

Seth Swingle Biography

Seth Swingle is an award-winning musician and scholar. A curious and dedicated practitioner of traditional music, he has studied Southern banjo styles with noted folklorist Mike Seeger, given talks and performances of banjo history at universities throughout the South, and is 2-time Virginia State Banjo Champion. He can pick, strum, pluck, and beat upon the banjo in a half-dozen archaic and modern banjo styles and in over a dozen tunings. His new CD, *Solo 5- & 6-String Banjo*, features Seth playing everything from intricate Irish reels to 19th century waltzes to fiery Appalachian breakdowns. He explains, “the banjo was once the universal American instrument, played by men and women of every class. People used the banjo as a courting instrument, a dance instrument, a stage instrument, a parlor instrument. We have this image today of the banjo as a rural, Appalachian, white instrument, but it was played almost exclusively by African-Americans until the 1830’s, was hugely popular in the urban North-East as early as the 1840’s, and was a respectable middle-class instrument by the 1890’s.” Seth brings the wide and varied history of the banjo to life on stage with music that stretches across the centuries to the earliest transcriptions of banjo music and even to the banjo’s roots in W. Africa.

One of Seth’s biggest musical influences was the late Mike Seeger. An indefatigable teacher, musician, field recorder and folklorist, Seeger influenced generations of old-time and traditional musicians. Through a year-long **Virginia Foundation for the Humanities Folklife Apprenticeship**, Seth was able to study many Southern banjo styles with him. This apprenticeship instilled in Seth a deep appreciation for the art of performing while informing.

In his search to understand the banjo’s history, Seth has also studied the n’goni, a banjo ancestor, with griot Cheick Hamala Diabaté. A Mandé griot (a trained member of the hereditary musician class) from Mali, Cheick is one of the foremost representatives of traditional Malian music in America, and has explored banjo/n’goni connections with Bob Carlin on their Grammy-nominated album, *From Mali To America*. As his apprentice, Seth has performed with Cheick at the **Kennedy Center**, **Merlefest**, and the **First Black Banjo Gathering**.

After graduating from the University of Chicago with a Bachelor’s Degree in Middle Eastern History, Seth received a **Fulbright Scholarship** to study traditional Mandé music in Mali, W. Africa. In addition to the n’goni, Seth became proficient on the kora, a 21-string African harp capable of complex counterpoint and shimmering cascades of notes. His fluency in French and Bambara have allowed him to immerse himself in Malian society and communicate and play with working musicians throughout Mali. He has performed (in Bambara) at the **Festival sur le Niger** and on **Malian national television**.

As an academic and musician, Seth has been an invited lecturer and performer at The **Banjo Collectors' Gathering**, the **Center for the Study of the American South at UNC Chapel Hill**, **Appalachian State University**, and **Virginia Wesleyan College**.

An unabashed frequenter of banjo contests, he has won numerous ribbons including **First Place** in the **Mt. Airy Fiddlers Convention** and **Appalachian String-Band Festival-Youth Category**, two consecutive years as **Virginia State Banjo Champion**. Seth has been racking up awards, during 2015 alone he has taken the **Grand Prize** at the **Charlie Poole Festival**, **First Place** at **Morehead Fiddler's Convention - Banjo Competition**, **First Place** at **Highland County Fiddler's Convention** and **Second Place** at **Clifftop - Adult Banjo Division**.

When not touring, Seth divides his time between Central Virginia and Mali, West Africa.