

Digital Mando (XXIV.1) by John Goodin

This is the first of what I hope will be several columns that will take a look at various wonderful and interesting mandolin developments in the digital realm. My intention is to pick out certain websites and projects and discuss them in a little more depth than the usual “here’s a list of cool sites” that we often see.

In November 2007 CMSA member Robert Margo alerted the denizens of the classical mandolin discussion board of the Mandolin Cafe (<http://www.mandolincafe.com/>) of an exciting development. The University of Rochester, home of the Eastman School of Music, has digitized several years’ worth of the *S.S. Stewart’s Banjo and Guitar Journal* as part of the UR Research service, a digital institutional repository.

The full text of many, but not all, issues from 1884-1899 is now available, free of charge, in PDF format at their site (<https://urresearch.rochester.edu/handle/1802/2586>) and these issues provide a fascinating look at the world of banjo, mandolin and guitar playing in America at the end of the nineteenth century. The Journal’s main purpose was to advertise the sheet music published by S.S. Stewart and the instruments manufactured by the company in Philadelphia. It also promoted the careers of performers who used Stewart instruments.

In addition to the interesting promotional material, Stewart’s Journal printed many letters from their satisfied customers and articles on technique. Every issue included several pieces of sheet music for banjo, guitar or mandolin, often with more than one part.

Although primarily a journal devoted to the banjo, the amount of content devoted to the mandolin grew slowly through the 1890s. The first piece of sheet music for the mandolin, E.H. Frey’s “The Castanet Dance”, appears in the April-May, 1891 issue and there are at least 18 other mandolin pieces scattered throughout the rest of the collection. I have compiled a list of mandolin-related articles and music from the Journal for those who might want to go straight to the mando content and save the fascinating banjo articles for later. You can find the list online at this address:

<http://academic.luther.edu/~goodinjo/ge/stewartbib.pdf>

Not all of the letters seem to have been genuine (In the Feb./Mar., 1898 issue on p. 27 there are two identical letters, one supposedly from Texas and one from Niagara Falls, in different columns.) but my suspicion is that most of them were. Not surprisingly, controversy raged among the musicians of the 1890s as it does today. I was delighted to discover a connection to my family history in the pages of the February-March, 1893 issue.

A Mr. Voyles of Crandall, Indiana had apparently written a letter in a previous issue (one of the issues that has not been digitized by the UR service) where he advocated the superiority of metal guitar strings over gut. His original letter prompted several replies on pages 11-12, including an exhaustive one from Joseph Scott of Charlestown, Mass., and a further comment from Mr. Voyles expressing gratification that his letter had “provoked

such a storm of rebuttals.” Imagine people getting all worked up over which kind of string is best!

Crandall, Indiana was founded in the 1870s in rural Harrison County and has always been a tiny railroad town. My mother’s family emigrated from Germany and settled near Crandall not long before the time when Mr. Voyles must have been working up the courage to write his letters to Stewart’s Journal. My grandmother was born just outside the village in 1894. Is it possible that as a young girl she heard our Mr. Voyles playing his metal strung guitar?

There is much to enjoy as you flip the digital pages of Stewart’s Journal. The ads alone are fascinating with lists of new music for mandolin and pictures of instruments for sale. The concert reviews give us an idea of what music was being played and the instructional material helps us see how these instruments were being played. You can see how the mandolin becomes more and more prominent as the decade progresses. All in all I think you will find that the *S.S. Stewart’s Banjo and Guitar Journal* is a fine way to spend a few hours visiting with our mandolin, guitar and banjo predecessors. Many thanks to the University of Rochester and the Eastman School of Music for their generosity.