

Ed Cabbell
By Ajay Kalra
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The first African American to earn a masters degree in Appalachian Studies, Edward J. Cabell, for the last three decades and a half has been one of the single most important pioneering forces in bringing to light the heretofore “invisible” black experience in Appalachia. *Blacks in Appalachia*, a book that followed from his master’s thesis project in Appalachian Studies undertaken at Appalachian State University, and which he co-edited along with William H. Turner, has been hailed as *the* groundbreaking work that launched Appalachian African American studies (Waage).

Born (in 1946) and raised in McDowell County in southern West Virginia, Cabbell belongs to a family with African American and Spanish ancestry that has lived in that part of the mountains for over 150 years. Alex Haley, the famous author of *Roots*, is in the same lineage on Cabbell’s mother’s side (Cabbell). Cabbell became an active torchbearer for raising awareness about the black Appalachian presence and experience when he graduated from Concord College in Athens, West Virginia. He has founded and headed a number of organizations that approach the black Appalachian cause from various angles.

In the African American folk hero [John Henry](#), the subject of the most popular of all Appalachian songs of black origins, Cabbell has found a popular mascot for his activist efforts. His John Henry Memorial Foundation has hosted the annual John Henry Memorial Festival for over three decades, in addition to establishing the Princeton, West Virginia, based John Henry Museum for preserving Appalachian African American heritage (Arnow).

Cabbell performed unaccompanied spirituals during both the 2000 and 2001 Celebration of Traditional Music. He claims to have learned his singing mostly from his grandmother who lived from 1890 to 1991. She was a miner’s wife and lived in a shantytown, much before the advent of modern gospel music in 1930s. Because of his position as both a scholar and musician, Cabbell, in his presentations at the CTM, spoke extensively of the contextual history of individual spirituals particular to their singing in his grandmother’s African American community in West Virginia.

During his CTM performances, Cabbell also invites the audience to join him in responsorial singing by echoing the melody of the spiritual “[\(Where\) the Sun Will Never Go Down](#)” through “moaning.” He explains how women doing laundry in West Virginia tenement towns would together “moan” such songs, echoing in Appalachia an older tradition likely extending back to West Africa, but identified in the U.S. mostly only with the prison or plantation work song of the Deep South. What is worth noting here is that Cabbell draws attention, without making it an issue, to the similarity in living conditions, and thereby musical traditions, of Appalachian African Americans and those of their brethren elsewhere whose lives and music have more commonly been a focus of scholarly attention.

Most of the unaccompanied songs Cabbell performed were folk spirituals, all predating later urban genres such as the concert spiritual and gospel. “Little David Play on Your Harp,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “Amazing Grace,” and “[Steal Away](#)” definitely predate those later trends. Others, including “[Take It to the Lord in Prayer](#)” and “[The Sun Will Never Go Down](#),” also appear to be from the slavery period although, like most spirituals, they have been interpreted by twentieth-century black and white gospel groups as well as by white classical vocal groups such as Chanticleer.

As the slave spiritual mostly arose out of a group performance context, Cabbell attempts and succeeds at times in involving the audience in responsorial vocal and percussive music making to evoke the spirit of the pre-Civil War practice. The resulting performances contrast strikingly with available recorded performances of these songs in twentieth-century styles.

One of the foremost scholars on the legend and history of John Henry, Cabbell sang the ballad dedicated to the folk hero during each year of his appearance at the CTM, and also spoke of testimonies of blacks he had known regarding John Henry's actual existence. For instance he reports that a black man, Lance Chariot, who was 100 years old in 1960, had as a child heard of the famous competition that was later commemorated in the song. The Civil War Union anthem "[Battle Hymn of the Republic](#)" was the only other secular piece Cabbell sang at Berea.

Berea College Special Collection and Archives holdings:

Celebration of Traditional Music recordings:

- CTM 2000: 10 song performances (with three songs performed twice) contained on 4 Open Reels (AC-OR-005-710, 716, 717, 719); all have reference copies on audio cassette.
- CTM 2001: 5 song performances contained on 1 Open Reel (AC-OR-005-736); reference copy available on audio cassette.

References:

Arnow, Pat. 1986. "A Part and Apart." *Now and Then* 3/1. 9-11.

Cabbell, Ed. 2000. Introduction and Performance. *Celebration of Traditional Music*. Berea.

Turner, William H. 1986. "Introduction." In *Blacks in Appalachia*, edited by Edward J. Cabbell and William H. Turner. Lexington: University of Kentucky.

Waage, Fred. 1986. "From the Editor." *Now and Then* 3/1. 2.