

# **Lost Delta Found: Rediscovering the Fisk University-Library of Congress Coahoma County Study, 1941-1942**

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Lost Delta Found: Rediscovering the Fisk University-Library of Congress Coahoma County Study, 1941-1942. By John Wesley Work, Lewis Wade Jones, and Samuel C. Adams, Jr. Edited by Robert Gordon and Bruce Nemerov. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005. Pp. xvi + 343, preface, introduction, photographs, illustrations, musical notation, maps, appendices, notes, indices. \$34.95 cloth)

Lost Delta Found presents important writings from an uncompleted project, launched on the eve of the second World War, to document the African American folk culture of an entire county, Coahoma, in the Mississippi Delta. A collaboration between the pioneering African American college Fisk University and the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folksong, the project was to have culminated in the publication of a large field study, and to that end some forty hours of field recordings were made (including the first of Muddy Waters), one hundred residents separately interviewed, and a variety of data gathered. The project bogged down in disagreement over editing and authorship, however, and was shelved when principal researchers Lewis Wade Jones of Fisk and Alan Lomax of the Library of Congress were drafted into the military. The present volume has been assembled by editors Robert Gordon and Bruce Nemerov from the project writings of Lewis Wade Jones, Samuel C. Adams, and Fisk University music professor John Wesley Work III. Although the only finished piece in this volume is "Changing Negro Life in the Delta" (Adams' Fisk M.A. thesis), all the writings are vital and illuminating, for they represent some of the earliest scholarship on African American folklife and folk music in the Mississippi Delta.

At the time of the project's inception, Fisk was home to an innovative sociology department headed by Charles S. Johnson. Johnson and his associates (including Lewis Jones, but not John Work) had just published *Growing up in the Black Belt* (1941) a survey of eight predominantly black southern counties. Coahoma was depicted as a once-isolated area still dominated by the cotton plantation system but experiencing rapid mechanization and urbanization. Folk culture was not documented or studied for the book, but when Alan Lomax, who had been making field recordings throughout the South, Northeast and Midwest since 1933, visited Fisk in April, 1941 to take part in an anniversary celebration, a joint project was discussed, and Coahoma was subsequently chosen for further study.

A brief preliminary field-recording trip was made at the end of the summer, with Johnson and Work present at some sessions, but most of the field recording was done the following summer by Alan Lomax and Lewis Jones. Working independently of Lomax and Jones, Samuel C. Adams and Fisk anthropology fellow Ulysses Young collected interviews and data on paper based on a prepared questionnaire, a method developed by Johnson. In Lewis Jones's writings for the unfinished study, he observes that three generations of African Americans shaped Coahoma County, beginning in the 1870s, and links changes in technology and transportation there with changes in the folk culture. Samuel Adams's thesis fleshes out this model considerably with song excerpts, stories, and interviews that range from poignant to hilarious.

John Work, a music teacher and composer who on his own had gathered folksongs in and around Nashville with paper, pen and occasionally a disc recorder, took a less sociological approach, transcribing a sample of the field recordings and grouping them by genre for

commentary. Work's analysis of blues, spirituals and game songs gathered in the field is acute and rewarding. His sections on black worksongs and balladry are less developed, though he might have had more to say in a finished study. The transcriptions are reproduced from handwritten originals that Work may have intended to develop further—some lack full lyrics, others are only melodic fragments, and none have tempo markings—but the complete, detailed transcriptions of such performances as the group spiritual "Hallelu, Hallelu" (153), a contrapuntal track-lining song (175-179), and a half-spoken, half-sung sermon (66-76), provide insightful commentaries on the recordings. To illustrate individual melodic variation in a group singing of "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say," Work notated the essential melody as sung by four girls, and then two variants sung as solos (160). Given the weight and significance that they assign to John Work's contribution, it is difficult to fathom the editors' inattentive treatment of it in *Lost Delta Found*—though they call it the "musical heart" of the project. They state that "all of his 158" Coahoma transcriptions were preserved on microfilm (26), but only 138 of those indexed by Work are here (331-334), and these are ordered randomly, not by genre as in Work's classified index. Many lack performers' names or are given titles different from the ones used at the Library of Congress and in discographies and commercial releases, shortcomings that could have been addressed through attention to the standard discography in the field (Dixon, Godrich and Rye 1997). This would have made for a better organized and more user-friendly book. The editors make numerous negative judgments against Alan Lomax, the principal field recordist for the project, but many are contradicted in the Fisk texts themselves. They state, for instance, that Lomax's bias towards recording older styles can be seen in the list of "spirituals" in Work's classified index (124-125). But this list includes many pieces considered new by Work, and reflects only what he chose to study, not everything actually recorded. Again citing Work, the editors criticize Lomax's fieldwork: "Work also includes a transcription of an interview with a gambler. The gambler explicitly states that music was not an integral part of the activity, yet this knowledge doesn't stop Lomax from persistently asking interview subjects, 'What kind of songs do men sing when they gamble?'" (51-52). But upon reading the actual interview (78-79), one finds that the informant "explicitly states" no such thing, and in fact sang two gambling songs for Lomax, duly transcribed by Work (78-79). Elsewhere, Lewis Jones names four more gambling songs, noting that "the gamblers had game songs and gambler's talk peculiarly their own" (48). Similarly, the editors' characterization of Lomax's 1993 book *The Land Where the Blues Began* as "an appealing but static and nostalgic portrayal of black Southern America" (25) will surprise anyone who remembers Lomax's many detailed and sordid descriptions of racism and its consequences in the old South. (Disclosure: The present reviewer worked for Alan Lomax in the 1980s, and later on the Alan Lomax Collection CD series and more recently at the Library of Congress.)

The editors also hold that a proposal made by John Work was the basis for the eventual Coahoma study, for which Lomax denied him credit in *The Land Where the Blues Began*. But Work wanted to go to Natchez, 200 miles south of Coahoma, to study songs written about a catastrophic 1940 fire (1-2), a project very different from the broad survey eventually undertaken. In a July 24, 1941 letter to Lomax not cited by the editors, but accessible at a website they reference, Work himself wrote "As I understand your proposal, it stipulated Dr. Johnson's selecting an area (or areas), previously studied by him for the recording to be done." (Emphasis added. This letter can be viewed at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ftvhtml/ftvhome.html>, under Manuscripts.)

The Fisk University writings, some of them thought lost for many years, are now available to us in *Lost Delta Found*. For this we can be thankful, yet still wish that the editors had paid more attention to detail, beginning with a closer reading of the primary texts.

#### WORKS CITED

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