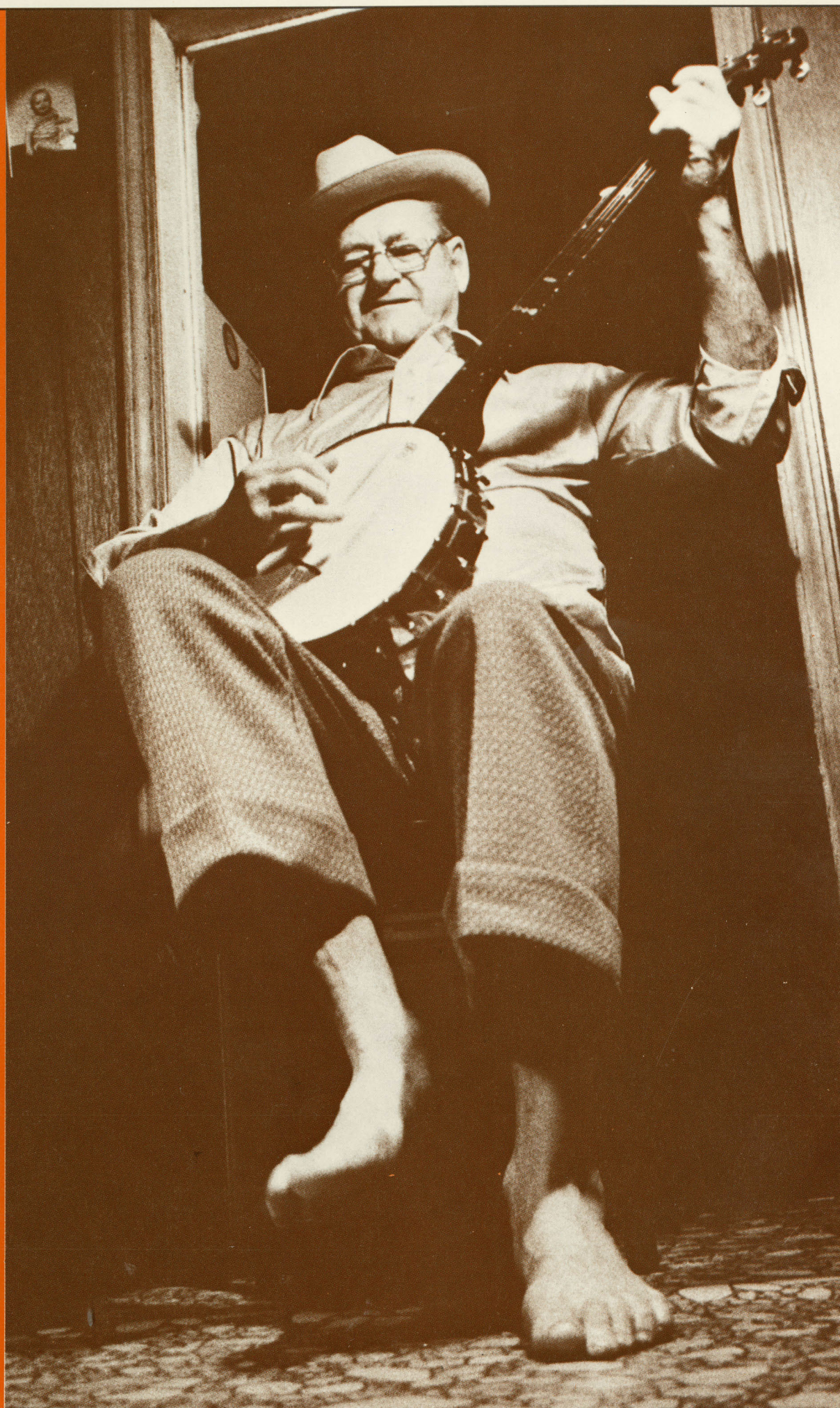


# Uncle John Patterson

Plains, Georgia  
Rock





# Uncle John Patterson

## INTRODUCTION

Uncle John Patterson, the "Banjo King," picks old-timey tunes in a truly unique style that seems designed to lift spirits and get feet moving. Born 66 years ago a few miles from where he now lives in Carrollton, Georgia, Uncle John won his first banjo championship at the age of 14 and successfully defended his title at every convention he entered thereafter. His early adult years were spent sharecropping. For 20 years he was a hydraulic and plumbing mechanic at Lockheed, where he invented a tool for injecting hydraulic fluid into B 47s which is reported to have saved Lockheed \$350,000 a year. An old-time populist politician, and a gregarious one, he was Carrollton's State Representative to the Georgia Legislature from 1968 to 1974.

But Uncle John's first love has always been music. In addition to the banjo, he plays a rocking piano, hand saw, and fiddle, sometimes over-dubbing himself on the tape recorder he always keeps ready in his livingroom. (He also "plays" his feet, which are always bare and tapping out the rhythm on the floor when he performs.)

He played frequently over the radio and made personal appearances with such legendary old-timey musicians as Fiddling John Carson, Clayton McMichen, J. Laurel Johnson, Gid Tanner, and Riley Puckett. In 1952 he took a leave of absence from Lockheed to make a tour of the South with Smiley Burnette, one of Hollywood's leading Western comics. His group, the Carroll County Ramblers, made two records, "Rome, Georgia Bound," in 1931, and "Georgia Wobble Blues," in 1947. He says he made his first recording in 1924 when he accompanied Clayton McMichen on "Down Yonder."

The rest of Uncle John's story is told in his own words, edited from an interview I conducted with him in 1976.

George Mitchell

## INTERVIEW

"I've been playing banjo ever since I was three years old. But I think it started when I was one. See, I was walking at about a year old, and I would drag the banjo around. I'd drag it over the floor. I'd sleep on it.

I do remember this: one time when I was three years old I was crying to get the banjo; Mama had it put up. So I got up in her lap and she tuned it for me in a manner that I could play one tune, 'Shout, Lula.' All I had to do was just rap the banjo and just go up and down on one string and it played the tune. So she showed me how to do it, and I laid down and went to sleep. And I got up and went to rapping that banjo and I remembered that she told me to go up and down on that one string. And it come to me.

My mother was known to be the best five-string banjo picker anywhere, and she took the prizes wherever she went. Her name was Elizabeth, they called her Bessie. She played tunes that was over a hundred years old back then. And I still play those same tunes. "Bob Murphy," "Snowbird in Ashbank," "Mama, Put the Kettle On," and tunes like that. I got a little different style, but not much. I play it as I was taught with your old time banjo picking, not this fancy stuff. And I **do not** use picks. I pick it with my fingers. When I get through with a tune, I can make it sound like it was more than just one instrument. I play the rhythm and the lead at the same time. I pick it, I don't just chord it.

My mother died in 1924. It was an hour or so before she passed away that she called me to her bedside. I was 14 years old. She said, "John, you know I worked hard with you to learn you to pick a banjo." She said, "As long as you live, don't never let nobody beat you playing the banjo." And that hasn't been done yet.

The month after she died they had the Fiddlers Convention in the old city auditorium in Atlanta. And I wanted to go and defend her title. So my daddy carried me to Atlanta in a T-Model. It took us all day to get this side of Atlanta late that evening, and I was supposed to play that night. So Saturday we went on into Atlanta. Well, I was late and they looked at me trying to decide whether or not to let me play. I was very small, very thin, weighed 67 pounds. And I had on a shirt made out of a flour sack — I'm gonna tell it like it is; I was raised a poor boy — and a pair of my granddaddy's pistol pants. Well, I thought I was something with my granddad's pants on with the pistol legs. And I had on some regular country shoes; I didn't know what good slippers was. So they looked at me and they broke the rule for me.

I was up against Moonshine Kate, Fiddling John Carson's daughter, who was a banjo picker. I was gonna play "Spanish Fandango," but she played first and that's what she played. There was a rule that I couldn't play what she played, so I played "Hen Cackle." Clayton McMichen, Fate Norris, Gid Tanner, all of 'em was there. I looked around at 'em, they says, "Pick it out, Uncle John." I got to playing that "Hen Cackle," and old Gid Tanner, even John Carson joined in with me. They got to cackling and got to crowing.

And we tied. The audience applause decided it. Well, I had it but, you know, she was a girl — that made some difference. So then she came out with "Hen Cackle" and I came back with that "Spanish

Fandango." And I laid it on 'em. So that was it. And from that time till now, I've managed to take care of myself.

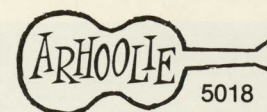
Later on, me and Fiddling John Carson went all over the state together. We went all over the state of Georgia together for one governor and he was elected. That was Gene Talmadge. Yeah, we was the ones that put out the "Three-Dollar Tag Song" and "The Gene Talmadge Special." Those were political songs we played at political rallies. We'd have the best time in the world. The wagons and the buggies would come from miles around. We wore red galluses — that was our trademark. Had "Gene Talmadge" wrote on 'em. We'd start playing and we'd see old Gene coming through the crowd, and me and John would holler, "Oh, look who's coming — the next governor of Georgia." That's when everything went up in the air. What are you talking about!

I lost my main picking finger (the index finger) about 20 years ago in an accident at Lockheed. they had to take it off, my main picking finger. Well, I didn't give up. They first declared I was gonna surrender. I said, "Uh uh." So my wife brought my banjo to me at the hospital. I had been laying the little finger on the head of the banjo and picking with my other fingers. So after I lost my main picking finger, I began to use my thumb and other three fingers, laid my wrist on the edge of the banjo. And I still got four fingers at work. And people said, "You can't do it." You **can** if you want to.

It bothers me a little sometimes when I go to play the piano, or the banjo. It seems like that finger's there and it's gonna get that string or hit that note on the piano, and it ain't there. But if I miss that note, I'm gonna hit one on the side of it to cover it up.

A couple of years ago I had a 45 cut. "The Watergate Blues." I'd been watching the Watergate hearings all along, and I went to bed one night, went to sleep. About 2:30 or 3 o'clock something woke me up. And I could hear that sound. "The Watergate Blues." I got up and went and sat down at the piano and played it. Right then I walked over and turned on the tape recorder, and I taped it. Then I picked up the banjo and dubbed in the banjo. See, the Watergate thing had done give me the blues. And there's no words in the song. I had just got tired of words in the Watergate.

I want to keep my mama's wish until I give the banjo up. I don't know whether I'll ever give it up or not. I can still pick just as good today as I could 40 or 50 years ago. I've got music that will never be put out to the public until I put it out. Because I ain't found nobody that can play my style and pick it the way I pick it. Not yet."



STEREO

**SNOWBIRD IN ASHBANK**  
**UNCLE JOHN'S WALTZ**  
**FLAT FOOTED CHARLIE**  
**BOB MURPHY**  
**MILK COW BLUES**  
**BUCKING MULE**  
**BUCKING MULE (piano)**

**UNCLE JOHN'S ROCK (piano)**  
**SUMMERLAND**  
**FIRST LADY WALTZ (piano)**  
**DEEP ELM BLUES (piano)**  
**DRAGGIN THE BOW**  
**HEN CACKLE**  
**PLAINS, GEORGIA ROCK (piano)**

*Uncle John Patterson — banjo or piano  
and foot tapping*  
*James Patterson (John Patterson's son)  
guitar*

© 1977 by Arhoolie Records Inc.

Supervised by George Mitchell  
Recorded by Chet Briggs in Carrollton, Ga. 1976  
Remix by Dennis Fink  
Photographs by George Mitchell  
Produced by Chris Strachwitz and George Mitchell  
Cover by Wayne Pope

*Special thanks to the National Endowment for the Arts, whose support of a special project of the Georgia Folklore Society and the Georgia Grassroots Music Festival, co-sponsored by the Society and the City of Atlanta Bureau of Cultural Affairs, made possible the field research which led to this album.*

For our catalog of over 200 Folk, Blues, and Ethnic LPs on ARHOOLE, BLUES CLASSICS, FOLKLYRIC, and OLD TIMEY and a free copy of the 60 page LIGHTNING EXPRESS, send \$1.00 to:  
**ARHOOLE RECORDS**  
**10341 San Pablo Ave.**  
**El Cerrito, Ca. 94530**