

TELLING THE WHOLE STORY

New film explores the multicultural roots of traditional music and dance

Old-time, mountain music, buck-dancing — no matter which terms come to mind, Western North Carolina's traditional music and dance play a central part in the region's identity, a kind of cultural anchor delighting hillbillies and hipsters alike.

But while most fans of the genre are familiar with its British and Scots-Irish heritage, few realize the important role that African-Americans and indigenous peoples had in crafting some of America's oldest art forms. In an effort to shine a spotlight on those contributions, filmmaker **David Weintraub's** latest documentary, *A Great American Tapestry: The Many Strands of Mountain Music*, explores the diverse roots of traditional music and dance in this region.

The film's world premiere is set for Thursday, June 22, at Blue Ridge Community College. Subsequent screenings will take place at the Fine Arts Theatre on Thursday, June 29, and at White Horse Black Mountain on Friday, June 30.

CHANGING DIRECTION

Making this film has been on his bucket list for more than six years, says Weintraub, who also runs the Center for Cultural Preservation in Hendersonville. "It's become more complicated than I first anticipated; other things kept coming up that were so exciting and interesting, too."

Intrigued by old-time's enduring popularity, Weintraub originally set out to document the tradition's abil-



OLD-TIME TRADITION: Local filmmaker David Weintraub's new documentary, *A Great American Tapestry*, delves into the multicultural roots of old-time music and dance, from early African and indigenous influences to present-day performers like Rhiannon Giddens, pictured. Photo courtesy of Weintraub Films

ity to "carry on across the generations," despite "the completely different world [we live in]." But as he delved deeper into the history of mountain music, the documentarian was increasingly bothered by the inconsistencies between the genre's accepted history as a largely European

invention and the details that seemed to say differently.

"There was a point in time when I realized I was telling part of the story, but there's a whole other part of the story that I've never heard," Weintraub says.

To discover those missing pieces, Weintraub turned to the research of local music historians such as **David Whisnant** and **Phil Jamison**. "I leaned heavily on those scholars," he says, pointing to groundbreaking works like Jamison's 2015 book *Hoedowns, Reels & Frolics*.

Jamison, who spent 14 years poring over primary documents going back to Colonial times for the book, says his research revealed, among other things, that "all the earliest dance callers were African-American." Without the formal dance training many white settlers received, African-Americans often gave instructions on the spot.

Other old-time dance terms, such as buck dancing, have a more sordid history. "We use that term now to mean an individual dancer," Jamison reveals, "but originally, a 'buck' was a male slave. White people adopted not only the term but some of the style and steps."

African-Americans and indigenous peoples continued to play a large role in traditional music into the 20th century, says Weintraub. By the end of the 1800s, half of all string bands in the U.S. were composed of black musicians; Cherokee musicians, like Walker Calhoun and Manco Sneed, meanwhile, were widely acknowledged as some of the foremost old-time performers of their times.

BLACKFACED AND WHITEWASHED

Why, then, do so few know about the African and Native American old-time tradition? According to Weintraub, cul-



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tural appropriation, coupled with the growth of mass media, combined to drive minority musicians into the shadows in the early 1900s.

The practice of “blackface” — white musicians in greasepaint portraying African-Americans through negative stereotypes — grew in popularity to the point that “you had black people blacking their faces, mimicking white people in black face,” Weintraub says. “It becomes this ironic and disgusting ethnic in American music.”

As radio broadcasts and personal record players grew in popularity, the budding music industry began marketing old-time and country acts as “hillbilly music,” downplaying minority musicians’ contributions. “[Record companies] thought the only thing black people will buy is blues and jazz,” says the filmmaker. “If you were a black string band player, they wouldn’t record you.”

By the end of the 20th century, the diverse cultural roots of old-time music and dance had been essentially whitewashed, adds Jamison: “It’s kind of the democratization of the dance — the traditions got shared.” With few people of color represented in popular media, “People for-

got where [the music and dance] came from.”

‘CREATING A SPACE FOR ALL CULTURES’

But the white cloud cast over traditional music and dance is beginning to lift. Popular African-American musicians like **Rhiannon Giddens** and **Amythyst Kiah** — who feature in Weintraub’s film — have made a name for themselves playing Appalachian roots music.

For Kiah, who began playing old-time after attending East Tennessee State University, the genre offered “the kinds of things that inspired me — alienation and loss; sounds that had a foreboding or brooding quality,” she says.

While her entrance into the old-time scene was largely met with positive reinforcement, Kiah admits there were some folks uncomfortable with a person of color singing traditional music. “I got mixed reviews, if you will,” she says. “Through slavery and Jim Crow, people developed attitudes and justifications for treating a group of people a certain way; that manifests into these stereotypes of what a black person is and should be interested in.”

Studies like Weintraub’s film, she adds, can help dispel such stereotypes, creating a space for all cultures. “History is a narrative about people, places and ways of life,” Kiah says. “Now we have more information to help shape up the narrative and tell all the different aspects of what it means to be an American, a musician and a Southerner.” Kiah, along with other local balladeers like **Sheila Kay Adams**, will perform at the world premiere of *A Great American Tapestry* before the film’s screening.

Weintraub hopes that the film will further music lovers’ appreciation of the diverse influences that old-time music and dance sprang from.

“It’s exciting to know that there isn’t one straight line,” says the filmmaker, “that there’s [cultural] tributaries connecting to other tributaries, becoming this incredible river of music. I think when we understand the role we all played in both society and in music, we have a better sense of being part of something larger than ourselves.” X

Screenings

A *Great American Tapestry* will be shown at the following times. Tickets are \$10-\$15. Info at 828-692-8062 or saveculture.org

180 W. Campus Drive, Flat Rock

Performances by Joe Penland and others

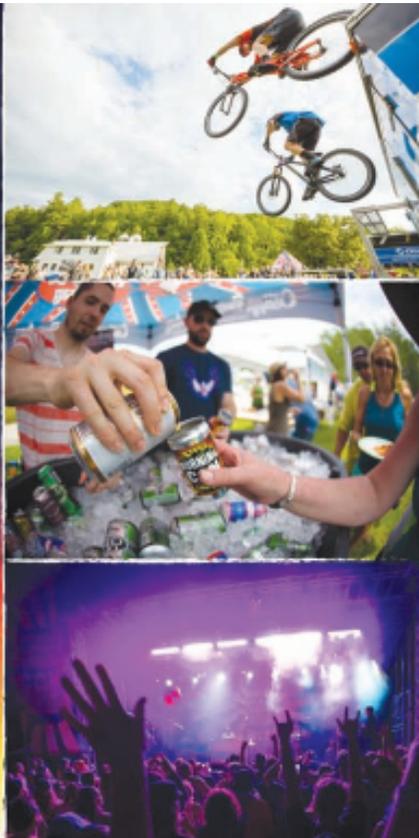
• Friday, June 30, 7:30 p.m., White Horse Black Mountain, 105 Montreat Road, Black Mountain

Performances by Sheila Kay Adams, Amythyst Kiah and the Relics

• Thursday, June 29, 7:30 p.m., Fine Arts Theatre, 36 Biltmore Ave.

• Thursday, June 22, 7 p.m., Blue Ridge Community College, Bo Thomas Auditorium,

Performances by Rhiannon and the Relics and Bobby McMillon



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