

**John “Uncle” Homer Walker**  
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**Berea College Appalachian Music Fellowship Program 2006**

John “Uncle” Homer Walker was one of the few remaining Appalachian African American banjo players performing in the last quarter of the twentieth century. At the 1978 Celebration of Traditional Music, his friend African American scholar and activist Ed Cabbell introduced Walker as the last remaining black banjo player from West Virginia, although for long Walker had been living in Glen Lyn on the Virginia side of the state line.

Walker learned to play the banjo in the early years of the twentieth century from his grandfather who had been a slave in Summers County, West Virginia. Cabbell’s substantive introduction and Walker’s testimonies to slave life in the Mountain State, the heart of the Appalachian region, quash popular assumptions of the hills being free of slavery. Although the history of blacks entering the region to work in the railroad and mining industries is more widely known today, Walker’s performance at the Celebration of Tradition music testifies to a much longer history, and under different circumstances. His playing also suggests continuities in African American banjo playing tradition that scholars have been trying to establish in the last three decades.

Walker was born in Crump’s Bottom, near Hinton in Summers County in either 1904 or 1898, according to different sources (Lornell; Cabbell and Fenton). His grandfather, from whom he learned his clawhammer style, as well as his grandmother had both been slaves. So were his great-grandfather and family members only a generation removed from Walker, for instance his uncle Abe (Walker 1978).

In his introduction to one of the most popular and earliest of all spirituals, “[Steal Away](#),” Walker discusses one specific contextual meaning of the song during slavery relating the practice in which slaves such as his uncle Abe would steal away from their masters to pray on the mountain. Walker’s vocal on “Steal Away” is more utilitarian than any found in the more elitist traditions that emerged from the various stages of arrangement of spirituals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—his vocal melodic contour has a very short pitch range barely suggesting the harmonic change to the dominant chord. Walker’s banjo does not suggest any chord changes, sticking to the same motif throughout. This approach seems to be typical of black songsters playing both banjo and guitar in the early years of the twentieth century.

On his interpretation of “[John Henry](#)” also, Walker alludes to the dominant and sub-dominant chords only in the vocal melody, and not distinctly in his banjo playing. This practice appears to be continuous with that of playing one-chord “blues” songs in the rural traditions of Mississippi John Hurt and [Etta Baker](#) and in later years in the urban blues of such artists as Howlin’ Wolf and John Lee Hooker.

Walker’s third performance at the festival was “[Rockin’ Chair Blues](#),” which he learned in the early 1900s when the blues were just entering the hills. This appears to have been definitely before the blues appeared on recordings. As in the aforementioned songs, Walker’s adaptation of this blues to the banjo nods just slightly to the chord changes which are evidenced mostly in the vocal melody. Although during the verses Walker barely alters his main banjo motif, his instrumental solo appears distinctly influenced by guitar blues and sees the “banjo man” playing double- and triple-stops and bending one or more notes thereof, a distinctly guitaristic maneuver.

“Rockin’ Chair Blues” is an early blues that seems to have been varied significantly by different performers who have recorded it and sometimes ascribed authorship to themselves. Often the only overlap between these versions is the title, with the song often revealing the process of improvised composition from older floating verses. A more detailed investigation into the various commercial versions and comparison with the interpretations of purportedly “folk” performers such as Homer Walker may illuminate further tracts in the interregional and rural-to-urban journey of the blues. Interestingly, Walker may have only heard “Rockin’ Chair Blues” as a child and not adapted it to the banjo until much later as suggested by this quote ascribed to Walker by *Living Blues* magazine’s editor Jim O’Neal, who interviewed the banjo player at the 1976 John Henry Folk Festival in Princeton, West Virginia, “Since I been travelin’ around to these festivals, I started playin’ blues, about six or seven years ago. I hadn’t played many blues before that on the banjo.” (O’Neal)

### **Berea College Special Collection and Archives holdings:**

#### *Celebration of Traditional Music Recordings:*

- CTM 1978: 3 tunes contained of 1 Open Reels (01 AC-OR-005-111) with a reference copy on audio cassette.

#### *Commercial Recordings:*

- Uncle Homer Walker and Clarence Tross: *Blues Roots* (John Henry Records: JHR 001) (WT-LP-017). LP. Features seven numbers recorded by Walker.
- Various Artists: *Virginia Traditions: Non-blues Secular Black Music* (Blue Ridge Institute: BRI 001). LP. Features one instrumental, “Cripple Creek,” by Walker.
- Various Artists: *Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia*. (Smithsonian Folkways: SF CD 40079). CD. Features one song by Walker – “Sugar Hill.”

### **Commercial Discography:**

The aforementioned three albums, all available at the Berea College Special Collections, are likely the only formally released recordings of Homer Walker’s music.

### **References:**

Cabbell, Ed and Joan Fenton. Liner notes to *Uncle Homer Walker and Clarence Tross: Blues Roots* (John Henry Records: JHR 001). Princeton, West Virginia: John Henry Memorial Foundation.

Conway, Cecilia. Liner notes to *Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia*. (SF CD 40079). Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways.

Keller, Tim. “Uncle Homer Walker.” *Living Blues* 31/March-April 1977. 23.

Lornell, Christopher “Kip”. Liner notes to *Virginia Traditions: Non-Blues Secular Black Music* (BRI 001). Ferrum, Virginia: Ferrum College.

O’Neal, Jim. 1977. Editor’s note to Keller, Tim, “Uncle Homer Walker.” *Living Blues* 31/March-April 1977. 23.

Walker, John Homer. 1978. Introduction and Performance. *Celebration of Traditional Music*. Berea.

**Other available resources:**

Lornell, Kip. Interview and music with Uncle Homer Walker (TO 41). Blue Ridge Institute and Museum Heritage Archives. <http://www.blueridgeinstitute.org>