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A Virginia Virtuoso by Way of Mali Comes to Virginia Wesleyan

Written by [Dan Margolies](#) on 12 January 2015.

It is not often that a musician's bio includes both the descriptions “Fulbright Scholar” and “old-time banjo player,” but then Seth Swingle has been forging a unique path since he started winning prestigious banjo contests at the age of 11.

Now just 25, his musical mastery is matched only by his appreciation for and knowledge of the history of the banjo, which place Swingle among the top academic scholars to study the instrument around the world.

Swingle’s academic grants from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation throughout his high school and college years afforded him unique opportunities to study with some of the finest scholars in the field. In 2005, he was awarded a Virginia Foundation for the Humanities year-long Virginia Folklife Apprenticeship with the late, old-time banjo master and folklorist, Mike Seeger. His time with Seeger instilled in him a deep appreciation for the art of performing while informing.

During his young life, he has woven together performance opportunities and study as he immersed himself in the music and cultures of his chosen instruments, countries and languages. Seth began studying the n’goni, one of the antecedents of the



banjo, in 2004. A mentorship with n'goni teacher and Malian griot Cheick Hamala transformed into a musical partnership, which led Swingle to first share the stage with Hamala at Merlefest in 2006. Along with Cheick Hamala, Swingle joined Mike Seeger, Bob Carlin and Bela Fleck for a power-house banjo workshop at Merlefest that same year.

In 2011, Seth was awarded a year-long Fulbright Scholarship to study the n'goni in Mali, West Africa. Since then, he has spent six months of each year in Mali studying and playing n'goni and other traditional instruments under the tutelage of kora master Toumani Kouyate. Seth makes his home in Central Virginia when not touring or living in Mali, West Africa. He will be performing at Virginia Wesleyan College's Blocker Auditorium on January 15 at 7:30 p.m. as part of the College's annual old time music series.

Dan Margolies: What exactly is “old time music”? And does this have any meaning in a world where scholars and musicians have now recognized the influence of “old” music from Mali on American vernacular traditions?

Seth Swingle: Roughly speaking, “old time music” refers to traditional American music, usually from the South and Midwest, before the birth of bluegrass music in 1945. It's American music from Irish, Scottish, English, and African roots, plus other European countries and some Native American influences. The most popular instruments in old time music were the banjo and fiddle, though the guitar gained in popularity after the turn of the 20th century. Other instruments included the mandolin, autoharp, quills (panpipes), jaw-harp, song-bow, fife, piano, dulcimer, bass, harmonica, ukulele, bones, pump-organ, etc. Solo ballad singing, Primitive Baptist and Sacred Harp choirs, and harmony singing were also big parts of the music, plus field hollers, children's play-party songs, ham-boning, and work-songs are also part of old time music. It's a pretty broad term which, like any other description of a musical genre, gets a little fuzzy around the edges.

You have studied with recognized masters of traditional music in both the United States and Mali. What have been the most challenging and rewarding aspects of entering the continuum of these traditions?

Hmm, tricky question. It's a continual pleasure to listen to the old masters of both genres, to hear the ways in which life-long musicians have personalized standard songs. The infinite adaptability of traditional tunes and songs is amazing to me, and I find it really pleasurable to hear the same song interpreted by two different musicians. As for the challenging part, finding my own voice within both traditional musics has been difficult, and also learning to play with other musicians within a duo or group context. The banjo and kora are both solo and group instruments, and the playing styles are very different depending on how many people you're playing with.

The banjo does not always get a lot of respect in cultural circles in the United States. What is the situation in Mali for n'goni or kora players?

Musicians have a mixed reputation in all cultures, I think! Still, the n'goni and kora are a little more integrated into mainstream Malian culture than the banjo is in American culture. Traditional music is alive and well in West Africa (there was never a 'revival' scene because the music has never needed reviving) and plays a bigger part in everyday life than it does here in the States.

What are the responses to you as a cross cultural player in the United States and in Mali among other musicians and others?

There's cross-Atlantic interest in both directions. Malian and American traditional musics differ structurally, aesthetically, and in the contexts in which they're played, but I think good music is appreciated everywhere. Interestingly, the Malians tend to like simpler tunes with strong rhythm, whereas Americans seem to like the really complex kora tunes.

When Uncle Dave Macon saw Earl Scruggs play for the first time at the Grand Ole Opry, he said, according to legend, "he's a good banjo player but he ain't one damn bit funny." What do you think Uncle Dave would think of you playing the banjo or the kora? Would he have recognized the connections? Does it matter? Do banjo players and kora players play similar comic roles historically or do these instruments signify different ranks?

The kora is definitely taken more seriously, both in Mali and abroad, than the banjo! And no, there are no cultural expectations for kora players to be funny, on-stage or off. In fact, many of the best-known kora players have been men in their 50's and older, who are given a lot of weight in Malian society. Most kora music is based on centuries-old court songs, melodies that have been interpreted by generation after generation of musicians, and is meant to be introspective and "deep." Nowadays, it's sometimes used for dance and popular music, but it's not an electric guitar. Unlike the banjo, the kora is a virtuosic instrument which requires years of serious study.

As for Uncle Dave, he was a popular entertainer, so it's hard to know what he would have made of the kora. That said, there have always been lots of banjo players who played solely for their own enjoyment or that of their family and neighbors, and I think they would have a different perspective.

What's so interesting about the history of the banjo?

The banjo has been around since Colonial times, and has been a lot of different things to a lot of different people. Here's an instrument that was created by African slaves from a variety of West African instruments, popularized by them throughout the South (and the Caribbean), then appropriated by white popular

musicians who took it to the North (New York especially, but also Boston, Providence, and elsewhere), out West, and even to Europe, particularly England. Physically, the banjo went from a simple gut-strung gourd instrument to a tack-head grain-sifter banjo, was commercialized in the 1840s and '50s by William Boucher and others, then had all sorts of metal parts (hooks, brackets, tone-rings, geared tuners, frets, etc.) added in the late 19th century, and was even hybridized to make banjo-mandolines, banjo-ukeleles, banjo-guitars and even weirder instruments in the early 1900s. The banjo has been a folk instrument, a pop instrument, a homemade instrument, a commercial, factory-made instrument. It's been played in college glee clubs and coal mines, in concert halls and up hollers. In other words, I think it's an ideal lens through which to inspect American history.

What sort of music can listeners expect to hear?

There'll be banjo music from 1855 to the present, including pop songs from the minstrel era, mountain songs and tunes from North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia, and maybe even some bluegrass. I'll also play a few tunes on the n'goni and the akonting, two "ancestor" instruments of the banjo from Africa.

Seth Swingle will be performing at Virginia Wesleyan College's Blocker Auditorium on January 15 at 7:30 p.m. as part of the College's annual old time music series. The show is free and open to the public. [More information.](#)



About Dan Margolies

Dr. Dan Margolies is a professor of history at Virginia Wesleyan College, where he specializes in American foreign relations and teaches a wide variety of classes on topics such as globalization and empire, Old and New South, the Civil War, the 19th century, maritime history, and radicalism and violence in American history. He also teaches courses on various aspects of Korean and Mongolian history, on Appalachian traditional music, and on the history and practice of beekeeping.