

Years spent loyally attending to the Tune of the Week and Tune of the Month has introduced me to hundreds of tunes. One of the genres represented is southern Black string band music, which Charles Wolfe (1943 – 2006) wrote was “effectively ignored” during the beginnings of country music recordings in the 20’s because “they did not fit into the stereotyped categories” of hillbilly music or blues. This changed in the 1940’s when folklorists and collectors set out to discover this rich repertoire of music. My introduction to Black old-time and string band music occurred via several TOTWs on Instagram in the last ten years. In a past TOTW installation on BHO I covered [Peace Behind the Bridge](#) as played by Etta Baker.

This week I’ve chosen Altamont, as played by banjo player Murphy “Murph” Gribble, along with fiddler John Lewis Lusk and Albert York on guitar. The Library of Congress offers the CD “Altamont, Black Stringband Music” with fourteen tracks. The tune was learned from Murph’s father, Will Gribble. My two arrangements are from the solos at the end of the recording. The banjo player and fiddler were intentionally asked to play their respective versions, revealing the purposefulness of the 1940’s project to document the music itself.

Paul Kirk, Jr. shared thorough research on the three musicians, so check out his YouTube notes in the Altamont video with Stephen Rapp on banjo for [Old-Time TOTW #261](#). The tune’s history goes back to the days of slavery in Tennessee. Interestingly, Paul reports that John Lusk’s enslaved great-grandfather, born in the 1820’s, was sent to New Orleans to learn fiddling. The trio of John Lewis Lusk (fiddle), Joseph York (guitar), and Murph Gribble (banjo) were apparently related, probably as brothers and cousin, and busked together at the same spot for nearly 30 years.

Paul cited an essay available on [Gribble, Lusk and York website](#) which gave him good information for researching Altamont. If you follow Paul’s TOTWs, you’ll notice his research always goes the extra mile to uncover the history. Scroll down in this link to the essay by Linda Henry called “Some Real American Music: John Lusk and his Rural Black String Band.” The website also has the recordings for all three sessions for Gribble, Lusk and York. In addition, at 14:51 in this video link, [Linda Henry](#) makes a plea for publishing Black southern string band music by Gribble, Lusk and York, for it was a “sustaining source for cultural survival and ‘an expression of American life and character.’” On Banjo Hangout there was a post last year with history on [Murph Gribble](#).

My two arrangements of Altamont are from Gribble’s banjo and Lusk’s fiddle, which are played separately at the end of the 1946 recording on the Library of Congress CD. This wasn’t included on the partial recording of [Altamont on the Slippery Hill website](#) and may account for why my arrangements are unique. I was also helped by my favorite music camp bluegrass banjo instructor’s video: [Bill Evans](#). He covered the tune in Banjo Newsletter’s August, 2020 edition.

More versions of Altamont to listen to:

[Rhys Jones](#) “a groovier way to play this simple C tune”

[Bruce Molsky and Bob Carlin](#)

[Dean Barber](#) and the Lone Star String Band

[Susan Sterngold, banjo](#)

[Zac Sokolow \(3-finger style\)](#)

[Jan Howard, fiddle and guitar](#)