



Chris Haley, nephew of the late Alex Haley, works for the state archives and has conducted workshops on genealogy.

ANDRÉ F. CHUNG [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

Thriving 'Roots'

Alex Haley's nephew, Chris, speaks to the continuing impact of the miniseries that made TV history 30 years ago

BY MARY CAROLE MCCAULEY
[SUN REPORTER]

EVEN 30 YEARS LATER, THE memories barely have dimmed. Chris Haley was a teenager in 1977 when he visited the set of the epic miniseries *Roots*. But he still can see the African-style huts hunkering down beneath the hot Georgia sun. He can hear the long, dry grasses rustle like crickets. And he still feels sweat pooling beneath his shirt, near his heart.

That's when he knew that his Uncle Alex was about to accomplish something big.

"I was just a kid," Chris Haley says.

"I couldn't believe this was happening. And then when I saw Kunta Kinte in chains, I couldn't believe that I was watching a story about my great-great-grandfather.

"It's still powerful 30 years later. I still feel deeply ... I'm not sure if 'wounded' is the right word. Moved. I still feel deeply moved."

The 1977 miniseries, which is airing this week on TVOne, permanently altered the television landscape. About 100 million people — or half the nation — viewed the final night of the broadcast, an audience greater than that for most Super Bowls. *Roots* remains the most-watched miniseries ever.

Though our society has changed greatly in the past three decades, the series' continued pertinence was pointed up, ironically, by Don Imus. The controversial talk-radio host has been suspended and has lost his MSNBC simulcast after he made racially insulting remarks about members of the Rutgers University women's basketball team.

David Taft Terry, executive director of Baltimore's Reginald F. Lewis [Please see **HALEY**, 3C]



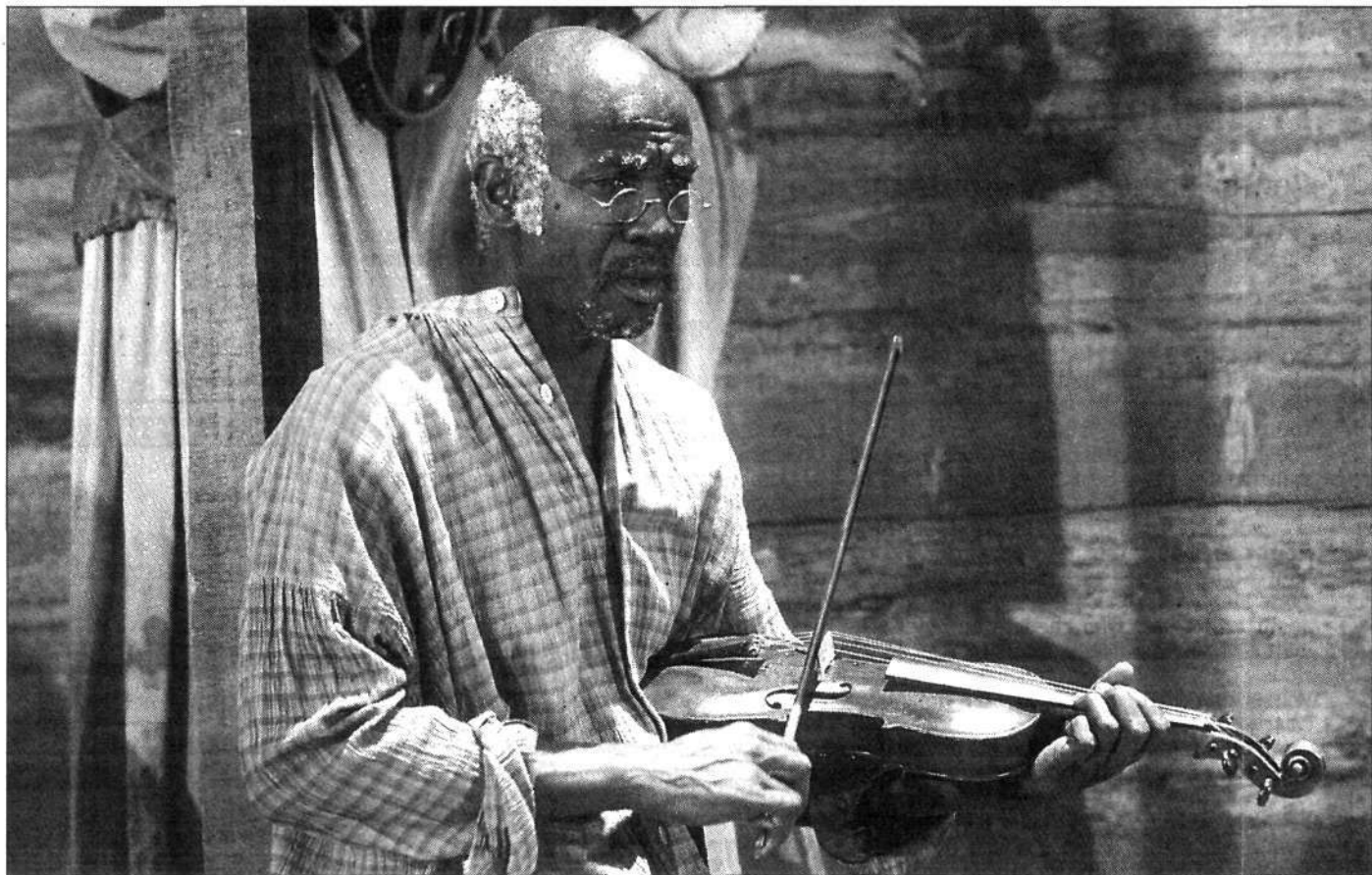
Leslie Uggams and Richard Roundtree were part of the groundbreaking multigenerational story of "Roots," first broadcast 30 years ago.



ONLINE

Hear UniSun editor Karlayne Parker and Sun reporters Joe Burriss and David Steele discuss the 30th anniversary of *Roots* at baltimoresun.com/unisunpod.

FROM THE COVER



Louis Gossett Jr. is Fiddler in "Roots," which is being rebroadcast on its 30th anniversary.

The lasting impact of 'Roots'

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Museum of African American History and Culture, thinks that it's a happy coincidence that *Roots* is being rebroadcast this week, because the series is an eloquent counterweight to Imus' racially charged remarks.

"*Roots* is an educational experience, then and now, for many people who might not be familiar with African-American history and culture," he says. "The issues that *Roots* addressed resonated in 1977, and they resonate today."

One of those issues is offensive language. Chris Haley wonders whether *Roots* would be widely broadcast in 2007, if only because of the frequent use of the n-word, a slur with long and painful associations for African-Americans.

"It would be very hard today to get this on the networks," he says. "It would have to be on cable. Maybe someone like Spike Lee could do it, but even then, it would be controversial. There would be disclaimers all over the place."

Walter Podrazik, a consulting curator for the Museum of Broadcast Communications in Chicago, thinks it would be a shame to limit the exposure of such a socially significant show.

"It's good to be sensitive and respectful of people's feelings," he says. "But context is everything. If you're doing a period piece, how honest are you being if you don't include offensive language? To pretend that it didn't happen takes away a bit of the triumph of the people who battled racism, and survived."

Podrazik is the author of *Watching TV: Six Decades of American Television*.

Before the series aired, ABC executives thought so little of its potential to draw viewers that they took the unprecedented step of cramming it into eight consecutive days during a slow period in January. But *Roots* became a cultural phenomenon. *Variety* declared: "*Roots* remakes the TV world in eight days." *Time* trumpeted: "Why *Roots* hits home."

News outlets reported that burly guys in taverns were asking bartenders to switch the channel from basketball to the miniseries.

Roots changed television history, Podrazik says, because it proved to network executives "that they could take tough topics, and they would attract an audience, as long as there was a compelling story."

It changed historical research, Terry says, partly because it focused on African-Americans and partly because it focused on the stories of everyday people.

"There's room for the view of history that talks about great men on horses, but that's not the only way to look at our past," Terry says. "*Roots* ushered in a much more democratic, bottom-up view of American culture. Before the series, you could count on one hand the number of people who thought it was important to look into African-American history. No researcher would make the same mistake today."

The series also began a fascination with genealogy that continues unabated.

Chris Haley has presented genealogical workshops as part of his job with the Maryland State Archives, where he oversees the

CHRIS HALEY

Age: 40s

Residence: Landover

Education: Bachelor's degree in English, University of Maryland, College Park

Occupation: Director of the department studying the legacy of slavery for the Maryland State Archives

Other activities: Hosts two weekly radio shows, *Heart of a Winner* at 6 p.m. Mondays on WNAV (1430 AM) and *Undiscovered Radio* at 10 p.m. Mondays on WRYP (97.5 FM)

In his spare time: An actor and singer who performs regularly at local venues; a consultant to the Kunta Kinte-Alex Haley Foundation.

Personal: Single, no children

Legacy of Slavery Department.

"My uncle showed people that their pasts aren't lost, even if their ancestors were slaves," he says. "Their histories could be recovered, and that was a very empowering realization."

The past three decades, he says, have seen technological advances that his uncle could only have dreamed of, such as the Internet and DNA testing. Alex Haley died in 1992.

"Perhaps if Uncle Alex had been able to use the Internet, he could have written his book sooner," Chris Haley says. "Perhaps he wouldn't have had to go

to Africa as early in the process as he did. But, he still would have had to make that journey."

And ultimately, he says, the paper trail would have disappeared. Alex Haley still would have had to rely on oral history to piece together the account of Kunta Kinte's capture.

"The griot was all there was," he says. "It wasn't as though there was a birth certificate for Kunta Kinte in Africa that my uncle could look at. There weren't even any birth certificates in the state of Maryland until 1898."

Alex Haley always described *Roots* as "faction" — that is, a blend of fact and fiction. But since his book was written, some experts have thrown into dispute even those passages that the author claimed were historically correct.

Chris Haley believes his uncle's account, though he acknowledges that it's impossible to know for certain. Ultimately, he says, it doesn't matter whether *Roots* is accurate in every detail.

"It isn't important if I am related to this man named Kunta Kinte, or what the ship he came over on was named, or if it arrived in America on a Monday or a Thursday.

"Something like that did happen to an awful lot of people. *Roots* represents all African-Americans with enslaved backgrounds, and whose stories, equally heroic and tragic, never will be known.

"Look at the faces around you. They are living proof of people who persevered through trials and tribulations.

"We are descended from the people who survived."

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»» **ON TV** Episode 5 of *Roots* will air on TVOne at 8 p.m. today; episode 6 airs at 8 p.m. Sunday. Earlier episodes will repeat on Friday and Saturday. For a full broadcast schedule, go to tvoneonline.com.