

## Alan Lomax: A Life in Folk Music

Alan Lomax's career was long, almost seventy years, and his interests many and varied. He achieved so much in those seventy years that it is impossible for any short account of his life and work to be comprehensive. The following overview is therefore necessarily selective and, to avoid duplication, I have passed quickly over those aspects of Alan's career emphasized by Ron Cohen, but I hope that it covers the ground reasonably systematically and at least hits the highlights of a remarkable, indeed quite extraordinary, story. This was a man whose like we shall not often see again.

### APPRENTICESHIP, 1933-36

Born in Austin, Texas, in January 1915, Alan Lomax was the son of renowned folklorist John Lomax, whose pioneering *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*<sup>1</sup> had been first published in 1910, followed in 1919 by *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp*<sup>2</sup>. The Lomax family had moved to the eastern USA by the early thirties and Alan began his university education by attending Harvard College for a year, but in 1933 he switched to the University of Texas, the institution from which he would graduate with a B.A. in Philosophy in 1936. One reason for Alan's transfer back to his home state was that it allowed him to accompany his father on collecting trips in the Deep South. John Lomax was now effectively the director of the tiny Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress, and in 1933 he began making field-recordings for the archive in the penitentiaries and work-houses of several southern states, including Kentucky, Tennessee and Mississippi. That year Alan visited the infamous Parchman State Farm at Canton, Mississippi, for the first time. He also helped his father compile and edit the first of their published folksong collections, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*.<sup>3</sup>

During the next three years father and son spent many months together carting their extremely heavy but (for the time) state-of-the-art recording equipment around Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas and the Carolinas. This was when they made their celebrated recordings of Aunt Molly Jackson, of the Soul Stirrers gospel group, and of Cajun and Creole music from (among others) the Hoffpaur family, the Segura Brothers, fiddler Wayne Perry,

and the duo of Lanese Vincent and Sidney Richard. It was also when they discovered Leadbelly at the Angola State Prison and recorded such classics as "Goodnight Irene", "Matchbox Blues", "Midnight Special", "Roberta" and "Take a Whiff On Me", as well as the plea for clemency that persuaded Governor O.K. Allen of Louisiana to pardon him.<sup>4</sup>

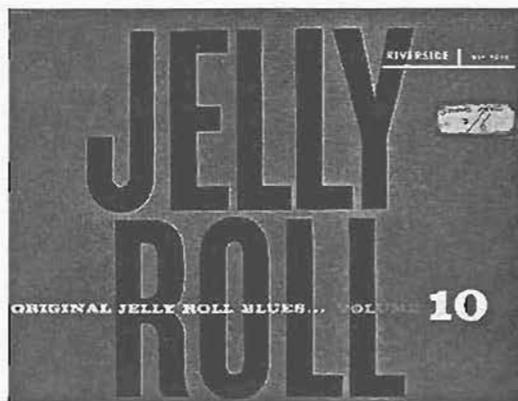


Leadbelly worked as the Lomaxes' driver for the remainder of their 1934 field-trip, and resumed his performing career at the December meeting of the Modern Languages Association in Philadelphia. But he soon quarreled with John, who had initially acted as his manager, although he remained on good terms with Alan and between 1935 and 1942 made many more recordings for the Library of Congress.<sup>5</sup> *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly*, jointly edited by John and Alan, was first published in 1936.<sup>6</sup>

### ARCHIVIST, 1937-42

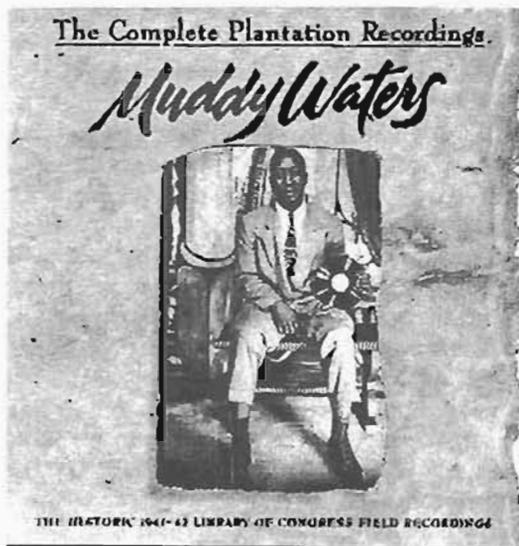
In 1937 Alan obtained the position of Assistant in Charge of the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress in Washington, while his father remained as "honorary consultant" and his nominal boss. Father and son continued to collaborate, jointly editing a new edition of *Cowboy Songs and Frontier Ballads* and compiling *Our Singing Country: A Second Volume of American Ballads & Folk Songs* in 1938,<sup>7</sup> but they now did most of their collecting separately. Alan had a new partner, Elizabeth Harold (whom he married in 1937), on his research trips to the Southern Appalachians, the mid-West, the Deep South, the Bahamas, and Haiti.

Alan was now also doing extensive recording for the Archive in New York (where he recorded Sarah Ogan Gunning) and in Washington, D.C. In 1938, for example, he first recorded Woody Guthrie, and the same year he made his greatest contribution to the history of jazz, interviewing at length jazz pioneer Jelly Roll Morton.<sup>8</sup>



The Morton recordings would eventually be issued as a twelve-volume LP set in 1950,<sup>9</sup> to accompany the publication of Alan's book, *Mr. Jelly Roll*, of which more later.<sup>10</sup>

Equally legendary were Alan's field recordings of blues musicians in the Mississippi Delta, the by-product of his abortive search for the already-deceased Robert Johnson. Bluesmen discovered included the young Muddy Waters (recorded on the Sherrod Plantation), Son House (recorded mainly in Robinsonville), and Honeyboy Edwards (recorded in Clarksdale).



Yet it was one thing to build up the archival holdings at the Library of Congress and another to publicize what had been collected and to make the recordings available to researchers. Alan was well aware of the need to catalogue the growing mound of archival recordings contributed by such folklorists as Sidney Robertson Cowell, Herbert Halpert and Vance Randolph, among others. He hired his young friend Pete Seeger to help him do the job. Seeger would later acknowledge Alan as his mentor, and remark that he achieved in his few years at the Library as much as would take most men a lifetime. One result of their labours was the invaluable *Checklist of Recorded Songs in the English Language in the Archive of American Folk Song to July, 1940*.<sup>11</sup> Alan supplemented this by also compiling, with Sidney Cowell, the equally useful *American Folk Song and Folk-lore, a Regional Bibliography*.<sup>12</sup> Yet despite his evident achievements, Alan's career as an employee of the Library of Congress came to an abrupt end in the fall of 1942. His resignation was the price required to save the Archive's funding in the face of attacks from hostile congressmen on its alleged political bias.

#### BROADCASTER AND PRODUCER, 1939-45

One of the events that made Republican congressmen see red was Alan's participation in the famous "Grapes of Wrath" concert in Washington, D.C. on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1940, which featured Guthrie, Aunt Molly Jackson, and Will Geer. The success of this event led to his collaboration with Seeger and Guthrie on a songbook, *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People*, for which no publisher could be found until 1967.<sup>13</sup> He also encouraged the Almanac Singers (of which his sister Bess later became a member) to persist with their idea of developing a repertoire that would mix traditional folksongs with union and other political material, pacifist at first but patriotic after Pearl Harbor. He even helped a group of unionized office workers to form a group called the *Priority Ramblers*.

Lomax's work at the Library of Congress was a full-time job, yet his enormous energy and enthusiasm found other important outlets too. For example, the seeds of his later academic career can be seen in his enrolment in a graduate program in anthropology at Columbia University and in his first experience of teaching folklore (at the University of Indiana) in 1939. He also began his career as a broadcaster that

same year, with a 26-part series titled *American Folk Songs* on the CBS network's *American School of the Air*. It illustrated a wide variety of English-language folksongs, featuring Aunt Molly Jackson, Burl Ives, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, and the Golden Gate Quartet. A follow-up series, *Wellsprings of America*, ran for another 26 weeks on the same network during the winter of 1939-40. Late in life, Lomax remembered this show with pride, commenting that "one of its programs, co-authored with Woody Guthrie, won an award as the best Music Education Program of its years, and the two series led directly to MENC adopting American folk songs as a main emphasis in its public school teaching materials. CBS then decided on a prime-time network show [for adults] featuring folk songs".<sup>14</sup> This was *Back Where I Come From*, which Lomax co-produced with Nicholas Ray, and its regular performers included not only Guthrie, Ives and the Golden Gate Quartet but also Josh White and Pete Seeger.

Lomax also found opportunities to produce recordings by his favourite artists. *Negro Sinful Songs performed by Leadbelly*, issued by Musicraft in 1939, was probably the first commercial album of Afro-American folksongs, and it was followed a year later by two influential releases on Victor: *The Midnight Special: Songs of Texas Prisons, performed by Leadbelly and the Golden Gate Quartet* and *Dustbowl Ballads performed by Woody Guthrie*. Moreover, one of the major projects on which he had been working at the Library of Congress came to fruition the year after his departure: the release of eleven albums of traditional music collectively titled *Folk Songs of the United States*, a survey of the field recordings in the Archive that included material from Mexico and the Bahamas as well as from most regions of the USA. As Lomax later remarked, "this was the first time in history a country had ever published a full, field-recorded picture of its folk traditions. It had a world-wide impact".<sup>15</sup> Significantly, five of the albums comprised material collected by Alan and his father.<sup>16</sup>

Lomax spent the remaining war years working for the Office of War Information and for the Special Services unit of the US Army. One of his activities was to produce and host a CBS radio series titled *Transatlantic Call* that was also broadcast in wartime Britain by the BBC. A by-product of this collaboration with the BBC was his first radio ballad, *The Martins and the Coys*, which was scripted by his wife Elizabeth and starred Woody

Guthrie, Burl Ives, and Pete Seeger. Another was his first filmscript, for a movie called *To Hear My Banjo Play* that was directed by Willard Van Dyke of the Office of War Information.



#### FREELANCE FOLKLORIST, 1946-49

After the war, Lomax earned his living as a record producer, broadcaster, impresario, and freelance writer. Cognisant of the power and influence of the media, he tried to use it to win a mass audience for the music he loved, folksong and blues. An example of his journalism from this period is his article "America Sings the Saga of America" which appeared in the *New York Sunday Magazine* in January 1947. He also edited, in collaboration with his father, a new collection of traditional songs, *Folk Songs: USA*, first published under that title in 1946 and reissued a year later as *Best Loved American Songs*. For more than a decade this best-selling publication would serve as the standard resource for any performer, amateur or professional, who wanted to sing American traditional folksongs. Although the song-texts were composites and the documentation poor, it was nonetheless highly effective as a work of popularization.

For a couple of years, between 1946 and 1948, Alan served as Director of Folk Music for Decca Records, a grandiose title that implied more authority than he actually had within the organization. He did succeed in issuing a number of albums, including compilations of hillbilly and country blues performances originally recorded between 1927 and 1931, which appeared on Decca's subsidiary label, Brunswick. Actor Burl Ives and poet Carl Sandburg

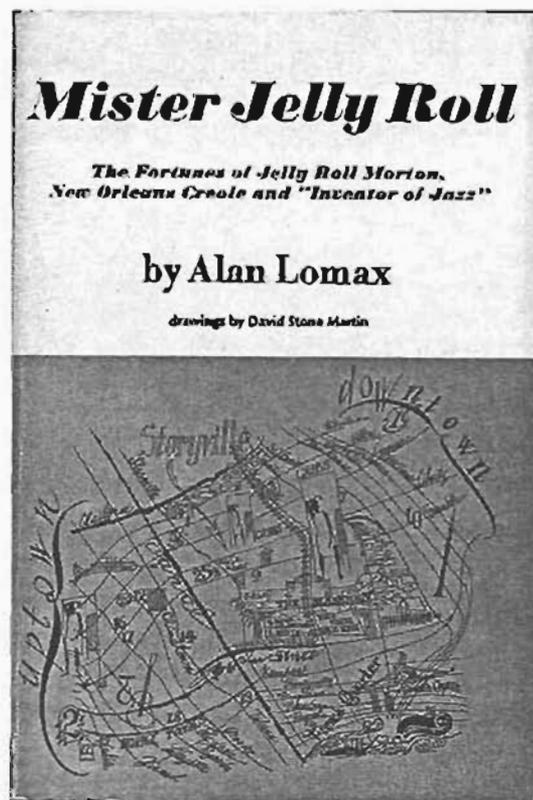
were two of the best-known personalities to record folksongs for Decca around this time, although I am not sure if Alan personally supervised their recording sessions.

He got back into broadcasting as a disc jockey, hosting a program titled *Your Ballad Man* which first aired on the Mutual Broadcasting Network in 1947-48. This was complemented the next year by *On Top of Old Smokey*, a new series that was heard coast to coast. Catering to as wide an audience as possible, Lomax mixed a lot of country & western music with recordings by his favourite bluesmen and folksingers. His career as a DJ and record producer went hand in hand with his activities as an impresario. In the post-war years he organised a variety of folk music, jazz and blues concerts, sometimes working with the left-wing organization founded by Seeger and Lee Hays, *People's Songs*. A vocal advocate of racial equality, Alan took as his model John Hammond's famous *Spirituals to Swing* concerts that had given black musicians equal billing with the likes of Benny Goodman. One such concert series, *Midnight Special*, held at New York's Town Hall during 1946, led to another of his most famous and important recording sessions, the evening in the Decca studios with Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim and Sonny Boy Williamson that resulted in the powerful documentary *Blues in the Mississippi Night*. The recording was the finest achievement of his stint with Decca, but the content was too hot to handle, and the recordings were issued only in 1959 when the bluesmen were safe from retaliation for their truthful reminiscences about segregation and the penitentiary system in the Deep South.<sup>17</sup>

Alan's 1946 encounter with the Chicago bluesmen whom he most admired reinvigorated his latent desire to get back into the Deep South with state-of-the-art recording equipment. A successful application for a Guggenheim Fellowship allowed him to do just that. The years 1947 and 1948 saw him returning to the Mississippi Delta, and making new recordings at the Parchman State Penitentiary and also in Greenville. Selections would eventually be released on Tradition Records in 1959 as *Murderer's Home: Negro Prison Songs*. Another result of this research was an article titled "I Got the Blues" published in *Common Ground*, and a third was Alan's brief return to academic life, teaching a folklore course at New York University in 1948. That same year saw him again heavily involved in politics, as volunteer music director for Henry Wallace's campaign as presidential candidate for the

short-lived Progressive Party. This, and his previous association with *People's Songs*, meant that Alan would come under suspicion in 1950 as a Communist fellow-traveller, one reason for his decision to leave the USA and spend the worst years of McCarthyism in Europe.

Meanwhile, his next fieldtrip (in 1949) took him to Louisiana, where he interviewed such New Orleans jazz musicians as Alphonse Picou and Johnny St. Cyr about their work with Jelly Roll Morton. This research was for Alan's innovative essay in oral historiography, *Mr. Jelly Roll*. Published in 1950, the book was a cross between biography and autobiography, and it was issued along with a twelve album set of Morton's 1938 Library of Congress recordings. A significant contribution to the history of traditional jazz, *Mr. Jelly Roll* is a classic that remains as readable and colourful today as when it was compiled.<sup>18</sup>



THE COLUMBIA WORLD LIBRARY PROJECT,  
1950-57

Lomax now had a dual career, as a freelance journalist, broadcaster and record producer, and as

an academic folklorist specializing in field collecting. As an ethnomusicologist, his horizons were expanding. He was aware of the activities of the International Folk Music Council and made the acquaintance of such luminaries as Maud Karpeles and Marius Barbeau. He also participated in the Midcentury International Folklore Conference at Indiana University, a gathering of eminent scholars from a number of different countries. Yet he was unable to sell his fellow academics on a grand vision that was dear to his heart: a systematic effort to record the traditional music of all regions of the world and to release the results on a series of LP discs. Not that Barbeau, Karpeles and company were opposed to the idea, but the problem was how to finance the field-work. And if the field recordings were ever made, what record company would release the albums?

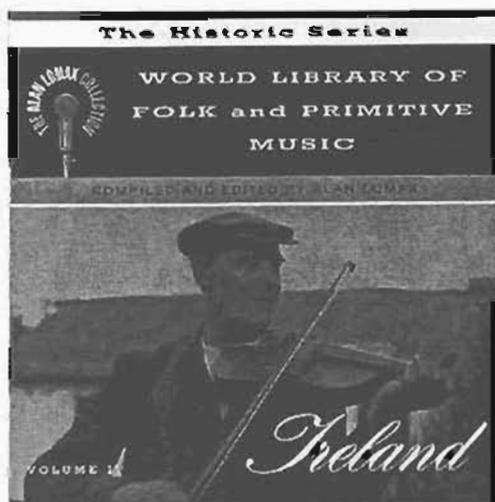
A chance meeting in a coffee shop with Goddard Lieberson, head of Columbia Records, provided the blade to slice through the Gordian knot. Lieberson took to the idea immediately and commissioned Lomax to assemble thirty one-hour LPs to be "edited by the principal folklorists of the world" from their own recordings in a series called *The Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music*.<sup>19</sup> As soon as *Mr. Jelly Roll* was in the press, Alan headed for Europe to begin work on the project. It proved much more difficult than he ever imagined, and half a decade passed before he had the first fourteen LPs ready for release in 1955.

Lomax encountered three main problems in achieving his goal: in a surprisingly large number of countries no national folk music archives existed so the required recordings had to be made from scratch; some folklorists upon whose help he had counted withheld their cooperation, preferring to keep their recordings for their own use as academics; others agreed to cooperate but failed to produce recordings of the right kind or quality, either through technical incompetence or because they hired professional singers instead of venturing into the field. To be sure, this was not always the case. For example, Peter Kennedy supplied the required material for the volumes on England and Yugoslavia, and Marius Barbeau did the same for Canada. Bert Lloyd used his Communist Party connections in Eastern Europe to obtain suitable recordings from Bulgaria and Rumania, although a companion volume on Hungary never materialized.



In any case, Alan found ways of solving some of his difficulties. Where possible he found an ethnomusicologist he could trust, such as Hamish Henderson in Scotland, Seamus Ennis in Ireland or Diego Carpitella in Italy, and worked closely with them to make the recordings he needed. If not, he simply set out to make them himself, as in the case of Spain. But for South America, Africa, Asia, and Australasia he had to rely on what the experts came up with, if indeed they came up with anything usable. Lomax insisted that the technical quality of the recordings be quite high, which ruled out using historically important cylinder recordings by Bela Bartok and Percy Grainger (among others), and he too often chose performances by revival rather than traditional singers.

In the event, only just over half of the planned thirty volumes were ever issued, although one more (on Mexico) was compiled but never released. The eighteen that did appear included three on the British Isles (*England, Scotland, and Ireland*), four on Western Europe (*France, Spain, and two on Italy*), three on Eastern Europe (*Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Rumania*), two on the Americas (*Canada and Venezuela*), two on Africa (*French Africa and British East Africa*), three on Asia (*India, Indonesia, and Japan, The Ryukus, Formosa & Korea*), and one on Australasia (*Australia and New Guinea*). Understandably the results were not perfect, and the quality varied from LP to LP. But many of the LPs quickly became recognised as the best available single disc overview of a given country's traditional music, and some (including the Irish, Scottish, Italian, Spanish, Bulgarian and Rumanian volumes) seem likely to perform that role again when reissued in CD format.



## EUROPE, 1950-58

If Lomax began collecting in England, Scotland and Ireland with the *World Library* in mind, his activities in the British Isles soon went far beyond this limited goal. Although he was often absent from the country for months at a time, he made London his European base and, while living there, played a significant role in the English folksong revival. He did so through his influence on such friends as Peter Kennedy, Ewan MacColl, Bert Lloyd and Shirley Collins, through his skiffle group *The Ramblers* (for which he brought Peggy Seeger to England), by his participation in the Ballads and Blues folkclub in the late fifties, and, above all, by means of his many radio and television broadcasts on the BBC and on Granada TV.<sup>20</sup>

Lomax's many BBC radio programs are too numerous to list in full, but they included several series (*Adventure in Folk Song*, *Patterns in American Folk Song* and *The Art of the Negro*) that effectively brought British listeners up to speed on the American folksong revival. Other series and individual programs presented some of the fruits of Alan's field collecting in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Among the most important of these were "I Heard Scotland Sing", a collaboration with Seamus Ennis called "The Gaelic West", and the six-part series *A Ballad Hunter Looks at Britain*, which was supplemented with two programs on Ireland. He also participated in a couple of BBC Radio ventures that have become almost legendary: the *Ballads and Blues* series masterminded by Ewan MacColl and Bert Lloyd, and Charles Parker's experimental exploration of the seasonal music of

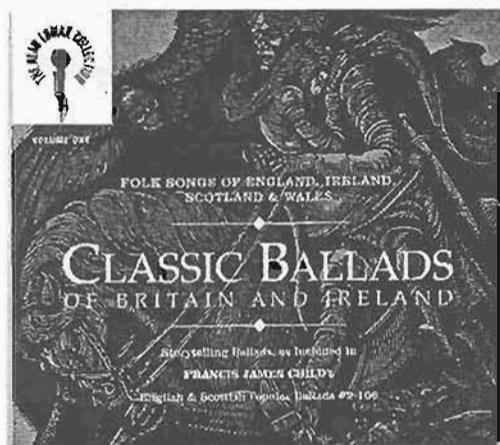
various regions of the United Kingdom, "Sing Christmas and the Turn of the Year".

Alan was also the first folklorist to host a BBC television series, the eight-part *Song Hunter: Alan Lomax*, and he later made fourteen one-hour programs for commercial television that featured his skiffle group, *The Ramblers*, which included Peggy Seeger, Shirley Collins, and Ewan MacColl, as well as jazz clarinetist Bruce Turner. He made one movie while in England, a collaboration with Peter Kennedy, George Pickow and Jean Ritchie titled *Oss, Oss, Wee Oss*, about the traditional May Day ceremonies at Padstow in Cornwall. As a performer he also made several discs for HMV, Nixa, Melodisc and Decca, but much more important were the field recordings he made of traditional singers and musicians. They included, among many others, Harry Cox, Margaret Barry, Seamus Ennis, Jeannie Robertson, Jimmy MacBeath, Davie Stewart, and John Strachan.



Unfortunately most of these recordings remained sequestered in Lomax's personal archives until a few years before his death, but selections (along with field recordings made in the fifties by Peter Kennedy and other participants in the BBC Folk Music and Dialect Recording Scheme) were used when he and Kennedy compiled the ten-volume LP series, *The Folksongs of Britain*, that was issued by Caedmon in the USA in 1961 and by Topic in the UK a few years later. Although arguably marred by controversial editorial decisions reflecting Lomax's and Kennedy's habits as broadcasters, this was the first systematic and scholarly overview of British traditional song on record, and, as such, was hugely

important and influential. It remained the definitive survey until the late 1990s, when Topic released the *Voice of the People* series compiled by Reg Hall.



Alan's field collecting in Europe was not limited to Britain and Ireland. Indeed, he worked more extensively in Spain and Italy than he did in the British Isles. He spent several months collecting in Spain during the second half of 1952, and returned again the next year: "seven months of wine-drenched adventure" was the way he remembered his trip.<sup>21</sup> Since the country still suffered under the repressive Franco regime and Alan received a chilly reception from musicologists at the Madrid Institute from whom he had hoped for guidance, obtaining the field recordings he needed seemed a formidable challenge. To begin with he was on his own, but he eventually found two collaborators, Eduardo Torner and Jeannette Bell, and with their help he got the job done, recording over seventy-five hours of songs and instrumentals.

It was evident from the programs on Spanish folk music that Lomax made for the BBC that he had assembled a wealth of wonderful and very varied material. Together they provided a fairly extensive overview of his Spanish travels and recordings. The first series, broadcast in October 1953, was titled *The Folk Music of Spain* and came in two parts, the first program devoted to Andalusia and the second to Northern Spain.<sup>22</sup> Alan scripted and presented these himself, using an entertaining travelogue format. His listeners hooked, he followed this introductory survey with a more erudite six-part series titled *Spanish Folk Music* for which the commentary had been written by Eduardo Torner. The field recordings were Alan's, and they covered most regions of Spain. The first program ranged widely, and the fifth, titled "Aragon, Valencia, Catalonia,

Baleares", also covered a large geographical area, but the other four focused on specific regions: Galicia and Asturias, Castilla, Vascongadas, and Andalusia.<sup>23</sup>

Many of the recordings were also issued as LP records. A selection first appeared in 1955 as the Spanish volume in the *Columbia World Library*, but Westminster subsequently released an eleven LP set as *Folk Songs of Spain*. Unavailable for several decades, this material is at long last being reissued on CD as "The Spanish Recordings", one of the subsets of Rounder's *The Alan Lomax Collection*.



Lomax later recalled 1954 as the happiest year of his life.<sup>24</sup> He spent most of it in Italy, and when he returned to England early the next year he had over sixty hours of field recordings on tape, far more than he required for either the projected Italian volume in the *Columbia World Library* or for the Third Programme radio series that the BBC had commissioned. In the event, Columbia issued two LPs: Volume XV: *Northern and Central Italy*, and Volume XVI: *Southern Italy and the Islands*.

The eight-part radio series, titled *The Folk Music of Italy*, was broadcast between March and June 1955.<sup>25</sup> It was divided into two parts: the first four programs were organized thematically, while the last four examined geographical regions. Alan had found the Italian folklore establishment much more helpful than the Spanish, and in Diego Carpitella he found the local expert and collaborator he needed. Moreover, he had access to the folklore archives of the Accademia Santa Cecilia. Italy was thus one of the very few countries in which things panned out just the way he had hoped they would when he

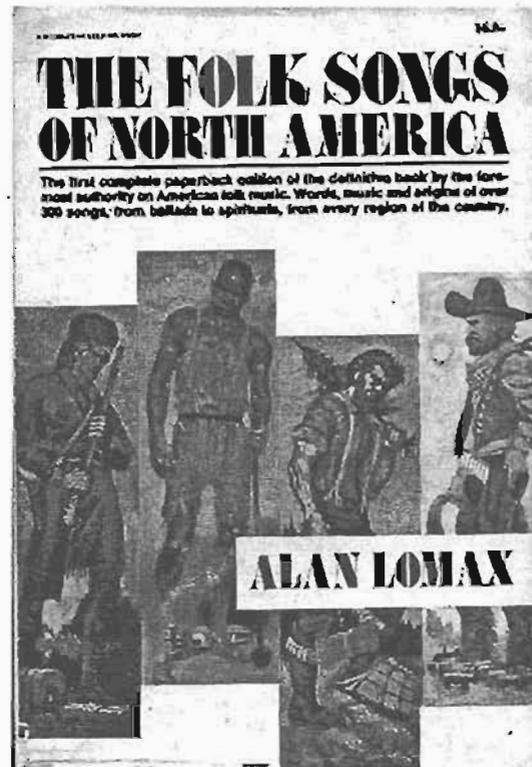
planned his European expedition five years before. The result was a magnificent and very varied set of field recordings. Regrettably, however, he never found the opportunity to make them available on LP, so the CDs that make up "The Italian Recordings" subset of *The Alan Lomax Collection* are especially welcome.

#### THE AMERICAN SOUTH, 1958-61

Lomax returned to North America in the summer of 1958. Back in the States he continued to make radio programs for the BBC, including "Lonesome Valley", "Folk Songs and Music of the Southern States" and "The Cowboy: Pioneer Days". He was now at a major turning point in his life, and the academic world promised a more stable income than freelance media work and journalism. He applied for and received a fellowship to do research at Columbia University. At the same time he resumed his career as an author, giving his reflections on the American folk revival in "The 'Folkniks' and the Songs they Sing", jotting down the autobiographical "Saga of a Folk Song Hunter", and writing *The Rainbow Sign*, an exposé of racism in the South based on the life of Vera Ward Hall (whom he was forced to disguise as "Nora" in order to avoid repercussions from the Ku Klux Klan). He also wrote a seminal academic article, "Folk Song Style", which appeared in *American Anthropologist* in December 1959 and summarized many of the conclusions he had come to while working on the *Columbia World Library* project.

Alan's most important new publication appeared in 1960: *The Folk Songs of North America*, a six hundred page annotated songbook that superseded his earlier printed collections of North American traditional music. A reviewer in the *New York Times* described it, with some justification, as "the fullest, most representative and best edited popular anthology of American folk songs so far compiled". Not everyone would agree with the phrase "best edited" since Lomax persisted in his decision to print composite texts, but there can be little doubt that the book was highly effective as a work of popularization, which was what Lomax intended, and, moreover, it was underpinned by a wealth of scholarship that was evident to anyone who bothered to read the fine print.

Lomax, however, had not gone back to America just to become a writer and an academic. His primary



motive was to undertake for his native land more of the kind of systematic field collecting that he had done in Spain and Italy. It was not long before he had persuaded two record companies, Prestige and Atlantic, to finance an extended search for surviving exponents of country blues, gospel music, white spirituals, traditional folksong, and old timey music in the Appalachians and the Deep South. Accompanied by Shirley Collins, Alan ranged widely in 1959, recording singers and instrumentalists in nine states: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

The results were impressive: Prestige released a twelve volume LP set titled *Southern Journey* in 1959, and Atlantic followed suit the next year with the seven volume set *Southern Folk Heritage*. The titles of the Atlantic set provide a summary illustration of the variety of traditional musical forms that Lomax and Collins discovered were still alive and kicking in the American South: an introductory survey titled *Sounds of the South* was followed by LPs devoted to *Blue Ridge Mountain Music*, *Roots of the Blues*, *White Spirituals*, *American Folk Songs for Children*, *Negro Church Music*, and *The Blues Roll On*. There were too many stars in the galaxy of traditional musicians who

produced this musical feast to be listed here, but perhaps two names among many stand out: Vera Ward Hall and bluesman Fred McDowell.



In 1993 a substantial selection from these recordings was reissued by Atlantic on the four CD set *Sounds of the South*, and they also provide the material for the thirteen CDs in the "Southern Journey" subset of Rounder's *Alan Lomax Collection*. Despite the fact that many of the same singers and instrumentalists appear in these two collections, there is very little, if any, duplication, a tribute to the quantity and quality of the field recordings. It was one of Alan's greatest achievements.

#### COLUMBIA, THE CARIBBEAN AND CANTOMETRICS, 1962-77

By 1962 Lomax's new academic career was well underway. He had become a Research Associate in the Department of Anthropology and Centre for the Social Sciences at Columbia University, and he was now the recipient of a Rockefeller Foundation research grant that would allow him to undertake a major study of the folklife and music of the West Indies for the Columbia Cross-Cultural Survey of Performance Behavior. To this end, accompanied by Antoinette and Anna Lomax, he made an extended fieldtrip to the Caribbean that took him to the islands of Anguilla, Carriacou, Dominica, Granada, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Nevis, St. Bartholomew, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, Tobago, and Trinidad.

It was not the first time Alan had explored the region, since he had made recordings in the

Bahamas and Haiti during the late 1930s, but his fieldwork in the early sixties was much more systematic and aimed at documenting both the African heritage and the cultural unity of the region. He taped over a hundred hours of music as well as dozens of interviews, but very little of this material has ever been made available to the public. Now, at long last, it will form the basis of "The Caribbean Recordings" subset of Rounder's *Alan Lomax Collection*. A sample can also be found on the CD devoted to calypso singer Neville Marciano in the "Portraits" series, and an early report on Alan's research in the Caribbean can be found in an article that he published with E. Trager in 1964, "Phonotactique du chant populaire".



With the first stage of his research successfully completed, Lomax consolidated his academic career. In 1963 he became Director of the Cantometrics and Choreometrics Research Project, a position he retained until the 1980s. The next two decades of his life would be devoted primarily to cantometrics, his term for the scientific study of the relationship between popular musical styles and the socio-economic environment of the performers. The study of choreometrics (the quantitative analysis of popular dance) paralleled his research into the traditional music of ethnic groups, which he increasingly aimed at giving a global breadth.

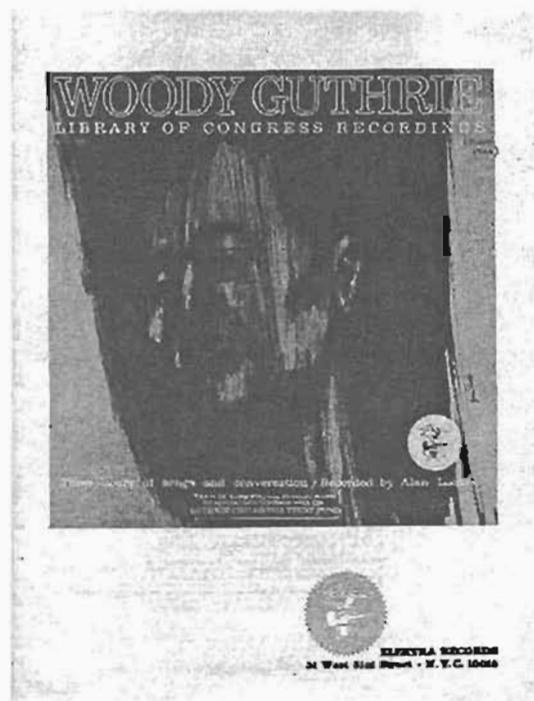
Alan built up a research team at Columbia University devoted to these ambitious projects and took on the responsibility of finding the necessary funding. Grantsmanship was a skill at which he excelled: the National Institute of Mental Health provided a grant from 1963 onwards, and in 1968 he landed further grants from the Ford Foundation and

from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. In the seventies he turned successfully to the National Science Foundation and to the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Naturally not all of Lomax's energy was consumed by academic administration and research. The sixties witnessed the civil rights movement and a folk music boom, in both of which he was heavily involved. He still sang, accompanying himself on the guitar, although he made no more commercial discs of his own. Instead he worked with Guy Carawan on producing the LP *Freedom in the Air*, a documentary account of the civil rights movement in Georgia, and in 1965 he took part in the campaign against discrimination in Mississippi. Later in the decade he was closely involved with the Poor People's March on Washington (1968), arranging the musical entertainment for the marchers. One of the artists was a bluesman he had first recorded in 1941, Muddy Waters.

Alan's way of blending music, civil rights and left-wing politics was also evident in the role he played on the committee that organized the Newport Folk Festivals. In the sometimes heated debates about which performers to choose, he stressed the importance of presenting both traditional musicians of all kinds and radical young protest singers such as Phil Ochs and Bob Dylan. He also insisted on the need to include black artists. It was probably he who was mainly responsible for the appearance at Newport of a number of elderly blues legends, including Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James and Son House. He (and others) filmed some of their performances, and some of the footage is now available on such Vestapol videos as *Legends of Bottleneck Blues Guitar*, *Legends of Country Blues Guitar*, and *Devil Got My Woman: Blues at Newport*.<sup>26</sup>

Alan was also in demand as an editor: his *Penguin Book of American Folk Songs* appeared in 1964, the same year as a new edition of *Folk Song USA*, which was soon followed by a new and enlarged version of his old Leadbelly songbook, now titled *The Leadbelly Legend*. Alan was no doubt pleased to see his Archive of Folk Song recordings of Woody Guthrie issued in a boxed set by Elektra Records as *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings*, and *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People*, his collection of old union and protest songs, originally compiled with Woody and Pete Seeger in 1940, belatedly appeared in 1967.



Lomax, in short, was one of the gurus of the sixties folk revival, and in 1966 the BBC recognised this when they employed him to script and narrate "The Folk Song Army", the program on the folk revival in the *America Since the Bomb* series.<sup>27</sup>

Yet it was the job at Columbia University that paid most of the bills, and to keep the grant money coming, the teams of cantometrics and choreometrics researchers had to give papers at academic conferences and also publish their results. Alan himself began doing so in 1967: his "The Good and the Beautiful in Folksong" appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore*, and "Special Features of Sung Communication" was included in the *Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society*.<sup>28</sup> The next year he and his staff published *Folk Song Style and Culture*.<sup>29</sup> This was the first booklength account of what cantometrics was all about, but it was a collection of articles on discrete research topics rather than a systematic description of Lomax's theory, methodology and preliminary results.

More of Alan's own articles followed in the early seventies: among others, "Folk Song Texts as Cultural Indicators", "The Evolutionary Taxonomy of Culture" and "Cross-Cultural Factors in Phonological Change".<sup>30</sup> Finally in 1976 he and his team brought out *Cantometrics: An Approach to the Anthropology of Music*, a handbook accompanied by

a set of audio-tapes intended as a practical teaching aid,<sup>31</sup> while the next year saw the compilation of an *Index of World Song* and the publication of two more articles, "Factors in Speaking Styles" and "A Worldwide Evolutionary Classification of Cultures by Subsistence Systems".<sup>32</sup> So by the late seventies ethnomusicologists and folklorists certainly had enough material on cantometrics for a preliminary evaluation of Lomax's theories and claims.

The verdict so far seems to be somewhat ambivalent. Lomax has his disciples, but on the whole the response of the academic community has been one of indifference or even hostility. But then Lomax's avowed positivism is currently out of fashion in a climate of relativistic postmodernism. The pendulum will have to swing back before his work receives the attention it deserves.

#### FILMMAKING & THE GLOBAL JUKEBOX, 1974-2002

By the mid 1970s Alan was getting tired of academia and itching to get back into the field. Always happiest when he had microphone in hand and a camera in action, he was now fascinated with the possibilities of using film as a way of recording, analysing and popularizing traditional dance. As early as 1969 he had co-authored a paper on "Choreometrics: a Method for the Study of Cross-cultural Patterns in Film", followed in the early seventies by two more articles on "Choreometrics and Ethnographic Filmmaking" and "Cinema, Science and Cultural Renewal".<sup>33</sup> In 1974-75 he landed grants from the Menil Foundation for filmmaking, and in collaboration with Forrestine Paulay scripted, directed and produced the film *Dance and Human History*.<sup>34</sup>

Then in 1978 Alan took his video-camera to Mississippi with the aim of making a TV program about the roots of the blues. This fieldwork eventually bore fruit in the form of the movie *The Land Where the Blues Began*, which won a Blue Ribbon at the American Film Festival in 1985. It also resulted in Lomax's last book, published in 1993 with the same title.

Alan's new fieldwork in Mississippi also provided material for a TV series on regional American music and dance, *American Patchwork*, which also drew on several fieldtrips to Arizona and Louisiana during which he filmed and recorded Cajun and jazz



musicians.<sup>35</sup> The series was long in gestation but it eventually aired on Public Television in 1989, by which time its scriptwriter, narrator, director and producer had been awarded a National Medal of the Arts by President Reagan.

Throughout his life Alan was a vocal and dogged campaigner for civil rights and racial equality. In 1989 he assumed the role of Director of the Association for Cultural Equity, and also became Research Associate in Anthropology at Hunter College.<sup>36</sup> Fascinated by the opportunities now offered by computer technology, he embarked on another major research and development project. The aim was to create a user-friendly, interactive computer/audio-visual software that Alan referred to as an "intelligent museum" of traditional song and dance. He called it "The Global Jukebox", and he worked on the project for the remainder of his active life.<sup>37</sup>

To begin with, Lomax's idea of what ought to be done far outstripped the technical capacity of the available hardware and computer programs, but the work he did in compiling and organizing the content is now bearing fruit. *The Alan Lomax Collection*, which when completed will comprise one hundred and fifty

CDs of Alan's field recordings, is, in a way, the first version of the global jukebox to reach the public at large. It is also an attempt to carry further his pioneering creation of the 1950s, the *Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music*.

For half a century, Lomax's vision remained constant: to make widely accessible the traditional song, instrumental music and dance of each and every ethnic group and region as an antidote to global cultural homogenization and commercialisation. In 1972 he explained his fundamental concept and mission of giving all local cultures a worldwide forum in an "Appeal for Cultural Equity":

All cultures need their fair share of airtime. When country folk or tribal peoples hear or view their own traditions in the big media, projected with the authority generally reserved for the output of large urban centers, something magical occurs. They see that their expressive style is as good as that of others, and, if they have equal communicative facilities, they will continue it...Practical men often regard these [traditional] expressive systems as doomed and valueless. Yet, wherever the principle of cultural equity comes into play, these creative wellsprings begin to flow again...even in this industrial age, folk traditions can come vigorously back to life, can raise community morale, and give birth to new forms if they have time and room to grow again in their own communities. The work in this field must be done with tender and loving concern for both the folk artists and their heritages. This concern must be knowledgeable, both about the fit of each genre to its local context and about its roots in one or more of the great stylistic traditions of human kind.<sup>38</sup>

It is sad that Alan Lomax did not live to see the full implementation of his global jukebox project, the last and most far-reaching attempt to achieve his lifelong vision of a world in which there could exist genuine cultural equity.

David Gregory

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Lomax, John, ed. *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*. New York: Sturgis & Walton, 1910. Revised, enlarged edition, N.Y.: Macmillan, 1916; reissued 1927. Third, further enlarged, edition, with Alan Lomax as additional editor, N.Y.: Macmillan, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> Lomax, John (ed.). *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp*. New York: Macmillan, 1919. Reissued, 1927. New edition: New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1950.

<sup>3</sup> Lomax, John & Alan Lomax, eds. *American Ballads and Folk-Songs*. New York: Macmillan, 1934.

<sup>4</sup> These recordings have been re-released on *The Library of Congress Recordings, Vol XII: Leadbelly "Midnight Special"*. Rounder CD 1044.

<sup>5</sup> He died of Lou Gehrig's disease in 1949.

<sup>6</sup> Lomax, John & Alan Lomax, eds. *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly*. New York: Macmillan, 1936.

<sup>7</sup> Lomax, John & Alan Lomax, eds. *Our Singing Country: A Second Volume of American Ballads & Folk Songs*. New York: Macmillan, 1941. The book remained unpublished for several years.

<sup>8</sup> There seems to be some uncertainty about the date of the Morton recording sessions. May-June 1938 is most probable, since Jelly Roll made a few commercial solo recordings in Washington and Baltimore later that year, and then returned to New York in 1939 for a Victor recording date with his New Orleans Jazzmen, a group that included two other legendary figures, Albert Nicholas and Sidney Bechet.

<sup>9</sup> *Jelly Roll Morton: Library of Congress Recordings, Vols 1-12*. Circle Records, c. 1950. Reissued c. 1957 by Riverside Records.

<sup>10</sup> Lomax, Alan. *Mister Jelly Roll*. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pierce, 1950. Reissued by Pantheon, New York, 1993. Appendix two lists the tracks recorded by Morton for the Library of Congress but on the same page (p. 307) gives May-June 1938 and May 1939 as the time the sessions took place. One of these dates, probably the second, must be a typographical error.

<sup>11</sup> Lomax, Alan, ed. *Checklist of Recorded Songs in the English Language in the Archive of American Folk Song to July, 1940*. Washington, D. C.: Library of Congress, 1942.

<sup>12</sup> Lomax, Alan & Sidney R. Cowell. *American Folk Song and Folk-lore, a Regional Bibliography*. Washington: Progressive Education Center, 1942.

<sup>13</sup> Lomax, Alan, Woody Guthrie & Pete Seeger, eds. *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*. Oak Publications, New York, 1967.

<sup>14</sup> Lomax, Alan. "Curriculum vitae", posted on the *Alan Lomax Collection* page of the Rounder Records website.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *The Ballad Hunter*, 5 Vols. AFS L49-53.

<sup>17</sup> The entire session is now available on CD as *Blues in the Mississippi Night*. Rykodisc RCD 90155.

<sup>18</sup> See note 10, above.

<sup>19</sup> Lomax, Alan. "Saga of a Folksong Hunter", reprinted in *The Alan Lomax Collection Sampler* booklet, p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> For an account of Lomax's activities in England during the years 1950-58, see David Gregory, "Lomax in London: Alan Lomax, the BBC and the Folk-Song Revival in England, 1950-1958", *Folk Music Journal*, 8:2 (2002), pp. 136-169.

<sup>21</sup> "Saga of a Folksong Hunter", *loc. cit.*, p. 51. Lomax dates his extended collecting trip in Spain as commencing in the summer of 1953. This appears to be a slip of the memory since the evidence suggesting that he first went to Spain the previous year is overwhelming.

<sup>22</sup> Lomax, Alan. *The Folk Music of Spain*, Third Programme, 24<sup>th</sup> & 25<sup>th</sup> October 1953.

<sup>23</sup> Torner, Eduardo M. & Alan Lomax. *Spanish Folk Music, Parts 1-6*, Third Programme, 19<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup> & 30<sup>th</sup> November & 12<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup> December 1953.

<sup>24</sup> Lomax, Alan. "Saga of a Folksong Hunter", *loc. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>25</sup> Lomax, Alan. *The Folk Music of Italy, 1-6*, BBC Third Programme, 7<sup>th</sup> & 23rd March, 4th & 17th April, 5th & 15<sup>th</sup> May, and 2<sup>nd</sup> & 23rd June.

<sup>26</sup> Vestapol 13002, Vestapol 13003, & 13016.

<sup>27</sup> Broadcast on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1966 on the BBC Third Programme.

<sup>28</sup> Lomax, Alan. "The Good and the Beautiful in Folksong", *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol 80, no. 317, July-Sept 1967. "Special Features of Sung Communication", in *Essay on the Verbal and Visual Arts*, Proceedings of the 1966 Annual Spring Meeting, American Ethnological Society, University of Washington Press, 1967.

<sup>29</sup> Lomax, Alan, et al. *Folk Song Style and Culture*. Washington D.C.: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1968.

<sup>30</sup> Lomax, Alan. & J. Halifax, "Folk Song Texts as Culture Indicators", in *Structural Analysis of Oral Tradition*, ed. Pierre Maranda & Elli Kongas. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971. Lomax, Alan. "The Evolutionary Taxonomy of Culture", *Science*, Vol. 177, July 21, 1972, pp. 228-239. Lomax, Alan. "Cross-Cultural Factors in Phonological Change", *Language and Society*, 2 (1973): 161-75.

<sup>31</sup> Lomax, Alan, et al. *Cantometrics: An Approach to the Anthropology of Music*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Media Extension Center, 1976.

<sup>32</sup> Lomax, Alan. "Factors in Speaking Styles." *Language and Society*, 6 (1977): 15-36. Lomax, Alan & Conrad Arensburg. "A Worldwide Evolutionary Classification of Cultures by Subsistence Systems", *Current Anthropology*, Vol 18 (1977), pp. 659-708.

<sup>33</sup> Lomax, Alan, I. Bartenieff & F. Paulay. "Choreometrics: a Method for the Study of Cross-cultural Pattern in Film", *Research Film*, vi (1969), p. 505. Lomax, Alan. "Choreometrics and Ethnographic Filmmaking", *Filmmakers Newsletter*, Vol IV, No. 4 (February 1971), p. 22. Lomax, Alan. "Cinema, Science, and Cultural Renewal." *Current Anthropology*, Vol 14 (1973), pp. 474-80.

<sup>34</sup> Lomax, Alan & Forrestine Paulay (scriptwriters & directors), *Dance and Human History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Extension Media Center, 1976.

<sup>35</sup> Lomax, Alan (scriptwriter & director). *American Patchwork*, a five program series on PBS, broadcast 1989-1990.

<sup>36</sup> Lomax, Alan. "Curriculum vitae", *loc. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Lomax, Alan. "Appeal for Cultural Equity", *World of Music*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, 1972. Quoted on the Lomax website, from which I have taken this quotation.