minstrels in the 40's, and was said to be the original Old Bob Ridley, was murdered at Lebanon, Tenn. . . . November 29, 1870." The lyrics demonstrate a first hand knowledge of the slavery system by mention of bounty (an agreed upon reward, monetary or other, for the accomplishment of specific tasks within a given time frame), a practice not generally known about or acknowledged in the north. "5000 dancing Juba to de symbol," references the practice on slave ships of exercising the captives upon the open deck en masse to dance to music most often provided by their fellows. Overall the song is a brief but consummate description of a slave experience expressing a confident ability toward work, indispensability to the master, hardship and suffering, the common legacy of passage and a lament of separation. The words "Jella," "everybody" and "brothers" are euphemisms.

Side One: Green Corn / Cettin up Stairs / Old Virginia Jig • Rattlesnake Jig • Sandy Boy / Hill Ho! de Charleston Gals / What's goin on • Robert Ridley • Sam Johnson's / Mrs. McCloud's Reels • Root Hog or Die • Darkie's Jig • Down in Alabama • Power of Music • Pica-yune Butler
Side Two: Devil's Dream / Grape Vine Twist • United States it am de place • Whooop Jambooree • De Ole Gray Goose • Get Away Gumbo, Sound Your Horn / Rise Old Napper • Darling Nelly Gray • Buckley's Best / Dick Slier's Reels • Essence of Old Virginia Dance • That's So and You'd Better Believe It • John Diamond / Buckley's Walkarounds

Volume IV in a five-volume series entitled *Early Banjo Classics* produced by Tuckahoe Music. Recorded at Dream Sequence Music, Charlottesville, Va.; Recording Engineer, Kevin McNoldy. Musicians: Jos. W. Ayers-5-string banjo, bones & vocals; Eric Ayers-guitar & vocals; Chris Ayers-field drum & vocals; Gabriel Ayers-baritone horn, percussion & vocals; Heather Ayers-flute; Pete Vigour-fiddle. Music arranged by Joseph W. Ayers. Copyright © 1995 Tuckahoe Music. All rights reserved. Unauthorized duplication is prohibited by law. Tapes sold for consumer use only.

For more information on this and other products contact:
Tuckahoe Music, P.O. Box 146, Brems Bluff, VA 23022, 804-842-3573

the Banjo (1868). According to *Monarchs*, "Dick Slicer was one of the world's greatest jig dancers. His professional career commenced in the late 30's, and he had been with many of the early famous organizations, notably Sanford's Minstrels in 1859."

Essence of Old Virginia Dance: "Arranged by FB. Converse." Earliest banjo transcription of "minstrel's most famous dance," states L. F. Emery in *Black Dance from 1619 to Today*. It "came from the shuffle and led to the soft shoe. The leading exponent of the dance was Dan Bryant who perfected it in 1850." Here the first eight measures serve as introduction to the actual melody also found in Buckle's 1860 version.

That's So and You'd Better Believe It: "By G. Swain Buckle." Youngest son of James, "the young Sweeney" influenced FB. Converse to take up banjo. The accompaniment is distinct and the lyric content was timely in relation to the publication. There was a national security concern about the Mormons in Utah territory and growing talk of southern secession. The minstrel prophet did better when he stuck to generalities, as his specific political predictions proved wholly inaccurate. The last verse is a new one just for fun.

John Diamond and Buckle's Walkarounds: The walk-around was the minstrel show's grand finale, a tradition continued in Vaudeville's "WOW finish" and faintly visible at the end of TV's "Saturday Night Live" comedy review. All the performers came together on stage and danced for this number. "John Diamond was one of, if not the greatest jig dancers that the world ever knew. . . [He] was born in New York City, in 1823; he died in Philadelphia, October 29, 1857." (*Monarchs*) Buckle's is the only early banjo transcription containing 32nd notes.

2nd Edition

capture it accurately. This music defies the orderly European sense of rhythm, but its appearance in music notation demonstrates well the melding of cultures taking place. "Put it where the white folks can't get it" was the admonition of one early 20th century black director to his band, and indeed this was a chief impetus behind the development of jazz.

De Ole Gray Goose: A popular minstrel song of the early southern tradition. Note the subject is neither topical nor political but rather timeless and sexual. Reference to farm fowl is a technique that southern blues musicians will continue through the 20th century. "Have you seen my little red rooster?"

Get Away, Gumbo, Sound Your Horn: "Arranged by Phil. Rice." One of the earliest of Negro characters. Gumbo was a boatman and his horn, which customarily alerted the community of a boat's arrival or departure, was replaced by the steam whistle. *Rise Old Napper*: "Arranged by Phil. Rice." This tune is nearly identical to the well known boatman song, *Going on Down to Town*. *Darling Nelly Gray*: The "Uncle Tom's Cabin" of songs. This well known ballad is the only sentimental selection of Rice's method, and at a time when sentiment was in vogue this seems odd. But the focus of the method is toward older material, and preservation of the earlier banjo music appears an underlying concern of the "author." Sales, however, was the main concern of the publisher and Nelly Gray was a big hit at that time.

Buckle's Best Reel: The most technically challenging piece of the method when played in the "banjo style," which it is. *Dick Slicer's Reel*: A nearly identical version, same title, is found in *Buckle's New Banjo Book* (1860), and with an altered "B" section in the key of E under the title Dan Emmett's Reel in *Buckle's Guide for*

the song 'Picayune Butler's Comin' to Town,' had considerable vogue in the 50's." C. Morrell in his letter to S.S. Stewart on the first banjo tournament in America (1857) states of Butler's banjo abilities, "... In my opinion he was not second to any man living at that time, providing he was in good condition to play." Butler was the New Orleans counterpart of Virginia's Joe Sweeney. That he "reigned" in the late 1830's is made apparent by the description of his banjo. Sweeney's addition of a string in the early 30's was initially a local phenomenon, but the banjo he learned on would have been a gourd like the one described in the song.

Side 2 • Devil's Dream: The well known tune amply demonstrates the use of the triplet rolls, a hallmark of the 50's "banjo style." *Grape Vine Twist*: "Arranged by Phil. Rice." Hans Nathan cites a relationship between the "A" sections of both of these tunes. Fred Mather, Dec. 1897, stated "I knew 'Old Joe Sweeney' about 1846 or '48 when I was a boy of thirteen to fifteen. He came North with a circus twice in different years. He taught me how to 'bring down my thumb' and play 'Grape Vine Twist'." The "A" section rhythm here varies from the text. The notes of the 2nd beat are played  instead of .

United States I am de place: "Arranged by Phil. Rice." This song is of the northern minstrel genre. Though its topical political context is less specific than *Root Hog Or Die*, a subtle manifest destiny statement counting Cuba as part of the U.S. is made in the chorus. Measures 9 and 27 unintentionally deviate from the original text.

Whoop Jamboree: "Arranged by Phil. Rice." A distinctive melody with no counterpart in other 19th century banjo methods. This piece of classic syncopation possesses a universally ancient feel, clearly of no western European origin. The transcriber must have worked to

Sam Johnson's / Mrs. McCloud's Reels: Sam Johnson was "One of the earliest minstrel performers; as early as the Summer of 1844 he appeared in Hoboken, N. J., at Otto Cottage as one of the Operatic Brothers and Sisters." McCloud's is, of course, a well known, popular reel tune of Scottish origin.

Root Hog or Die: "As arranged by Phil Rice." Based on the melody of *Essence of Old Virginia*, this is the quintessential northern minstrel adaptation of the southern musical form. Full of topical political references which have no relation to plantation life, it is a fundamental expression of manifest destiny.

Darkey's Jig: "FB. Converse." This jig is unique to the Rice method. Converse fully acknowledged the influence of black banjoists. In his "Reminiscences" for *The Cadenza* Converse transcribed another banjo tune frequently performed by a black man in his boyhood home of Elmira, N.Y.

Down in Alabama: The evolution of this song figures prominently in American Civil War history as it was the model for the famous Confederate recruiting song, *I'm in the Cavalry*. Sam Sweeney, famed banjo sidekick of J.E.B. Stuart, surely knew this original version as did Stuart himself who was a lover of popular music and good minstrel show tunes. He could possibly have witnessed a performance of Phil Rice with Reed's Minstrels while on duty in the Midwest in the 50's.

Power of Music, as executed by Tom Briggs: "Arranged by Buckle." To demonstrate the intertwining relationships in this early phase of banjo transcriptions, we have here a Briggs piece, arranged by Buckle, in Phil. Rice's method.

Picayune Butler: *Monarchs* states "John Butler, one of the best of the early banjoists, and who made famous