

Door County Brewing Company

Clawhammer Pilsner

Baileys Harbor, WI
doorcountybrewingco.com



The banjo is most commonly associated with bluegrass and country music, both of which are predominantly a part of white American culture. In fact, most Americans would find it very difficult to name one non-white banjo player; an interesting detail considering that, at one time, all banjo players were black.

The banjo originated in West Africa and moved to the Caribbean aboard slave ships in the late 1500s. From there, the instrument eventually made its way to the U.S. and found a home among



This painting, titled The Old Plantation, is believed to be the first ever depiction of someone playing a banjo-like instrument in America. It likely represents Gullah slaves in Beaufort, SC and was painted around 1785-1795.

plantations in the South. Many early African instruments resemble the modern-day banjo and it is hard to say that any one in particular evolved into the modern instrument. It is more likely that instruments were innovated due to the available materials and technology rather than any intricate planning or design and they often blended with instruments found in white cultures as well.

The exact meaning of the word “banjo” is lost but it almost certainly comes from Africa where similar early instruments had names like *bangie*, *banza*, *bonjaw* or one of the most commonly used names, *banjar*. Two particular instruments stand out in their similarity to modern banjos: one is called a *kora* which features a very similar body but also a 21-string arched neck, and the other is an *akanting* which hails from Senegambia and, like most early banjo-like instruments, has a body made from a gourd that is covered with an animal skin and a neck made from a stick. The strings were usually made from animal gut or plant fibers.

For many hundreds of years, banjo-like instruments provided a source of entertainment and storytelling for slaves and by the time the instruments reached modern-day America they had changed quite a bit. While the general shape and concept of the instrument was the same (and still is today), the body of the *banjar* developed into more of a hand-carved box while the neck saw one of the instrument’s most dramatic changes, the addition of a fingerboard, a modification likely influenced by European instruments that were similar to, and likely ancestors of, the guitar.

It didn’t take long for the banjo to take over America. Unfortunately, like much of the rest of the slave culture, early African-American banjo music was often ignored and many of its songs are forever lost. Even though many slaves taught their white masters to play, the banjo was an exclusively black instrument until the 1830s and 1840s when white banjo-playing minstrels first began to emerge. They often used a style of banjo that featured four longer strings and one short string, much like many modern-day instruments. They also often wore blackface, played songs that came straight from the plan-

tations and some even became so famous that they toured the world. As banjos became more popular, they evolved to take on modern technologies like manufactured wooden frames and metal strings.

Banjos continued to be played by both blacks and whites for decades with the musicians often passing tunes back-and-forth. Following the Civil War, African-American banjo players began to find more acceptance and employment, including with legendary band leader Scott Joplin. Rhythmic banjo playing greatly influenced the development of ragtime, folk and jazz music in the early 1900s and black banjo-playing musicians like Horace Weston, James Bland and Hosea Easton became famous celebrities. But by the start of WWI, the music that often featured banjos began to fade in popularity, and the instrument faded away too.

The banjo’s resurgence started around the mid-1900s when it was often used as a comical prop. Bluegrass music also began to emerge from the Appalachian hillbilly culture around this time and modern recording technology caused it to spread across the country. Most of the new generation of banjo players were white and the bluegrass and country music scene became the instrument’s new home. Although the instrument was still commonly used as a backdrop for dancing and storytelling at the time, musicians like Earl Scruggs, Ralph Stanley and Bill Monroe began to redefine the banjo and use it ways that still carry on today. Banjo playing and bluegrass music have seen a huge surge in popularity over the past few decades and many musicians from around the world have stayed connected to the instrument’s roots by playing renditions of old-timey tunes blended with new creative elements.

Clawhammer isn’t just the name of a tasty Pilsner from Door County Brewing Company, it also refers to a banjo playing method that gets its name from the claw-like shape that a player’s picking hand makes. While the vast majority of today’s banjo players are of white ancestry, there are still a few black banjo players to be found, like the Grammy Award-winning members of the Carolina Chocolate Drops who keep alive many traditional African-American folk songs. This music is, after all, the first ever played on a banjo in the United States of America.



From the Brewer: Clawhammer is a classic German style pilsner brewed with an American point of view. Dry, crisp, and refreshing. This beer is as delicious as it is simple. We use German Mandarina Bavaria Hops, which add notes of tangerine and citrus to complement the crispness of the beer. ABV 5.1% John, Danny, Angie & Ben McMahon - Founders