

The BLACK BANJO-PLAYING TRADITION IN VIRGINIA AND WEST VIRGINIA

by Robert B. Winans

Journal of the Virginia Folklore Society, Volume 1, 1979

In 1781, Thomas Jefferson wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that "The instrument proper to [blacks] is the Banjar, which they brought hither from Africa, and which is the original of the guitar, its lower chords being precisely the four lower chords of the guitar."¹ While Jefferson was wrong about the banjo being the original of the guitar, he was right about its having been brought from Africa and about its being "proper" to blacks, which I take to mean uniquely their instrument and rather widely played by them.²

Both these facts have been denied at times in writings about the history of the banjo. However, even the characteristic fifth string or short thumb string of the banjo, the invention of which legend has attributed to Joel Walker Sweeney of Appomattox, Virginia, seems likely to have been a black invention. A watercolor entitled "The Old Plantation" at the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Collection of American Folk Art in Colonial Williamsburg shows that the short thumb string was in existence on at least some banjos as early as 1800, well before Sweeney, who was born in 1813, is supposed to have invented it. The watercolor, painted in South Carolina sometime between 1777 and 1800, depicts a group of slaves dancing to the music of black musicians playing drums and a banjo. The banjo has three full-length strings and a short string going only part way up the neck. If Sweeney added any strings at all, he may have added another full-length string to extend the range downward.

Until recently, little evidence that a black banjo-playing tradition had survived into the twentieth century had been collected and many people assumed that it had not. But it did survive, as

[End page 7]

part of an Afro-American banjo/fiddle tradition very similar to the better-known Anglo-American tradition of old-time string band music. In this essay, I will trace the history of black banjo playing in Virginia, and discuss contemporary black banjo players in Virginia and West Virginia--especially their playing styles, repertoire, and interactions with white musicians.³ I will show that the tradition has survived in Virginia, and that it was very active until a generation ago. The tradition is less active now because the dances which created its demand have largely disappeared.

Oral histories collected from living black banjo players trace an active black banjo tradition back two generations, back at least as far as the Civil War. And scattered documentary evidence records the tradition in Virginia even further back--to the middle of the eighteenth century.

The thirteen black banjo players discussed here range in age from their mid-forties to their mid-nineties, though most are in their fifties, sixties, or seventies. All learned to play when they were young, between the ages of eight and sixteen, at a time which they say was a very active period for black string band, banjo/fiddle music. This period, as defined by the dates they learned to play, extends from around 1910 to around 1940. All of the contemporary players could name several people of their parents' generation who were then active players and who taught them to play.

The youngest of the group, Bob Jones, is in his mid-forties, and he's lived in Bedford, Virginia (Bedford County), all his life. His father played blues guitar (as his brother, Ray, now does) and frailed the banjo. An even more important influence on Jones's playing was his mother's brother, Uncle Henry Robinson, who still lives nearby. Now 76 and no longer able to play, he once was an accomplished frailer. Also under fifty is "Big Sweet" Lewis Hairston, who has lived most of his adult life near Martinsville, Virginia

(Henry County), though he was born in 1929 in

[End page 8]

McDowell County, West Virginia.⁴ Hairston has been playing the banjo since he was around eleven. He learned from an uncle, who also played fiddle and guitar, and from other, older black banjo players, all of whom frailed.

Three of the musicians are in their fifties. John Jackson, born in 1924 and raised in Woodville, Virginia (Rappahannock County), now lives in Fairfax County. He has also been playing banjo (and guitar, for which he is better known) since he was eleven. His father, who was born in 1888, played the banjo, but Jackson says he could never figure out what his father was doing, since he played left-handed. So he learned more from his Uncle Jim Clark, who played in a drop-thumb trailing style, and from a number of other banjo players in the neighborhood, especially French Turner. Irvin Cook, also born in 1924, has always lived in Henry County, Virginia. As a boy he learned to play banjo in a two-finger picking style from his father, Sylvester Cook, born in the 1890's.⁵ Cook frequently plays with Leonard Bowles, who accompanies him on fiddle. Bowles, born in 1919 in Henry County, where he still lives, also plays the banjo. He took it up only a few years ago, after a banjo-playing uncle died, so that the tradition would not also die. Bowles's mother and an aunt also played the banjo; they frailed it while his uncle used a two-finger picking style.

Among the three informants in their sixties is Rufus Kasey, whose family has lived in Huddleston, Virginia (Bedford County), for several generations. Kasey was born in 1918 and has been playing the banjo since he was eight. His father (1882-1946) and all of his uncles played in a drop-thumb frailing style, as did a number of other black banjo players in the area. Like most of the other banjo players noted here, Kasey and his father played mostly for local dances, usually with fiddlers and sometimes also a guitarist. Robert Stuart, born in 1916 in Check, Virginia (Floyd County), where he has always lived, learned his frailing style as a boy from a much older cousin who was a sort of uncle to him. His wife's brother also used to play banjo. John Lawson Tyree lives in Sontag, Virginia (Franklin County), a few miles from where he

[End page 9]

was born in 1915. He has a sister who used to play banjo and guitar. They both learned from their mother's family, several of whom played banjo and fiddle. Tyree learned primarily from his uncle, Torrance Wade; another uncle, Jack Wade, also played. Tyree and his wife have very fond memories of the dances he used to play for, accompanied by other black musicians, usually fiddlers.

John Calloway is one of the four musicians in their seventies. He was born in 1906 in Franklin County, Virginia, but has lived for the last sixty years in Henry County. When he was a boy, he learned his frailing style from older, local black banjo players.⁶ James "Clinks" Fantleroy was also born in 1906, near Tappahannock, Virginia (Essex County), where he still lives today. He and his good friend, Peter Bundy, born a year earlier and also raised in the area, were semi-professional musicians for many years. Fantleroy played primarily the guitar- and Bundy the fiddle, though they both also play the banjo, and Bundy the mandolin and guitar as well. There seems to have been little or no musical tradition in their families, but as boys both were inspired to learn the banjo by an older black player, William Giles, who passed through their area. Uncle Homer Walker was born in 1904 and raised in Summers County, West Virginia, and for the past twenty or so years, he's lived just across the border in Glen Lyn, Virginia (Giles County). He started playing the banjo when he was seven or eight. His brothers were also musicians and played guitar, fiddle, and mandolin. He learned to play banjo from his mother, who was born in the 1870s, and an uncle. Other black banjo and fiddle players in the Summers County area also influenced him.

The one musician in his nineties is Clarence Tross, born in 1884 in Hardy County, West Virginia, where he lived his whole life, as his father had before him. Tross learned to play from his father, Andy Tross,

who was born around 1850 and died around 1910. He also had an uncle, Mose, who played fiddle with his father at frequently held dances.⁷

At least one white banjo player remembers black banjo players in
[End page 10]

Virginia from early in this century. Dock Bogg said:

When I was a young boy 12 or 13 years of age [i.e., around 1910], my younger brother Rosco brought a colored man home with him one evening who played [banjo] with a brass band that used to be around Norton [Wise County, Virginia]. I heard him play "Alabama Negro." He played with his forefinger and next finger--two fingers and thumb.

There was a colored string band playing for a dance in Norton. I stuck my head in the door and I liked the way the banjo-player played, so I said to myself, "I am going to learn to play that way and I am going to pick it plain so that people will know what I am trying to play."⁸

Boggs implies that much of his style is based on what he heard from these black players. (I am sure that other white banjo players could also talk about black players, if they were asked the right questions.)

Nearly all of the informants said that there were generally a lot of black banjo (and fiddle) players in the previous generation and that they played frequently at dances. It all adds up to substantial evidence of a very active black tradition of banjo/fiddle music fifty to seventy years ago. Those from whom the informants learned were adults during this period, so, assuming that they too had learned when they were young, the tradition must have existed back as far as around 1890. In fact, oral histories from some of the informants provide specific information for tracing the tradition back even further than that.

Bob Jones's grandfather, Ellie Robinson, played banjo in a frailing style. He was probably born in the 1870s and presumably learned to play in the 1880s in the Bedford area. In nearby Huddleston, both of Rufus Kasey's grandfathers played frailing style banjo (Bob Jones and Rufus Kasey are actually distant cousins). Kasey's father (1882-1946) learned to play from them, and Kasey himself was directly influenced by them, since they were alive and still playing when he was young and learning to play. Kasey thinks that they were probably both born sometime in the 1850s.

Two others could also trace their traditions back to someone born around 1850. Uncle Homer Walker lived for a while with his maternal

[End page 11]

grandfather and learned banjo from him (as well as his mother and an uncle, as noted above). His grandfather was born a slave in West Virginia, probably around 1850. Walker claims that he lived to be 102 and died some twenty-odd years ago. As previously mentioned, Clarence Tross's influences can be dated to the 1850s.

These black banjo players born sometime around the 1850s indicate that a tradition of black banjo playing extends as far back as the 1860s at least. How active or widespread the tradition was in Virginia and West Virginia at that time is not clear from the oral evidence, but my guess is that if all the informants could supply information going back this far, the outlines of a tradition just as active then as it was fifty years later would be apparent.

Documentary evidence shows that a black banjo tradition existed in Virginia not only during the Civil War years, but also up to a hundred years earlier. This documentary evidence is summarized in the following table of historical references to black banjo playing. Much of it has already been made available by Dena Epstein in her 1975 article in *Ethnomusicology*, "The Folk Banjo: A Documentary History," and

in her more recent book, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*. I have gone back to her original sources to get more specific information about location for the Virginia references, and I have added a number of references from sources she does not utilize, especially ex-slave interviews.

References to Black Banjo Playing in Virginia and West Virginia, 1750-1865

Dates	Played For	Location
1850s- 1860s	"frollicking"	"eastern Virginia" ⁹
1850s- 1860s	songs	Richmond area ¹⁰
1850s- 1860s	dances	Suffolk (Nansemond Co.) ¹¹
[End page 12]		
1850s- 1860s	songs and dances	Charlotte Co. ¹²
1850s- 1860s	dances	near Norfolk ¹³
1850s- 1860s	dances--with fiddles, tambourines, bones	Yanceyville ¹⁴
1850s- 1860s	songs and dances	Forest (Bedford Co.) ¹⁵
1853	dance--with fiddle, bones	Lynchburg ¹⁶
1840s- 1860s	dances	Appomattox Co. ¹⁷
1840s- 1860s	dances	Franklin Co. ¹⁸
1840s- 1850s	with fiddles	King George Co. ¹⁹
1840s- 1850s	dances--with fiddle	Franklin Co., near Rocky Mount ²⁰
1830s- 1850s	dances	Prince George Co. ²¹
1830s-	songs	Southampton Co. ²²

1850s		
1839-1842	dances--with fiddles	Mecklenburg Co. ²³
1830s	dance	Prince Edward Co., lower end ²⁴
1832	songs and dances	between Richmond and Jamestown ²⁵
1820s	not specified	toured Northern Neck, Fredericksburg, Charlottesville, Richmond, Norfolk ²⁶
1820s	taught Joel Sweeney	Appomattox Co. ²⁷
1817	songs	Richmond ²⁸
1806	dance	Wheeling, W.Va. ²⁹
1799	songs	Richmond ³⁰
1781	not specified	Virginia, esp. Albemarle Co. ³¹
1755-1780	not specified	Nansemond Co., near Suffolk ³²
1774	dance	Westmoreland Co. ³³
late 1760s	dances	toured Norfolk, Jamestown, Richmond, Petersburg south to North Carolina ³⁴
1759-1775	songs and dances	Caroline and King George Co. ³⁵
1750s	songs	near Fredericksburg ³⁶

The documentary evidence depicts a continuous line of black banjo players in Virginia as far back as the middle of the eighteenth century. How widespread the tradition was at various points

[End page 13]

along the way is difficult to say. Some of the sources refer only to individual players, but a third of them, distributed throughout the century between the 1760s and the 1860s, specifically make a case for the general popularity of the instrument among Virginia blacks. It is also useful to point out that, for the century just mentioned, more historical references to black banjo playing have been found for Virginia than for any other state. This may have as much to do with the distribution of historical documents as it does with the distribution of black banjo playing, but it is a point worth noting.

The geographical distribution of these citations within the state of Virginia is also interesting. Nearly all are located in Tidewater and Piedmont Virginia; in the early part of the period they are mostly from the Tidewater area, and in the latter part of the period some are at the very western edge of the Piedmont. This distribution is not too surprising, given the pattern of settlement in Virginia, but it does indicate that this area should be subject to more fieldwork than it has been so far--especially, I would say, the Northern Neck and the area south of Richmond, west of Norfolk, and east of Danville.

Three other observations about these historical references are also important. The majority specifically connect the banjo playing with dancing, just as the contemporary informants do, indicating continuity in the primary function of the instrument. In addition, again consonant with oral testimony relating to the

late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, a number of the documentary citations mention the banjo and fiddle together. Since the principal focus of this essay is the banjo, many references to black fiddlers will not be discussed. The point is that black banjo playing is only one-half of a continuous tradition of banjo/fiddle music functioning primarily as dance music.

The third observation is more speculative, but still worth discussing; it deals with the number of strings the black folk banjo had in earlier periods. Most of the sources do not mention the

[End page 14]

precise number of strings on the banjos they refer to; in fact, only two make unequivocal statements: Jefferson said there were four and John Smyth specified three.³⁷ This is meager evidence, but it, along with other non-Virginia references, suggests that in the early period the form of the instrument was probably variable. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, this was no longer true. Lewis Miller's 1853 sketch is a little ambiguous, since it shows six tuning pegs on the peghead but only five strings and five knots at the tailpiece; but the testimony of Clarence Tross, Rufus Kasey, and Uncle Homer Walker, based in all three cases on direct knowledge, is quite clear. Pross's father, Walker's grandfather, and both of Kasey's grandfathers, who were all born around 1850 and probably learned to play banjo in the 1860s, all played five-string banjos. So it seems safe to speculate that sometime between the 1760s and the 1860s, the form of the banjo in black folk tradition became standardized at five strings.

We know that the five-string banjo became standard in the minstrel shows by the mid-1840s at the latest, and probably earlier. It seems quite possible that the extremely popular minstrel show brought standardization to the form of the banjo played in black folk tradition, as well as having been of great importance in introducing the banjo to large numbers of whites. This standardization, in fact, may be Joel Walker Sweeney's real claim to fame. He may have been the first to popularize the five-string form of the instrument, causing the minstrel show to adopt it, and thereby influencing all other banjo traditions. This is all somewhat speculative; the five-string banjo may already have existed in black folk tradition before Sweeney and the minstrel show arrived on the scene; but even if that were the case, I suspect that it was still only one of several forms, and that it took Sweeney and the minstrels to actually standardize it.

Contemporary black banjo players in Virginia and West Virginia

[End page 15]

use two basic playing styles: a down-stroking, frailing technique and an up-stroking, two-finger (meaning one finger and the thumb) picking technique. There are, of course, many individual variations on these basic styles, so no two players sound exactly alike.

Least numerous are those who play only in the two-finger, thumb-lead, picking style. They include "Big Sweet" Lewis Hairston, whose style is hard-driving, somewhat syncopated, and rather bluegrass, and Irvin Cook, whose style is a more straightforward, old-time, two-finger picking.

Five of the thirteen banjo players studied play only in a frailing style. Uncle Homer Walker plays in a fairly uncomplicated, non-drop-thumb frailing style, as does Bob Jones.³⁸ John Lawson Tyree uses a non-drop-thumb frailing technique which incorporates a fair amount of syncopation. Leonard Bowle's non-drop-thumb frailing places little emphasis on melody and heavy emphasis on rhythm, though without much syncopation. John Calloway also plays in a rather non-melodic style, though his playing is so rusty that it is hard to know exactly what his style is, or was.

The other six informants use both styles; in all instances, though, the frailing style is used more commonly than the finger picking style. Due to severe arthritis, Clinks Fantleroy no longer plays the banjo (and the guitar, his main instrument, only a little), but he says that he once both frailed and picked. His friend, Peter Bundy, plays a normal banjo left-handed, so both his picking and pseudo-frailing style

are a little strange. The tapes of Clarence Tross's playing that I have heard (recorded and graciously made available to me by Mike Seeger) indicate that in addition to simple two-finger picking and standard drop-thumb frailing styles, Tross played at least one piece in a modified frailing style which reverses the flow of the stroke (so that the thumb note rather than the finger note comes on the beat) and creates considerable syncopation. John Jackson plays the banjo in two- and three-finger picking styles, in a straight non-drop

[End page 16]

thumb frailing style, and in a unique style of his own that starts as a frailing down-stroke and ends as picking, producing a very full, rippling sound. Rufus Kasey plays the banjo most often in a rather syncopated non-drop-thumb frailing style, but he occasionally finger-picks a tune, usually a bluesy one, with two fingers. Robert Stuart does not play much anymore but, when coaxed, plays mostly in a simple non-drop-thumb frailing style, though he used two-finger picking on one piece he played for me.

Contemporary black banjo-playing tradition in Virginia, then, includes both frailing and finger picking, with some musicians using only one or the other, but many capable of using both. I was unable to find a coherent pattern of distribution of frailing vs. picking styles; they both seem to be spread throughout the region. Overall, frailing is more common. Among those who frail, only a couple use a drop-thumb technique; most use the thumb only on the fifth string. Other features common to both basic styles among these musicians are slides and the frequent use of hammer-ons and pull-offs with the left hand to get extra notes. Rarely do any of them play above the fifth fret.

The way in which these musicians tune their instruments is somewhat related to their playing styles so they use several different tunings, all of which are also known and used by white banjo players. The most common tuning is the G-tuning, gDGBD, also called "high bass" by some. The next most frequently used tuning, sometimes called "low bass," is the C-tuning, gCGBD. An open D-tuning, aDF#AD, is used for "Reuben" and a few other pieces, and the "Cuckoo" tuning, a modal tuning, gDGCD, is used for "Cuckoo Bird" and several other pieces. The "Fox Chase" tuning, gDGAD, is used only for that piece. Nearly all of the informants tuned their instruments somewhat below standard pitch, and a few tuned them quite far below.

Both frailing and picking were also known to the previous generation of players, back at the turn of the century, although frailing

[End page 17]

was probably even more prevalent then than it is now. And more of the frailers used a drop-thumb technique in that generation than today. For instance, Rufus Kasey does not drop his thumb, but says that his father and uncles did in their playing. As yet I have found no evidence of anything but frailing among black players two generations ago, back into the 1860s. A slight amount of documentary evidence lends support to the thesis that the earliest black playing style in Virginia was probably a kind of frailing, not finger picking.

William Smith's comments about a "beer dance" in the 1830s include some remarks that relate, indirectly, to playing style. He attributes the "pleasurable hilarity" of the scene, not to the persimmon beer, which he feels is not intoxicating, but rather to the "wild notes of the 'banjor'":

There is an indescribable something in the tones of this rude instrument, that strikes the most delicate and refined ear with pleasing emotion; the uninterrupted twang or vibration of its strings, produces a sound as it dies away, that borders on the sublime. I never could account for its wonderful effect on a well-organized ear, capable of distinguishing and appreciating agreeable sounds; unless it be admitted, that concord and discord are so completely blended as to produce perfect harmony.

These roundabout remarks would seem to suggest that there was something strange yet pleasing about the sound of the banjo to one used to European music. Further on, he speaks of the "ban- jor-man. . .*Tumming* his banjor, grinning with ludicrous gesticulations and playing off his wild notes to the company," and of "the banjor's *tum, tum, tum*."³⁹ The wildness of the sound, the uninterrupted twang, and the tum, tum, tumming are all more suggestive of the sound of a frailed banjo than a finger-picked one. In the 1760s, Jonathan Boucher suggested some of the same qualities in his description of the banjo: "Its sound is a dull, heavy, grumbling murmur; yet it is not without something like melody, nor incapable of inspiring cheerfulness and mirth."⁴⁰ Interpreting Smith's and Boucher's remarks as evidence that a frailing style was used may be somewhat conjectural, but other remarks provide comparisons that make this interpretation more substantial.

[End page 18]

In 1799, Thomas Fairfax recorded the following impression of black banjo playing:

He appeared to be quite an adept on this African instrument, which tho it may not bear a comparison with the Guitar, is certainly Capable of Conveying much pleasure to a musical ear. Its wild notes of melody seem to Correspond with the state of Civilization of the Country where this species of music originated.⁴¹ Here are the "wild notes" again, and an awareness that the banjo sounded quite different from a guitar, which at this time would have been played in a simplified, "classical" finger-picking style. Further evidence that the earliest style was a kind of frailing rather than finger-picking comes again from Jonathan Boucher. He ends his comments on the banjo by quoting the following song verse:

Negro Sambo play fine *banjar*,
Make his fingers go like handsaw.

Finger-picking does not make the fingers go like a handsaw, but a down-stroking frailing style does.

Joel Walker Sweeney and minstrel show banjo playing are also relevant to this discussion of early black banjo-playing style in Virginia. In a previous article, I showed that minstrel banjo style was essentially drop-thumb frailing, that this style must have derived from black playing style, and, more specifically, that descriptions of Sweeney's playing indicate that he too used this style.⁴² Since it is also hard not to conclude that Sweeney learned to play the banjo from blacks in Appomattox in the 1820s, this style can be attributed to them, So all of the admittedly limited evidence available suggests that the earliest black playing style was a down-stroking, frailing style.

A connection can also be made between minstrel playing and the playing of Clarence Tross, the black banjo player from West Virginia. One way in which minstrel banjo style differs from traditional playing is in the use of what I call a reversed stroke. Whereas the standard stroke, used by all traditional banjo players,

[End page 19]

begins with the down-stroking finger followed by the thumb, the reversed stroke begins with the thumb hitting a string first, on a beat, followed by the down-stroking finger. While not all minstrel banjo pieces use this technique, it is not uncommon in them. And Clarence Tross, on the tapes I have heard, plays one song using this technique. This one song is a rather tenuous connection between black banjo playing and early minstrel playing, but one that I think is worth mentioning because, while I have heard no white banjo players who use this technique, I have heard two other black banjo players, one in North Carolina and the other in Mississippi, who also use it, even though most black banjo players do not.

A less tenuous differentiation between white and black playing in general involves syncopation, The playing of the contemporary Virginia and West Virginia black players discussed here, taken as a group, is

marked by a general tendency toward more syncopation than the playing of whites. (This is only a tendency, and it appears in varying degrees among the individual players; some do not show this tendency at all.) Overall, the similarities in white and black playing style outweigh the differences, a fact I will come back to.

I have been interested in exploring not only the playing styles, but also the repertoire of these black banjo players. At this point, what I have to say about repertoire is only preliminary. I have been to see most of these performers only once, for several hours, and while in each case I think I recorded the songs and tunes that were uppermost in their minds, I certainly cannot claim to have exhausted their repertoires.⁴³ Nonetheless, I think the following list of pieces that these musicians play and sing presents a good cross section of the total repertoire known to black banjo players in Virginia and West Virginia. What may not be valid about the list is the number of informants who actually know any one song. I have indicated alternate titles

[End page 20]

where I knew them or the common title of a song for which the informant gave an unusual title, but I do not guarantee that I have recognized and clarified all such situations.

Song/Tune	Informants	Number
JOHN HENRY	LH, JJ, LB, IC, CT, BE, EN	7
GOIN' DOWN THE ROAD FEELIN' BAD (Lonesome Road Blues)	LH, JJ, IC, JT, RK, HW	6
FOX CHASE	PB, RS, JT, CT, RK, HW	6
OLD JOE CLARK	JJ, LB, RK, HW, PB, CF	6
SOLDIER'S JOY	LB, CT, RK, HW, PB, CF	6
CUCKOO (Bird)	RS, JT, JC, RK, HW	5
CLUCK OLD HEN	RS, RK, HW, CF	4
SALLY ANN Shake Your Little Foot Sally Ann Dine-E-O Pretty Little Girl Get Your Foot Out of the Sand	HW JT RK CT	4
MISSISSIPPI SAWYER	LH, RK(2), HW	3
CINDY	JJ, CT, HW	3
REUBEN	JJ, RK, HW	3
SHORTNIN' BREAD	LB, RK, PB	3

CRIPPLE CREEK	RK(2), CT, HW	3
HALLIE COME TO THE WINDOW	LH, LB	2
TURKEY IN THE STRAW	LH, CT	2
RED WING	JJ, PB	2
BOIL THEM CABBAGE DOWN	LH, JJ	2
OH SUSANNA	JJ, CT	2
COMIN' ROUND THE MOUNTAIN CHARMING BETSEY	JJ(2), JC	2
HOP LIGHT LOU (=Roustabout)	JT, RK	2
I'LL SEE YOU WHEN YOUR TROUBLES GET LIKE MINE	JC, RK	2
JESSE JAMES	RK(2), HW	2
SOURWOOD MOUNTAIN	RK(2), HW	2
SALLY GOODIN	PB, CF	2
ROUNDTOWN (Buffalo) GALS	RK(2), CT	2
COTTON EYED JOE	LH	1
DANCE AROUND LITTLE MOLLY (=Molly & Tenbrooks)	LH	1
GOING ACROSS THE OCEAN	LH	1
IDA RED	LH	1
MOUNTAIN DEW	LH	1
POOR BOY LONG WAY FROM HOME	LH	1
SITTING ON TOP OF THE WORLD	LH	1
HARD LUCK BLUES	LH	1
BILLY IN THE LOW GROUND	LH	1
GRANDPA'S OLD MULEY COW (=Here Rattler Here)	RS	1
MCKINLEY (=White House Blues)	RS	1
BLACK ANNIE	RS	1
LEFT ME THIS MORNING BLUES	JJ	1
WHEN YOU AND I WERE YOUNG MAGGIE	JJ	1

[End page 21]		
HATTIE WANNA LOU	JJ	1
I WISH I WAS A MOLE IN THE GROUND	JJ (2)	1
GROUND HOG	JJ (2)	1
LEATHER BRITCHES	JJ (2)	1
IT'S GOING TO BE RAIN OR SNOW WHEN YOU HEAR THAT COCKADOODLE CROW	JJ (2)	1
MY MOTHER TOLD ME IF I BE GOOD SHE BUY ME A RUBBER DOLLY	JJ (2)	1
IF YOU HAVE TROUBLE, SAVE YOUR SOUL	LB	1
EAT WHEN I'M HUNGRY	LB	1
TAKE THIS RING I GIVE YOU	LB	1
THE MAN WHO RODE THE MULE AROUND THE WORLD	LB	1
MOMMA, MOMMA, LOOK AT SIS	LB	1
RABBIT ON A LOG	LB	1
JOHN CROSSED THE ISLAND ON HIS KNEES	LB	1
WISH TO THE LORD I'D NEVER BEEN BORN	LC	1
OLD ROOSTER CROWED IN PINE TREE TOP	LC	1
HERE COMES A REDBIRD THROUGH THE WINDOW	LC	1
OLD BLUE	CT	1
YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE	CT	1
CARRY ME BACK TO OLD VIRGINNY	CT	1
MISS LUCY NEAL DOWN IN THE COTTON FIELDS	CT	1
GOING BACK TO BALTIMORE	CT	1
SORRY I LEFT MY FATHER'S HOME (tune like Georgie Buck)	CT	1
GOIN' ON DOWN TO TOWN	CT	1
FAREWELL TO ANGELINE	CT	1
COLD DRINK OF WATER, COLD DRINK OF WINE	CT	1
LOW AND LONELY	CT	1

DARLING WRITE TO ME	CT	1
BABY, LORD, I DO LOVE YOU	RK	1
SEE YOU WHEN YOU'RE ALL OUT AND DOWN	RK	1
OLD AUNT DINAH	RK	1
OH, LORD MOMMA LOOK AT SAM	RK	1
WILL THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN	RK	1
TAKE ME BACK AND TRY ME ONE MORE TIME	RK (2)	1
ROCKING CHAIR BLUES	HW	1
SUGAR HILL	HW	1
BRIGHTER DAY A-COMING	HW	1
STEAL AWAY	HW	1
UNCLOUDY DAY	HW	1
IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE WAY I DO, MOVE ON DOWN THE LINE	HW	1
WORRIED BLUES	HW	1
DANCE ALL NIGHT	HW	1
JOHN HARDY	HW	1
LIZA JANE	HW	1
WHOA MULE	HW	1
ROLL ON BUDDY	HW	1
MY BLUE HEAVEN	PB	1
FISHER'S HORNSPIPE	CF	1
JOHN BROWN'S DREAM	CF	1

[End page 22]

A number of observations can be made about the preceding list. First, most of the informants sing words to most of their pieces; strictly instrumental renditions are in the minority, although this varies with the individual. Some, like Lewis Hairston or Uncle Homer Walker, sing words to nearly all of their pieces, while other[s], like Rufus Kasey or John Lawson Tyree, know some words to most of their songs but rarely sing unless pressured to do so, claiming they are not good singers. Second, the repertoire includes extremely few ballads; songs with anything like a full and coherent narrative are rare. The lyrical folksong is the rule. Third, a genre of song that one might particularly look for from black musicians, the blues

song, is well represented in the repertoire; but while most of the informants played a few blues pieces on the banjo (some were picked and some, less expectedly, were frailed), such pieces are definitely a minor portion of any individual's repertoire. Fourth, although a few of the songs are more popular than traditional ("When You and I Were Young, Maggie," "My Blue Heaven"), the vast majority seem to be traditional, even if quite local ("Hallie Come to the Window"). But it is especially interesting to note that a good number of the traditional pieces apparently originated in an earlier popular institution connected, in ways not yet fully documented, to black music: the minstrel show. Minstrel songs in the repertoire include "Turkey in the Straw," "Oh Susanna," "Run Nigger Run," "Shortnin' Bread," "Buffalo Gals," "Carry Me Back To Old Virginny," "Miss Lucy Neal Down in the Cotton Fields," "Going Back To Baltimore," "Goin' On Down To Town," and "Old Aunt Dinah." The informant whose repertoire contains the largest percentage of minstrel songs, Clarence Tross, is also the one whose playing on one song, as noted above, used a technique common in minstrel banjo tunes but not in traditional playing.

Most important, however, is that the repertoire list contains a thorough mixture of songs with supposedly Anglo-American origins and songs with supposedly Afro-American origins. I'm not going to stick my neck out and go down the list saying which ones are

[End page 23]

[and] which [are not] (some are obvious, some are not); nevertheless the *mixture* should be obvious. And most of the tunes on this list, whatever their origins, are also commonly played by white banjo players. "John Henry," in fact, is probably the most widely known piece among white and black banjo players alike.

That there is a body of tunes and songs like "John Henry" that readily crosses the color line and has crossed it for a long time is, of course, not news. The phrase "common stock" has been used to describe this body of racially shared songs. Tony Russell, for instance, does a good job of discussing the common stock in *Blacks, Whites and Blues*.⁴⁵ He presents a list of tunes that he says "gives a fairly comprehensive idea of common-stock material," although he suggests that an exhaustive list might be two or three times longer. Since only twelve of the songs on the above repertoire list are included in Russell's list, I would suggest that the common stock may be much more extensive than it is usually thought to be, even more extensive than two or three times Russell's list. However, the real point here is that little about the repertoire of black banjo players in Virginia is exclusively or uniquely "black"; the majority of it is shared with whites.

This fact makes one curious about the amount of direct musical interaction these black musicians have had with white musicians. This is an issue that I discussed with most of the informants, and, as one might expect, I got a variety of responses. Unfortunately, I do not have responses from five of the informants--three (Tross, Cook, and Calloway), because I did not interview them and those who did did not deal with this issue, and two (Jones and Bowles), because I myself neglected to deal with it. My suspicion about the five is that they may have had some direct contact with white musicians, but probably not very much.

The remaining eight informants, starting with those who have had little or no contact, provide a more definitive basis for discussion. Rufus Kasey said that he had never played with white musicians,

[End page 24]

though he knows some. He is aware of bluegrass as a white musical form and sometimes goes to hear a bluegrass group in Rocky Mount. Yet this music appears to have had no influence on his own music, all of which he claims he learned from his father and grandfathers. He assumed, in fact, that all white banjo players must use a bluegrass finger-picking style, and when I played "Cluck Old Hen" for him in a frailing style like his own, his jaw dropped, and he said when I was done, "I never saw a white man play that way." John Lawson Tyree has also had little direct contact with white musicians. He told me that he

had sometimes played with them, but I got the feeling that this must have been rare, that he mostly played by himself and with other blacks at black dances.

At some intermediate level of black/white interaction is Robert Stuart. He told me about a lot of other musicians he knew in the area, all of whom are white. Just how much he played with them is not clear, but one of the few pieces he played for me, a finger-picked, bluesy kind of piece, he said he learned directly from a white man.

The rest of the informants have all had considerable direct contact with white musicians and music. Uncle Homer Walker used to play a lot with white fiddlers Henry Reed, Buddy Thompson, and Harrison White. He also talked about the music he heard and played in the coal fields of West Virginia when he worked there in the teens; there were many musicians, black and white, and many different kinds of music. In addition, he felt he had been influenced a little by early recordings of white banjo players. John Jackson grew up in an atmosphere of extensive black/white musical interaction. He said that the many black and white musicians in the Woodville area frequently played together, and that they played essentially the same music. Black musicians played for both black and white dances. Jackson told me that his family was one of the first in the area to have a radio, and that both black and white neighbors came over on Saturday night to listen to the Grand Ole Opry together. Other radio music and recordings,

[End page 25]

both "race" and "hillbilly" also had an influence on his musical development.

Another black banjo player who listened frequently to the Grand Ole Opry and who seems to have been even more thoroughly influenced by it, is "Big Sweet" Lewis Hairston. He plays occasionally with local white bluegrass musicians, and his style is rather bluegrassy, though he uses two fingers rather than three. His playing has been significantly influenced not only by the Opry, but by recordings of Flatt and Scruggs and Bill Monroe. He will play "old" songs if persistently asked, but he prefers bluegrass songs, especially Bill Monroe songs.

And, finally, both Clinks Fantleroy and Peter Bundy seem to have had extensive contact with white musicians and music. Fantleroy's first introduction to music was at the hands of white musicians, His family had always worked for a white family in the Tappahannock area; when he was growing up, the sons in this family were all musicians, and he learned from them, rather than from his own family tradition (there was none) or from local black tradition (which apparently was slight). However, both Fantleroy and Bundy say that the first five-string banjo player they saw was a black man from outside their area. He inspired them to make their own banjo and learn to play it. Fantleroy and Bundy played together as semi-professional musicians for most of their adult lives, at black and white dances both in their area and as far away as Baltimore and New Jersey, and they apparently came into contact with white musicians with some regularity. And, more than any of the other informants dealt with here, their repertoire (mostly played on instruments other than the banjo) is heavily influenced by white popular music of the 1920s to 1940s, probably through contact with radio and records.

Some scholars, myself included, have long considered traditional banjo/fiddle string band music an expression of southern, rural, basically white Anglo-American folk culture. And the contemporary

[End page 26]

study of various genres of Afro-American music has tended to emphasize the uniqueness of that music, the degree to which it differs from Anglo-American musical form; this has been true for blues, for work songs, and for religious music. But here is a longstanding musical tradition where black and white players interact with one another to varying degrees, where black banjo players use the same tunings and the same basic playing techniques as white players, where they play the same songs, for the same dances. Some differences, such as the general tendency of black players to make greater use of syncopation, can be

found, but overall the similarities far outweigh the differences. Traditional American banjo/fiddle music is unique to neither blacks nor whites, but is shared by them. Perhaps the entire tradition is "common stock."

I do not mean to imply that the similarities are due merely to blacks having absorbed a white musical tradition. I repeat my belief that the black/white exchange in this tradition has been a two-way street. Traditional American banjo/fiddle music is as much an Afro-American tradition as an Anglo-American one.

Robert B. Winans
Wayne State University

NOTES

¹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, reprint edition, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1964, p. 135.

² His comment on how the banjo was tuned is also of interest, though it has caused confusion. Scott Odell recently pointed out that the kind of guitar Jefferson would have been most familiar with, and probably was referring to, was the English guitar (rather than the now more common Spanish), which was tuned Cegc'e'g'. This means that the "banjar would have been tuned either Cegc', if by 'lower' he meant 'lower in pitch' or gc'e'g', if he meant 'lower in position when held by the player.' The former interpretation gives a scordatura tuning pattern still sometimes used today for the banjo's four full-length strings. The latter gives the tuning pattern of the modern 'G tuning'."

[End page 27]

(Pre-publication copy of the article, "Banjo, to appear in the forthcoming new edition of *Groves Musical Dictionary*.) Since the earliest known minstrel banjo tunings, dating from the 1840s and likely to have derived from black folk practice, are closely similar to the latter, that seems to me the more likely interpretation.

³ I have interviewed and recorded most of the banjo players I discuss here, but I must thank Kip Lornell, formerly of the Blue Ridge Institute in Ferrum, Va., and now folklorist for the city of Newport News, for having first located many of them, and for helping me get started working with them.

⁴ Kip Lornell, booklet of descriptive notes accompanying record album, *Virginia Traditions: Non-Blues Secular Black Music*, Ferrum, Va., BRI Records, 1978 [BRI-001], p. 10

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁷ Kip Lornell and J. Roderick Moore, "Clarence Tross: Hardy County Banjoist," *Goldenseal*, 2(1976), No. 3, 7-8. Clarence Tross died in 1976.

⁸ Dock Boggs, "I Always Loved the Lonesome Songs," *Sing Out!*, 14(1969), No. 3, 32-33.

⁹ John B. Tabb, Letter to the Editor, *The Critic and Good Literature*, n.s. 2(August, 1884), No. 32, 65.

- ¹⁰ Dorothy Scarborough, *On The Trail of Negro Folk Songs*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1925, p. 164.
- ¹¹ Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, Charlottesville, The University Press of Virginia, 1976, p. 225: interview with Matilda Henrietta Perry (b. 1852).
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 231: interview with Levi Pollard (b 1850).
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 267: interview with Marrinda Jane Singleton (b.1840).
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 316: interview with Nancy Williams (b. 1847). Yanceyville, Va. is in Louisa Co., but the reference here may be to Yanceyville, N.C., in Caswell Co.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 326: interview with Robert Williams (b. 1848).
- ¹⁶ Watercolor sketch by Lewis Miller, reproduced in Dena Epstein "The Folk Banjo: A Documentary History," *Ethnomusicology*, 19(1975), 365; Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1977, p.157; and on the album of BRI-001, *Non-Blues Secular Black Music*.
- ¹⁷ *Weevils*, p. 49: interview with Fannie Berry (b. 1841).
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 265: interview with Martha Showvely (b. 1837).
- [End page 28]
- ¹⁹ William Ferguson Goldie, *Sunshine and Shadow of Slave Life, Reminiscences as Told by Isaac D. Williams to "Tege."* East Saginaw, Mich., Evening News Printing and Binding House, 1885, p. 62, reprinted in Epstein, "Folk Banjo," 357.
- ²⁰ *Weevils*, p. 82: interview with Baily Cunningham (b. ca. 1838).
- ²¹ Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life; or, Illustrations of the 'Peculiar Institution*, 2nd ed., Boston, published by the Author, 1855, p. 68; cited in Epstein, "Folk Banjo," 357.
- ²² *Weevils*, p. 141: interview with Marriah Hines (b. 1835).
- ²³ Mary A. Livermore, *The Story of My Life; or. The Sunshine and Shadow of Seventy Years*, Hartford, Conn., A.D. Worthington and Co., 1897, p. 257; cited in Epstein, "Folk Banjo," 357. Epstein's date of 1847 is a little later than Livermore was actually in Virginia.
- ²⁴ William B. Smith, "The Persimmon Tree and the Beer Dance," *Farmers' Register* (Shellbanks, Va.), 6(April, 1838), 58-61; reprinted in Bruce Jackson, *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth Century Periodicals*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1967, pp. 3-9.
- ²⁵ John Pendleton Kennedy, *Swallow Barn: or, A Sojourn in the Old Dominion*, Philadelphia, Carey and Lea. 1832, I, pp. 110-113; cited in Epstein, "Folk Banjo," 355-356.

²⁶ John Finch, *Travels in the United States of America and Canada*, London, Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green and Longman, 1833, pp. 237-238; cited in Epstein, "Folk Banjo," 360.

²⁷ Arthur Woodward, "Joel Sweeney and the First Banjo," *Los Angeles County Museum Quarterly*, 7 (Spring, 1949), 7.

²⁸ James Kirke Paulding, *Letters From the South, by a Northern Man*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1835, I, pp. 96-97; cited in Epstein, "Folk Banjo," 355.

²⁹ Thomas Ashe, *Travels in America, Performed in 1806*, London, R. Phillips, 1808, I, p. 233; cited in Epstein, "Folk Banjo," 360.

³⁰ Thomas Fairfax, *Journey from Virginia to Salem. Massachusetts (1799)*, London, Printed for Private Circulation, 1936, p. 2; cited in Epstein, "Folk Banjo," 354.

³¹ Jefferson, *Notes*, p. 135.

³² *Virginia Gazette*, Jan. 8, 1780, p. [2], col. 3, and Feb. 18, 1775, p. [3], col. 2; cited in Epstein, *Sinful Tunes*, p. 34.

³³ Hunter D. Parish, ed., *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian. 1773-1774*, Williamsburg, Va., Colonial Williamsburg, 1943, p. 83; cited in Epstein, "Folk Banjo," 360.

³⁴ John F. D. Smyth, *A Tour in the United States of America*, London, Printed for G. Robinson, J. Robson, and J. Sewell, 1784, I, p. 46; cited in Epstein, "Folk Banjo," 354.

[End page 29]

³⁵ Jonathan Boucher, *Boucher's Glossary of Archaic and Provincial Words*, London, Printed for Black, Young and Young, 1852, BAN; cited in Epstein, "Folk Banjo," 353.

³⁶ John Davis, *Travels of Four Years and a Half in the United States of America During 1798, 1799, 1800, 1801, and 1802*, New York, Henry Holt, 1909, pp. 413-416; cited in Epstein, "Folk Banjo," 360. An old slave mentions playing the banjo as a young man, probably in the 1750s.

³⁷ "a banjor (a large hollow instrument with three strings); Smyth, *A Tour*, I, p. 46.

³⁸ Jones hinted at one point that he also played in a finger-picking style, but he never demonstrated this to me.

³⁹ Smith, "Persimmon Tree and Beer Dance," italics in original.

⁴⁰ Boucher, *Glossary*, BAN.

⁴¹ Fairfax, *Journey from Virginia*, p. 2.

⁴² Robert B. Winans, "The Folk, the Stage, and the Five-String Banjo in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of American Folklore*, 89(1976), 407-437.

⁴³ In a few cases where I have not actually been to see the informant, I have been fortunate to hear tapes and receive information collected by Kip Lornell and Mike Seeger. In several other cases, tapes made by Lornell have supplemented my own.

⁴⁴ The initials used here stand for the following informants: LH = Lewis Hairston, JJ = John Jackson, LB = Leonard Bowles, IC = Irvin Cook, CT = Clarence Tross, RK = Rufus Kasey, HW = Homer Walker, JT = John Lawson Tyree, PB = Peter Bundy, RS = Robert Stuart, CF = Clinks Fantleroy, JO = John Calloway. A "(2)" following an initial means that the informant told me that someone in the previous generation played that song, though they themselves no longer play it.

⁴⁵ Tony Russell, *Blacks, Whites and Blues*, New York, Stein and Day, 1970, pp. 25-31.

[End Page 30]

[**Note:** For those who would like to hear examples of black banjo music from many of the same individuals and field-recorded sources Robert Winans discussed in this article, see the editor's commentary on the recent release, *Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia*, along with directions for ordering the CD from Smithsonian Folkways Recordings on the [What's Happening?](#) page.]