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Welcome back to Busy Kids Love Music, the podcast where we explore the wonderful world of music, including its fascinating instruments. I'm your host, Carly Seifert, the creator of Busy Kids Do Piano and in today's episode, we're diving into the world of the banjo.

The banjo is a unique and versatile instrument with a rich history that spans continents and cultures. Given that June is also African-American Music Appreciation Month, it's a fitting time to dig into the history of this instrument, as its roots can be traced back to West Africa, where similar instruments were played for centuries. Listen to this ancestor of the banjo, called the akonting. It is a 3 stringed instrument with a long neck and a body made from a gourd with a goat skin stretched over it.

There are more than 60 similar instruments found in the West African region, and the instruments were brought to the Americas by enslaved Africans.

In the 1830s, something called blackface minstrelsy made the banjo really famous in the United States. It was like a big show with music and skits, and some people pretended to be Black. They wore makeup to look like Black people, but portrayed Black people in unkind and cruel ways. Even though these groups said they were showing what life was like on Southern plantations, it wasn't true.

There was a man named Joel Walker Sweeney who was one of the first to play the banjo in these minstrel shows. He learned how to play from Black musicians in Virginia, where he lived. Joel became really famous, and lots of other white people in Blackface started playing the banjo too, especially at circuses and variety shows.

By the time the 1850s rolled around, the banjo was a big part of life in America. People wanted banjos, so makers and music book writers worked hard to sell them to White families who were doing pretty well. They tried to make the banjo seem fancy and special,

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but they also wanted to make it seem less like it came from Africa. So, they changed how banjos looked and how people played them.

One person named Tom Briggs wrote a book in 1855 called "Briggs' Banjo Instructor" to teach people how to play the banjo. Before, people played the banjo by hitting the strings downwards, but Briggs showed a new way where you pick the strings upwards, kind of like how you play a guitar. This became known as the guitar style. The songs in the book changed too, now including songs from Europe like waltzes and polkas.

The banjo's unique sound and versatility quickly captured the hearts of musicians across different genres. By the end of the 1800s, the banjo was the most popular stringed instrument in America! With its bright, twangy tone and distinctive fingerpicking style, the banjo has found its way into all kinds of musical traditions, from Appalachian folk music to jazz and even rock.

Today, the banjo continues to be a beloved instrument in both traditional and contemporary music. From the iconic bluegrass tunes of Earl Scruggs to the innovative sounds of modern banjo players like Béla Fleck, the banjo's influence is felt far and wide. Folk music artist Rhiannon Giddens, who plays the banjo in Beyonce's hit song "Texas Hold'em" said in an interview with AARP, "The banjo is part of the hidden history of America."

As we wrap up today's episode, let's take a moment to appreciate the banjo's enduring legacy and its significance in Black history. From its humble origins in West Africa to its pivotal role in American music, the banjo stands as a symbol of resilience, creativity, and culture. You can listen to a curated playlist of banjo music featuring traditional African instruments as well as modern and contemporary banjo music in this episode's shownotes at [buskidsdopiano.com/podcast/124](https://www.buskidsdopiano.com/podcast/124).

That's all for today's episode of Busy Kids Love Music. In our next episode, we'll be kicking off our annual summer series, Around the

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World with Busy Kids Love Music, where we travel the world to learn about folk music from all over the globe, collecting passport stamps as we go. I hope you'll join me for that in two weeks. Bye for now!