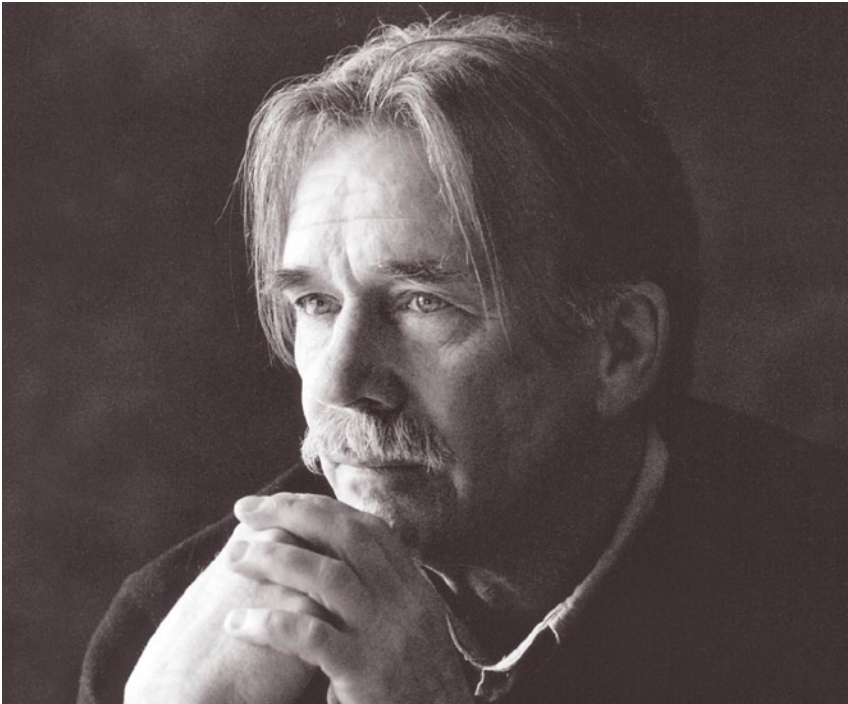


A Long Time Coming

Perry Walker champions the South with his photography and his attitude... BY CORY DUGAN



James Perry Walker ('67)

JAMES PERRY WALKER ('67) admits that he's somewhat of a contrarian. Actually, he seems more than a little proud of the trait.

Although he holds a Ph.D. from New York University's Steinhardt School of Education, he rarely uses the incumbent title. "I got it for purely political reasons," he said. "I discovered that, in certain situations, people return my phone calls more quickly if I identify myself as 'Dr. Walker.' Besides, I have a much better title than doctor—'Sir James.'"

The knightly honorific may not quite qualify Walker for a seat in the House of Lords (since it is the result of a proclamation by the town of Oxford, MS, whose mayor also owns the town's famously independent Square Books), but he finds it useful in New York City restaurants. "There are a lot of waitresses there who are now contessas," he explained. "I've been dispensing 'contessa-ships' all over the city. So be it."

When he's not elevating waitresses to minor royalty, Walker is a photographer. A book of his photographs, *The Reverend*, was published in April by the University Press of Mississippi. The photographs in the book, taken between 1976 and 1981, chronicle the last years of Reverend Louis Cole, a circuit preacher, and the black Baptist congregations he served in rural

West Tennessee and North Mississippi. The book also includes a foreword by Will D. Campbell, as well as reflections and sermons from Cole himself.

Growing up in Mississippi, Walker knew these rural congregations as his neighbors and sought to document the spiritual refuge and strong sense of community that they represented.

"It was a long time coming," Walker said of the effort to publish the photos, some of which are now 30 years old. "I tried to publish them for years. So I went back to school to find out what I was doing wrong. That didn't work either," he added with a laugh.

Going back to school took him to NYU, where he also earned a master's degree in documentary photography. "It was a lot of fun, I had a lot of fights, and I experienced an enormous cultural divide," Walker said of his graduate school adventures. "Those people didn't know anything about where I'm from."

The most common challenge he faced from his colleagues and teachers fell along the politically correct lines of "What business does a white boy like you have trying to interpret black culture?"

Walker's simple answer was: "I grew up in a county that's 70 percent black. It's my culture, it's our culture. There are no white folks in Mississippi."

When he first heard Reverend Cole preach in the late '60s, Walker said he felt like he was hearing "the tail end of an oral tradition, you could say a bardic tradition, that would soon be lost."

Walker followed Cole with his camera for six years, until the Reverend's death in 1981. "I kept photographing him because I thought I'd missed something," he explained.

Documenting and explaining the South, and attempting to connect it to the rest of the nation and the world, seem to be part and parcel of Walker's personal mission. He is one of the founders of Delta Axis, a non-profit organization based in Memphis whose expressed mission is to present new or neglected Southern art and relate it to other contemporary artwork being done elsewhere, nationally and globally. Delta Axis currently manages a regular calendar of exhibitions at the Power House and Marshall Arts galleries, as well as the annual Indie Memphis Film Festival and a biennial art exhibition at the University of Memphis. Walker is president emeritus and still serves as a member of the organization's board of directors.

Despite his affiliation with Delta Axis, and despite



the fact that his photographs have been exhibited in galleries and museums throughout the United States and abroad (including the Mississippi Museum of Art, Tricia Collins Contemporary Art and Taranto Gallery in New York City, the Flint Institute of Arts in Michigan, and the Basel Art Fair in Switzerland), Walker declines to be called an “artist,” preferring the designation of documentary photographer. He has also co-produced several documentary films, *That Far Away Place* and *Seminoles, Alligators and Football Players: A Florida Rivalry*, and directed a film short entitled *Rimpoche Romance*.

He is currently beginning work on a commissioned photography project that will document the culture and panhandle environs of Gadsden County, FL—the state’s only county with an African-American majority population. He is also printing and compiling a collection of found photographic negatives of Havana from the 1930s, along with printed postcard images, with the intention of publishing them in a book.

“They were found in Miami, and we don’t know who the photographer was,” Walker said. “I started this project without knowing much of the history of Cuba, and I’ve learned a lot. It’s all very romantic and very corrupt. There are lots of photos of government

Mt. Gilliam Church, Byhalia, Mississippi, 1979 (left) and Gatewood Church, Slayden, Mississippi, 1976 (above), from The Reverend by James Perry Walker.

officials, of foreign ambassadors, all very evocative of a colonial and turbulent time.”

Walker and his wife (and fellow photographer), Mary Mhoon-Walker, live in the Chickasaw Gardens neighborhood of Memphis, within a stone’s throw of the campus of his undergraduate alma mater. While he expresses appropriate fondness for his academic associations with CBU and NYU, Walker is especially proud of his latest diploma—the one from Ag-Flight School in Bainbridge, GA. Ag-Flight, for those who aren’t aware, is the top crop-dusting training school in the country.

“It’s just one of my many compensatory activities,” Walker said, explaining that there were numerous pilots in his family and that learning to fly seemed natural. While describing crop-dusting as “balletic” and as a “beautiful thing,” he also admitted (and advised), “It’s all about learning. Never stop learning.”

Maybe it’s also about being a contrarian, “When I’m in New York City, I’m a crop-duster,” Walker said. “But when I’m in Georgia, I’m a poet.” ■

For more photographs, visit www.jamesperrywalker.com