

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH CYNTHIA SAYER

Videotaped for The Banjo Project on Oct 13, 2002

NY Banjo Concert, Albany , NY

Interviewed by Marc Fields



The interview began with questions about how Sayer, who originally played piano and grew up in New Jersey , discovered the four-string banjo and early jazz...

CYNTHIA SAYER: ...The banjo lead me to this wonderful old music, old style jazz, and I adore it, I just think it's great. There's something very raw about it and soulful and heart-felt. And it's that primitive raw edge, along with the free-spirited jazz aspect. I love that combination and I can't get enough of it...

My hero banjo player is an historic player named Elmer Snowden...When I heard "Harlem Banjo," [LP] I was like, oh my god, this is amazing, you can be a hot, jazz swingy player and play the banjo... Before, I bought into the cliché about the instrument. I thought banjo was very theatrical, it was like a prop, it was a lot of fun, but for real music I would play piano. And then I listened to this Elmer Snowden and I think, you goof ball, any instrument is as good as you choose to make it. And this was the thing that was the singular turning point, where I said that is what I wanna be able to do, because that just totally connected to me. And his hot, swingy style on that recording just knock me out. And between, I would say, Elmer Snowden and Django Reinhardt, the combination of the two are what launched me in terms of figuring out what I wanted to do with the banjo.

I don't know if most people know, but Django started off as a banjo player. As did other guys like Bucky Pizzarelli, started on the banjo. That's why they do that [strums banjo] that tremolo thing. That comes from a, a banjo mentality...

MF: *Did you always play four-string banjo or did you ever try five-string?*

CS: [Laughs] I'm missing that string, you know. It's not that I can't count up to five, it's that I really like it this way. [Strums banjo] Well, I suppose I play the banjo very much like a jazz guitarist plays a jazz guitar. I play the rhythm, I play solos, I combine single string and chordal work, and I also make use of the things that are uniquely banjo-ish like tremolos and strumming styles. I don't want to play my banjo as though it's a guitar. I want it to be a banjo, but I want it to be a jazz instrument, too...

...The four-string banjo world, with which I'm very familiar, needless to say, regards the five-string world as this foreign planet, and never the twain shall meet. I remember going to some banjo conventions years ago, where when the five-string players would get up to play, the four-string banjo players would leave the room, they weren't interested in even listening.

MF: *How difficult was it for you as a woman to be taken seriously as a banjo player?*

CS: [Being] a female banjoist made it very hard to be a beginner. No one invited me to the "hangs," [laughs] and that wasn't because guys are necessarily exclusionary, it was like I was uncomfortable, too. I wasn't that comfortable hanging out in bars, and stuff like that, and sitting in... When I was twenty, I was a little intimidated by it all. And I think it made it hard for me to go through that initial learning process, much harder than it would have if I had been male. When I first started touring, people would take a look at me and they'd go, what do we got going on here tonight? And then they'd be so shocked that I could play, that then they would think that I was better than, you know, than I was. I mean, there was just the presumption that I had to work through ever time, and there was such a presumption that, I couldn't play. I, I'd walk into a room and they were like, oh god, [making gesture of an "X" with her arms]. And now, I just find that that's just not true at all. I think that, number one, I've been doing this long enough and I've -- knock on wood -- become more well-established, but, also, times have changed.

MF: *Let's talk about the banjo's origins and its social history...*

CS: ...The African gourd instrument evolved into a banjo on American soil. It actually became a banjo in America and this African association with the banjo set the trajectory for the rest of its existence. And it has continued and still continues to have an impact on who plays it, why they'd play it, who doesn't play it and why they don't and the way the instrument is used. It's just never stopped, this African influence.

And, of course, that's a product of our social history as a country. Originally, it was an African-American instrument, and slaves played it on plantations and it eventually made its way to the cities. The second group that played the banjo were women. And women played the banjo, initially, you know, on the farm or in the home, because, like, African-Americans they were also considered, simple, and emotional, and not too much happening there, so it was OK, you know. Socially it was acceptable for women, it was the next logical step for women to play.

...I just love the inherent humor of the fact that there used to be tons of women playing banjo and now I'm like this freak [laughs]. 'Cause it actually was a female instrument at one point, like piano was considered a female instrument too.

But the banjo has a huge racial stigma attached to it. To this day, it has never gotten over its slave roots, and there are both cons and pros to this. Because along with this African image that people would attach to the banjo, which was all the down side of it, but there was another side to it where it was very exotic and foreign and boundary breaking.

...The interesting thing about the Jazz Age with women is at first the banjo was a proper ladies' instrument, and then later society women in the late 1800s would play the banjo because it was a really rebellious thing to do. It was very cool and it was kind of daring to play the banjo. And then later it went even another step with women of the Jazz Age, they would play banjo like they were smoking and doing whatever they wanted to do. ... There were women playing the banjo because it was independence, sexual freedom...

The bottom line is, all of this is so reflective of just what happened in our social history. And this banjo is almost a symbol of, of what happened [laughs] here...The way [the banjo] was dealt with socially is also reflective of the impact that it had musically. Because underneath everything, this African influence is what drove it to all of the different things that it did.

The absence of African-American players today is part of the same story just going on and on and on. It's like the banjo needs therapy to open the closets and [laughs] get all the skeletons out or something, you know, so it can finally breathe and do its thing. Although maybe that would lose an awful lot of it too, I don't know [laughs].