

Banjo history plays on film



APRIL 14, 2013 9:00 AM • [DOUG MOE | WISCONSIN STATE JOURNAL | DMOE@MADISON.COM | 608-252-6446](#)

Most documentaries get made because the filmmaker falls in love with the story. Jim Carrier did.

The painting got him first. Then the book, and, later still, the book's author. He'd liked the music all along.

Taken together it is a remarkable story — a musical instrument's lost history, and the woman who unearthed it — one Carrier has now told in a labor of love titled "The Librarian and the Banjo," which premieres today at the Wisconsin Film Festival.

Carrier, 68, came to Madison in 2007 with his wife, Trish O'Kane, who is working on a doctorate. Jim has a colorful background that includes newspapers and seeing the world on a small sailboat.

When he landed in Madison, his interest in film led him to start a filmmaker collective called the Wisconsin Film Festival.

Carrier was considering a documentary on the cult of Hank Williams fans who gather every New Year's Eve at midnight at the singer's grave in Alabama. They drink, sing songs and ponder the legacy of Williams, already a legend when he died at 29. Carrier met some of them while he was working for the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery.

That film may yet happen, but the banjo story got him first. Carrier, who grew up in New York State, played the instrument ever since hearing the dueling banjos in the 1972 film "Deliverance."

Decades later, in 2003, Carrier came across a painting on exhibit in a museum on the campus of Hampton University in Virginia. "The Banjo Lesson," painted by Henry Tanner in 1893, depicts an elderly black man teaching the banjo to a young black boy.

The image stayed with Carrier, and he began researching blacks and the banjo. Much of the conventional wisdom of the banjo's history put its roots in the rural American South. By the 1990s, Carrier learned, that began to change, with scholarly evidence taking the instrument back centuries, to Africa.

One book in particular, startling in the scope and variety of its original sources, served as a kind of touchstone for the reassessment. It was published in 1977 and called "Sinful

Tunes and Spirituals.”

When Carrier finally read it, he was blown away. Here was the history of the banjo, with documentation of black folk music dating to Africa in the 18th century. The author’s name was Dena Epstein. A more unlikely scholarly superhero is hard to imagine.

Carrier tracked down Dena Epstein in early 2009. She was 92 and in an assisted living facility in Chicago. She agreed to an on-camera interview. It wasn’t like she was besieged with requests. Her name meant little to the general public, even if in the small circle of banjo historians she was revered.

Epstein’s story — her own words propel Carrier’s film — begins with her birth in Milwaukee, and takes her to a New York City suburb in New Jersey, where, as a young wife and mother, she can’t find a job at the local libraries.

She began to take the bus into the city, visiting the great libraries, not really sure what she was after. In the end, it found her. Epstein dropped a reference book that opened to the typed diaries of UW-Madison historian William Francis Allen, who co-edited the 1867 book “Slave Songs of the South.”

It introduced Epstein to a world that had been willfully ignored by mainstream cultural gatekeepers.

She eventually centered on the banjo, tracing it to the Caribbean, and earlier still to Africa. A reviewer described the difficulty of the research: “She painstakingly combed through memoirs, diaries, travel accounts and slave narratives for scraps of evidence.”

When she kept getting kicked off the microfilm machine at her local library — the librarians had need of it themselves — Epstein bought one and projected the images on the living room wall of her home. Carrier recreates it in the film, having located a 1940s projector for sale on the Internet.

There is a symmetry between Epstein’s years of research and the mountains Carrier climbed, all these years later, to tell her story. He used a \$5,000 grant from the Madison Arts Commission to travel the country and film interviews with banjo artists and scholars, many of whom profess themselves in Epstein’s debt.

There is a wonderful scene, late in the film, when Carrier brings Epstein together with the Carolina Chocolate Drops, the Grammy-winning black string band that has played in Madison — and across the country — to wildly enthusiastic sold-out audiences.

The meeting was on a stage at Chicago’s Old Town School of Music. One of the Drops asks Epstein to sign his copy of “Sinful Tunes and Spirituals.”

“Did you learn anything?” Epstein asks.

They all did. “The Librarian and the Banjo” — which plays at 4:30 today at the UW Elvehjem Building — makes clear that and more. The showing is sold out, though some rush tickets might be available at the door. Carrier will speak after. Dena Epstein watched

it on DVD in Chicago. She turns 97 in November.