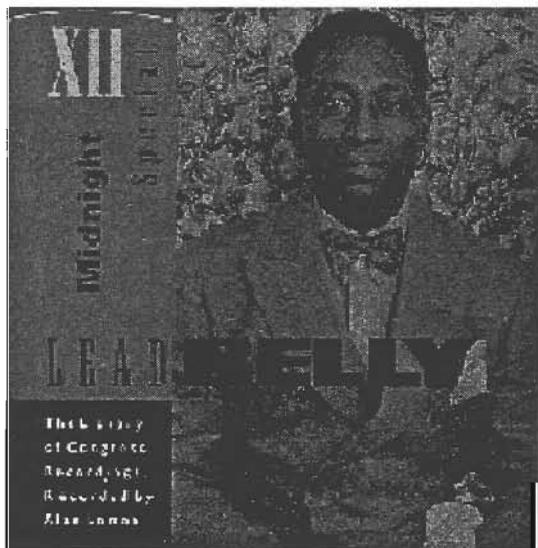


## Some Other Field Recordings by Alan Lomax

Believe it or not, the CDs in *The Alan Lomax Collection* are not the only ones that make Alan's field recordings accessible to the general public. Indeed, one needs to look elsewhere for Library of Congress recordings of some of the most important artists he discovered, especially such bluesmen as Leadbelly, Muddy Waters, Son House, and Honeyboy Edwards. The famous Decca session of conversations with Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim and Sonny Boy Williamson is another example of material apparently not available to Rounder. And, as we noticed earlier, an important selection from recordings made on the 1959-60 fieldtrips was issued on vinyl by Atlantic (the company that bankrolled the expedition) and has now been reissued by that label as a CD boxed set.

### LIBRARY OF CONGRESS FIELD RECORDINGS

*Leadbelly: The Library of Congress Recordings, Volume 1: Midnight Special.* Rounder CD 1044.



Huddie Ledbetter's recordings for the Library of Congress used to be available on a boxed LP set issued by Elektra. That was deleted many years ago, but it has now been replaced by three CDs in Rounder's excellent *Library of Congress Recordings* series. Volume 12 (Volume 1 of the subset) is devoted to the earliest non-commercial Leadbelly recordings, *i.e.*, the ones made in Angola

Penitentiary in 1933. Of course, all three CDs are worth having, but for those with limited budgets this is the one to get. Apart from the successful plea for pardon sung to Governor O.K. Allen, it includes (among others) such songs as "Goodnight Irene", "Midnight Special", "Matchbox Blues", "Frankie & Albert", "Take a Whiff On Me", "Roberta", and "Careless Love". Yes, there is considerable surface noise from the acetates, but the recording quality is remarkably good, and Leadbelly's unique performances come through clearly and powerfully. His guitar work is not as good as it would be two years later, when he made his best commercial recordings in New York, but the vocals are strong. Incidentally, those 1935 Leadbelly recordings for ARC - the result of John Lomax's hustle as Huddie's manager - are now available on a CD in the Columbia Legacy series (CCK 46776).

*Son House: Delta Blues.* Biograph BCD 118.

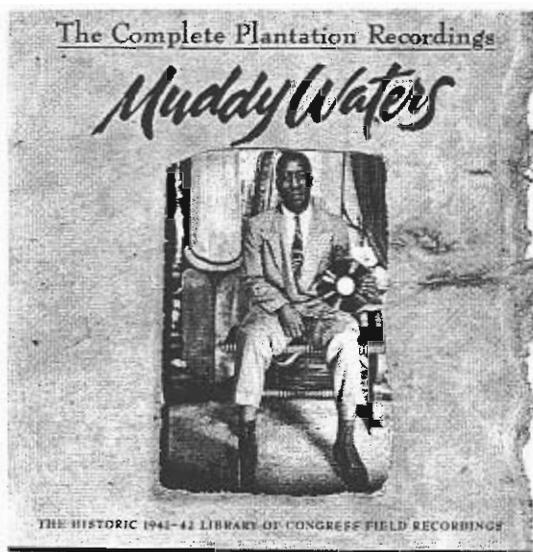


In August 1941 Alan Lomax went looking for Robert Johnson in the Mississippi Delta country around Clarksdale. Johnson, he discovered, was dead, but other bluesmen who knew and played with him were still in the area. At Clack's Store, near Lake Cormorant, he found Eddie James "Son" House, another disciple of the man often named as the father of the Delta blues, Charlie Patton. Five of the songs on this CD were recorded by Lomax at that time: "Levee Camp blues", "Government Fleet Blues", "Walking Blues", "Shetland Pony Blues"

and "Delta Blues". The others were cut when Alan returned to Mississippi in July of the next year and tracked Son down in Robinsonville. They included "Special Rider Blues", "Low Down Dirty Dog Blues" and "The Pony Blues", as well as two versions of "The Jinx Blues" and another performance of one of House's signature tunes, "Walking Blues".

If you don't know this material, suffice it to say that Lomax captured on record a master Delta bluesman in his prime. My only complaint is with the way Biograph have remastered the acetates for the CD reissue. In order to eliminate surface noise they have severely limited the upper frequencies, resulting in a rather muddy sound. A pity, because the music is essential listening for all lovers of the old country blues.

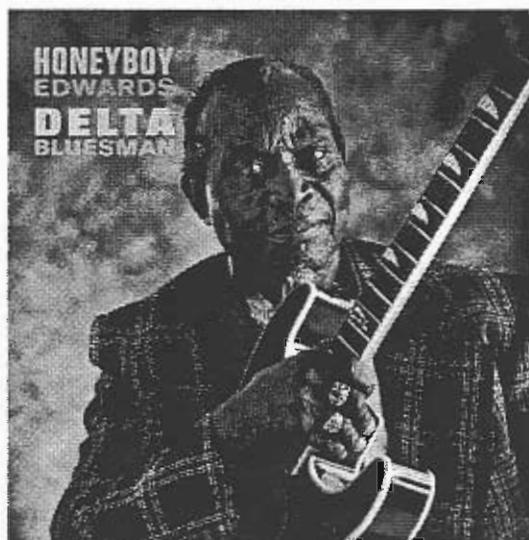
*Muddy Waters: The Complete Plantation Recordings.* Chess MCA CHD-9344.



Lomax discovered the 26 year-old McKinley Morganfield working on Stovall's Plantation the same week that he first recorded Son House. Apart from interviewing the young sharecropper, Alan recorded him singing "Burr Clover Farm Blues" and "Country Blues" (an adaptation of Son House's "Walking Blues"), playing Lomax's Martin guitar bottleneck-style. A year later, he found Morganfield (not yet a professional bluesman working under the name Muddy Waters - that happened after he moved to Chicago in 1943) playing with a group called the Son Simms Four. Four songs by this band appear on the CD, along with another ten solo tracks, including versions of

"I Be Bound to Write to You", "You're Gonna Miss Me When I'm Gone" and "32-20 Blues". The performances do vary in quality but the best tracks are superb and this CD presents a musical document of undeniable importance.

*Honeyboy Edwards: Delta Bluesman.* Earwig 4922CD.



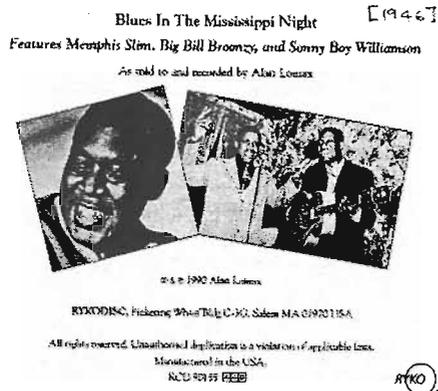
Perhaps less well known, but in fact equally accomplished as a Delta blues guitarist and vocalist was David 'Honeyboy' Edwards. Lomax missed him in 1941, but found him at home in July 1942 and took him into Clarksdale to record. Edwards cut a dozen tracks on that occasion, including "Roamin' and Ramblin' Blues", "You Got to Roll", "Watercoast Blues", "Wind Howlin' Blues", "Worried Life Blues" and "The Army Blues". They are all on this CD, but it also contains songs recorded by Honeyboy in 1979 and in 1991. There is also an interview in which Edwards recalls his relationship with blues legend Peetie Wheatstraw in the late '30s and his first meeting with Lomax. Honeyboy's reminiscences are fascinating, and the music is excellent. Strongly recommended.

#### BLUES IN THE MISSISSIPPI NIGHT

*Blues in the Mississippi Night.* Rykodisc RCD 90155.

This is the aural record (with text supplied in the accompanying booklet) of a three-way conversation between Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim, and

John Lee 'Sonny Boy' Williamson. It took place one Sunday in 1946 at the Decca studios in New York.



Although it was not intended as a recording session, there is some music on this CD: Memphis Slim playing and singing "You Got to Cry a Little", for example, and various examples of black folk music taken from Lomax's earlier field recordings. But the CD is mainly a record of the three great Chicago bluesmen reminiscing about their early years in the South, and locating the psychological roots of the blues in the oppressive social situations experienced by themselves and by other members of the rural black communities from which they came. It is an extraordinary document, and it is not surprising that - out of fear of retaliation against their families still living in the South - the three bluesmen refused Lomax permission to release it until after Williamson and Broonzy were dead. Alan did include some of the substance of their remarks - without identifying the speakers - in an article titled "I Got the Blues" that he published in *Common Ground* in 1948. But reading the text is one thing, hearing the voices of these great bluesmen pondering the roots of their music and struggling to articulate their ideas is quite another. Not to be missed.

## SOUNDS OF THE SOUTH

*Sounds of the South* is 4-CD boxed set, packaged with a substantial booklet, of more recordings from Alan and Shirley's 1959 fieldtrip. This is in fact a reissue of songs and instruments that initially appeared on seven Atlantic LPs in 1960. The recordings complement the *Southern Journey* series on Rounder, indeed one needs both in order to get the full picture of what Lomax achieved in 1959-60. Although Rounder's documentation is better -

the lavish Atlantic booklet fails to provide adequate information about recording dates and locations - the organization of material on the Atlantic set is more straightforward. With minor exceptions, each CD deals with one style of music or, at least, styles and subjects that are closely related.

*Sounds of the South: Volume 1: Blue Ridge Mountain Music.* Atlantic 7 82496-2.

The first volume is a mix of traditional folksong, old timey music, and bluegrass. It brings together the music on two of the Atlantic LPs, "Sounds of the South" and "Blue Ridge Mountain Music". The artists allotted the largest number of performances are a bunch of young bluegrass musicians calling themselves The Mountain Ramblers. They play hillbilly standards such as "Cotton Eyed Joe", "John Henry", "Jesse James", "Rosewood Casket", "The Old Hickory Cane", "Big Ball in Boston" and "Shady Grove" in an enthusiastic yet reverential manner, as if to assure their listeners that the Southern Appalachians stringband tradition is safe in their hands. Alan was obviously quite taken with them, insisting in his original sleeve notes that "all of [the band's] members were young and seriously devoted to the tradition of mountain music. They knew the techniques and the tunes of their forbears and, at the same time, they were aware of the development of hillbilly music...In my opinion they stand for a new wave of American music, far more important than the city folkniks, the Paris-oriented longhairs, the selfconscious 'cool' men and the weary technicians of Tin Pan alley. They have a new orchestral form to play with and a mature singing style, and they are enjoying themselves."

While I enjoyed the Mountain Ramblers, I found most of the other tracks on the CD more interesting. There are some fine performances in a more traditional style, such as Estil C. Ball's "Farmer's Curst Wife" and "Jennie Jenkins", Neil Morris' "Banks of the Arkansas" and "Jesse James" (the latter an interesting contrast to the Mountain Ramblers' version), and Hobart Smith's "John Brown" and "Poor Ellen Smith". An even older style is presented by the panpipes of Sid Hemphill and the cane fife of Ed Young. Moreover, blues master Fred McDowell plays "Keeps Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning", and one of Lomax's other exceptional discoveries, Vera Ward Hall, is represented by "Boll Weevil Holler" and "Trouble So Hard". Further variety is provided by an example of shape-note hymnody from the Alabama Sacred Harp Convention, by a worksong sung by a

group of convicts, and by a performance by Georgia Sea Island singers.

*Sounds of the South: Volume 2: The Blues Roll On.*  
Atlantic 7 82496-2.



This album explores the roots of the blues in Afro-American folk music as well as canvassing several different blues styles. Stylistically speaking, the oldest performances come from Vera Ward Hall ("The Wild Ox Moan") and the Young family trio, led by Ed Young's cane fife on "Jim and John" and "Sitting On Top of the World". Then there is the "Levee Camp Holler" of Johnny Lee Moore, and his performance of "Eighteen Hammers", leading a team of convicts at the Mississippi Penitentiary in Lambert. John Dudley, another inmate, this time at Parchman Farm, contributes "Cool Water Blues". Surprisingly, there are only four performances by Fred McDowell on this CD: "Shake 'Em On Down", "Drop Down Mama", "Been Drinkin' Water out of a Hollow Log" and "When You Get Home, Write Me a Few Little Lines". But Lomax found other bluesmen in the bottomlands of the Mississippi valley. One of his most important discoveries was Forrest City Joe, a brilliant young harmonica player and improviser of blues lyrics, whom he discovered in Hughes, Arkansas, and recorded one night, just a few months before Joe's death in an automobile accident. The CD includes two tracks by Forrest City Joe on his own, "Levee Camp Reminiscence" and "Red Cross Store", and a number of performances by Joe and his friends Sonny Boy Rogers and Thomas Martin: "Drink On Little Girl", "She Lived Her Life Too Fast", "She Don't Love Me That Way", "Stop Breaking Down" and "Forrest City Jump".

*Volume 3: Negro Church Music/White Spirituals.*  
Atlantic 7 82496-2.

As the Rounder series demonstrates, Lomax recorded a huge amount of religious music on his 1959-60 fieldtrips. The nice thing about this CD is that you get an overview of all the different types without the feeling of being overwhelmed. Yes, there is an Old Baptist sermon and lining hymn, a couple of tracks by the Alabama Sacred Harp Singers, and plenty of examples of spirituals and gospel music, including performances by the St. Simon's Island singers. But there are also religious songs from the Southern Appalachian mountains performed by Estil C. Ball and by the Mountain Ramblers. Two standout tracks are Vera Ward Hall's "Death, Have Mercy" and Fred McDowell's "I Want Jesus to Walk With Me". A good way of obtaining a representative sample of the varied religious music that Alan and Shirley found throughout the American South.

*Volume 4: American Folk Songs for Children.*  
Atlantic 7 82496-2.



Apart from occasional blues, such as Fred McDowell's "Freight Train" and "Motherless Children" and Forrest City Joe's "Train Time", this is mainly old timey music, with good performances by Almeda Riddle, Texas Gladden, Hobart Smith, the J.E. Mainer Band, and the Mountain Ramblers. Many tracks are indeed children's songs, a few are not, and quite a lot of others are instrumentals. In the main, this kind of material is absent from the *Southern Journey* collection, and it's all good fun. Not essential, but very enjoyable.

*David Gregory*