

Musician follows banjo's roots right to Africa

TORONTO'S JAYME STONE

BY BRIANA GOLDBERG

Ask most people about the banjo, and odds are they'll make a joke about *Deliverance*.

The 1972 film starring Burt Reynolds crystallized all the twangy, hillbilly stereotypes about the instrument in the first few minutes of its opening sequence: A cocky businessman passing through a remote Georgia town gets into the battle of the *Dueling Banjos* with a coverall-clad local.

Since then, when most people hear "banjo," they think "diddle-dee-dee, dee-dee, dee-dee deeee."

But not Jayme Stone.

Stone is a Toronto-based banjo musician hailed as a hero, a virtuoso, the next Bela Fleck. And tonight, he's going to tell Toronto the real story of the banjo — by playing it. The story that starts not in the hills of the U.S. south, but several hundred years ago in the heart of West Africa.

"I had a couple of banjo teachers early on that at least knew that much — that the banjo came from Africa — and as soon as I heard that, my ears kind of tweaked," he says.

Stone dug into books and CDs and began to put the pieces together. He learned that banjos started out as hollowed-out gourds covered with animal skin, centuries ago in West Africa.

He learned that when European colonial powers started "outsourcing" their work through slavery, those gourd banjos came across the ocean along with their African players.

He learned that colonial culture took the banjo from those slaves and adapted it to the new world with all its metals and tools and synthetic splendours.

Stone calls it "a little African instrument that went through the Industrial Revolution."

Since most of those slaves were based in the southern U.S., the

stereotype of the hillbilly banjo was born.

Stone knew these raggedy edges of the story. But when a colleague set him up to play with Malian kora player Mansa Sissoko, Stone knew he was just at the beginning.

"We didn't speak a common language, but as soon as we met, we played, and it was complete magic. I felt a heart connection with that music," he said.

Stone took his time, though. He studied, researched and ultimately won a grant that took him to Mali to learn the life story of the banjo in its own hometown.

Stone spent two months chasing it down, visiting everywhere from Mali's National Institute of the Arts to tiny rural villages, filling in the gaps in the banjo's story with real live music.

"I got to have contact with people who have actually never been outside their village, and never heard the radio, who are playing one- and two-string instruments that are related to the banjo," he says.

"Everywhere I went, I would just pull out my banjo and play something I knew they would recognize, and that won people over pretty quick."

Now, he plays the music he learned over and over. Although Stone continues to tour with his regular jazz quartet, he also studies the music he learned in Mali by reproducing it note for note in anticipation of his African project's launch tonight in Toronto and a recording in early 2008.

"I hear from a lot of people who do African collaborations that because African music is so melodic, you can just kind of play blues along with it, and it sort of sits," he says.

"But that's not a very deep take on the music. I'm really trying to get inside the music and know what's happening. We'll see what comes out of that."

■ Jayme Stone plays tonight at Hugh's Room in Toronto.

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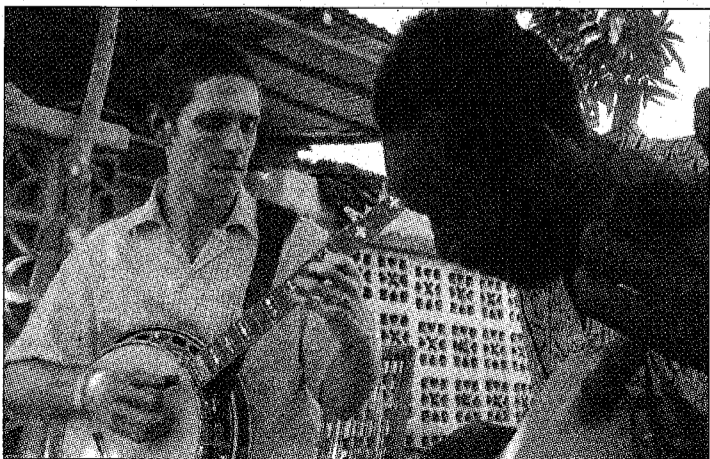
MUSICAL GOURDS

"Something that interests me very much about what I do is the demand," says Jeff Menzies, a sculptor and gourd banjo maker in Toronto. He estimates he's made about 200 banjos in the past eight years.

And yet, Menzies says it's not his neighbours who fill his inbox with custom banjo requests.

"There's a lot of banjo players in Canada, and just because of that some of them are becoming interested in the history of the instrument, and the gourd banjo. But, statistically, I probably make about 2% of my instruments for Canadians. I'd say there's a larger gourd banjo community in Japan."

Briana Goldberg, National Post



HAMADI TRAORE

Jayme Stone, left, made friends in Mali by pulling out his banjo and playing a few recognizable tunes for the locals.