

The Jumpin' Jehosafats are a traditional jazz band, but a very unusual one. Instead of the usual gigs, the Jehosafats play only concerts, and play about 40 each year. They have toured widely in the U.S. as well as in Haiti and Jamaica. The concerts are benefits for charities such as Habitat for Humanity and Operation Classroom.

The band is a huge amount of fun. The trumpet plays a strong driving lead, the trombone a gutbucket tailgate, the soprano a Bechet-like obbligato. Leader Lyndy Zabel plays a 4/4 rhythm instead of the usual stride piano, and combines it with a dazzling right hand. Unlike other traditional jazz bands, this one has a flute in the front line. Flute solos such as "Swinging Shepherd Blues" and "Amazing Grace" are a delight as are the duets between flute and reed instruments. The tuba plays a strong bass line, and contributes interesting solos and vocals. Dave Tidball plays remarkably melodic drum solos. The vocalist, Barbara York, sings blues, standards, and gospel. Her range is astonishing. The band has produced two CDs, which include original compositions as well as traditional jazz standards.

The name, Jumpin' Jehosafats, comes from an old explicative commonly used a generation ago. The first Jehosafat was a trumpet player who played for King David and was made his Secretary of State. The name is spelled with an "f" instead of a "ph" in honor of Fats Waller, whose tunes are included in the repertoire. (See the longer article in the September JazzNotes.)

Book Review: **The Banjo Entertainers: Roots to Ragtime**

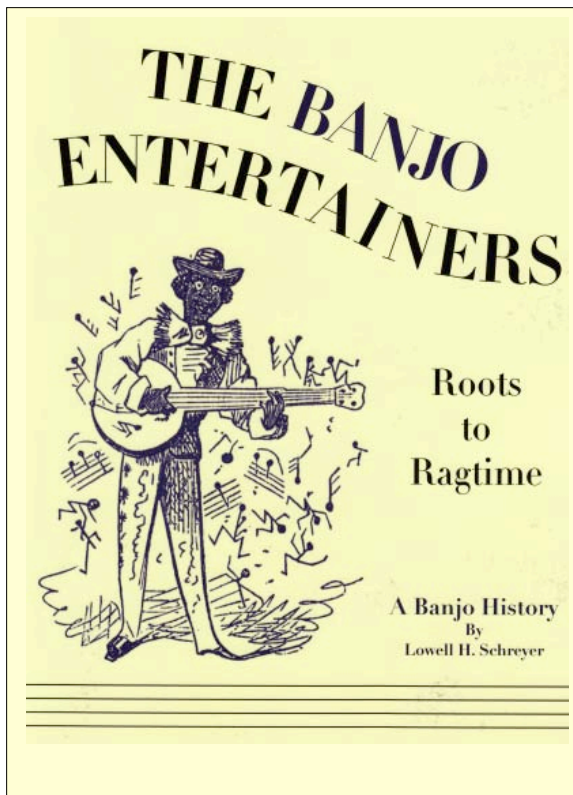
by **Lowell Schreyer**

Minnesota Heritage Publishing

Reviewed by Dick Parker and Jim Torok

This is a new book written by a much honored and revered Minnesota musician. In recognition of his writing, research and performance on the banjo, Lowell Schreyer has been inducted into both the Minnesota Music Hall of Fame and the National Four-string Banjo Hall of Fame.

This book is a history of banjo entertainers (Schreyer says they were more than just players), from the beginnings on Southern plantations in the 1700s to the ragtime period at the turn of the 20th century. Schreyer found so much material on that period that the history from that time to the present has been left for a second book.



Book cover showing banjoist Frank Converse.



Photo by Don Jackson

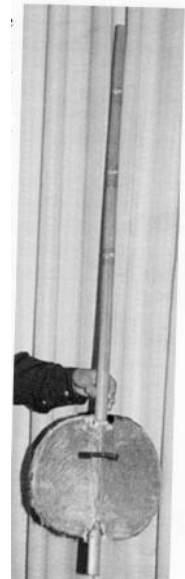
Lowell Schreyer with daughter Debbie, son Ted (on bass sax) and son-in-law Tom Owens in a 2006 TCJS "Jazz From J to Z" concert.

Schreyer is well qualified to write a history of banjo entertainers, since he is one himself. He has toured on U.S. riverboats and on concert trips in Europe besides performing on countless gigs and in festivals around the country. He has published a biography of the late Eddie Peabody, perhaps history's best-known four-string (jazz-style) banjo player, whom he knew.

He's also a journalist, retired from careers as a reporter and editor at the Mankato Free Press and directing the news bureau of Mankato State University.

Schreyer did the research for this book during his many years of touring, cranking through the microfilm rolls at local newspapers and libraries in cities and towns he visited. The result is a very complete history of the instrument and the early professionals who popularized it.

The idea of the banjo, regarded as the only American-born musical instrument, was brought from Africa by slaves. It had multiple African ancestors, for example, the Akonting — a papyrus stalk attached to a half gourd whose opening was covered by a stretched animal hide. Three strings went the length of the stalk and transferred their vibrations to the hide via a wooden bridge. There were no frets. An illustration of an Akonting is at right. Frets — wire cross-rails that define the notes on the neck — and more



**Akonting
front view**

strings were added later, so by the early 1800s the instrument resembled today's five-string banjo, which has a short "drone" or thumb string that sounds a constant note. Some 19th-century players continued to use fretless banjos, and Appalachian traditionalists still make and play them today.

Four-string banjos as we know them didn't appear until the early 20th century (unless a banjo entertainer broke a string), so we'll have to wait for Schreyer's second volume to learn about the tenor and plectrum players and their instruments. Schreyer, by the way, can play any style of banjo.

The author dug up a surprising number of entertainers, beginning with Joel Walker Sweeney, an accomplished violinist who learned from Virginia slaves in the early 1800s and made the first wood-hoop banjo, based on the gourd instruments. Minstrel troupes grew out of Sweeney's success in the 1830s and 1840s. Schreyer documents the proliferation of those groups with many newspaper ads of the day, along with photos (after photography's introduction in 1839). The cover illustration is an 1850s drawing of minstrel player Frank Converse. And anyone who remembers the New Christy Minstrels from the 1960s will enjoy learning about the original Christy Minstrels in Schreyer's coverage.

The book is encyclopedic in its listing of banjo entertainers and academic in its documentation with footnotes and appendices. One of your humble reviewers fancies himself a banjo player, and upon first glancing at the table of contents noticed a listing of banjoists. Turning to that section, he looked up his own name, for some reason. And found it. "Oh, Lowell, that's nice of you," he thought with a smile. Turning to page 116, he read that Dick Parker (1836-1908) performed during the Civil War years and afterward, and even played in England with Christy's Minstrels.

The book's final chapter takes us into the 20th century and ragtime, played on five-string instruments, and some of the earliest recordings. Vess Ossman, for example, waxed "The St. Louis Tickle" in 1906. That piece is central to a question that puzzles hard-core traditional-jazz devotees today: It's a four-strain rag whose second part is the same melody as "Buddy Bolden's Blues," a tune popularized by Jelly Roll Morton decades later. Jelly Roll said Bolden wrote it (circa 1902?), but there's no documentation. Did Morton steal the Tickle strain, or was it lifted from Bolden? Schreyer doesn't address the question. Maybe in the next book.

THE BANJO ENTERTAINERS: ROOTS TO RAGTIME

269 pages, \$35 plus \$5 shipping in USA

Available from:

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