

Oh John the Rabbit

Informant/Performer:
Four girls
Amory, MS, 1939

Source:
Library of Congress AFS 2975 A3
Collected by Herbert Halpert

Solo *Group* *Solo* *Group* (*etc.*)

Oh John the Rab-bit, Yes ma'am. Got a might-y bad ha-bit. Yes ma'am. Go-ing in my gar-den,
Yes ma'am. Cut-ting down my cab-bage. Yes ma'am. My 'ma-toes 'ma-toes, Yes ma'am.
My sweet po-ta-toes, Yes ma'am. And if I live,— Yes, ma'am, to see next fall,
Yes, ma'am. I ain't gon' pick, Yes, ma'am. No cot-ton a-tall. Yes, ma'am.

Transcribed by Cynthia Stuck

Game Instructions

Children stand in a circle.
A leader stands in the center of the circle,
and the children clap on beat and sing the response.

Background Information

According to Herbert Halpert, the ring game "Old John the Rabbit" was played by a circle of children with a lead singer in the center. The tune and response are the same as those that Bessie Jones teaches for "Shoo, Turkey." At the end of her game, a line of children sit on their haunches and, to the refrain "Shoo, turkey, shoo, shoo," hop in the fashion children also use to imitate rabbits. In tradition, games frequently change. They are added to and subtracted from as the aesthetics and knowledge of games vary from group to group. One can easily imagine "Old John the Rabbit" acquiring a rabbit hop from the "Shoo, turkey, shoo" of the game with identical vocal form. As other words are found with this tune, so other tunes are found with these words.

In *American Negro Rhymes, Wise and Otherwise* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat, 1968 [reprint of 1922 edition], pp. 263-71), Thomas Talley gives a glimpse of the process of floating texts from one game to another. A game like "Old John the Rabbit," played by young and old alike,

commonly went on continuously for a quarter of an hour or more. It was considered an accomplishment for a leader to be able to sing "calls" for so long a time and still a greater accomplishment to sing the calls both in rhyme and with meaning.