

The Alan Lomax Archive

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The Alan Lomax Archive, curated by Nathan Salsburg, Association of Cultural Equity, Hunter College, New York, ca. 1983–2015. www.culturalequity.org/index.php.

For Alan Lomax, documenting, analyzing, and disseminating folk music required harnessing the latest technological innovations. A quintessential romantic who saw modern standardization as a disease endangering the world's noncommercial, indigenous cultures, he nevertheless embraced modern innovation at every point in his astounding career as an ethnomusicologist and folklorist that spanned six decades from the 1930s to the 1990s. As early as the 1950s, Lomax foresaw the capacity of computers to revolutionize the study of ethnomusicology by analyzing vast amounts of diverse data that could lead to a unifying theory of musical expression. In the 1980s and early 1990s, as personal computers became increasingly common, but before the revolution wrought by the World Wide Web, he envisioned what he called an "intelligent museum" that would make the world's indigenous musical cultures widely accessible on CD-ROM databases. The idea became better known as the "Global Jukebox."

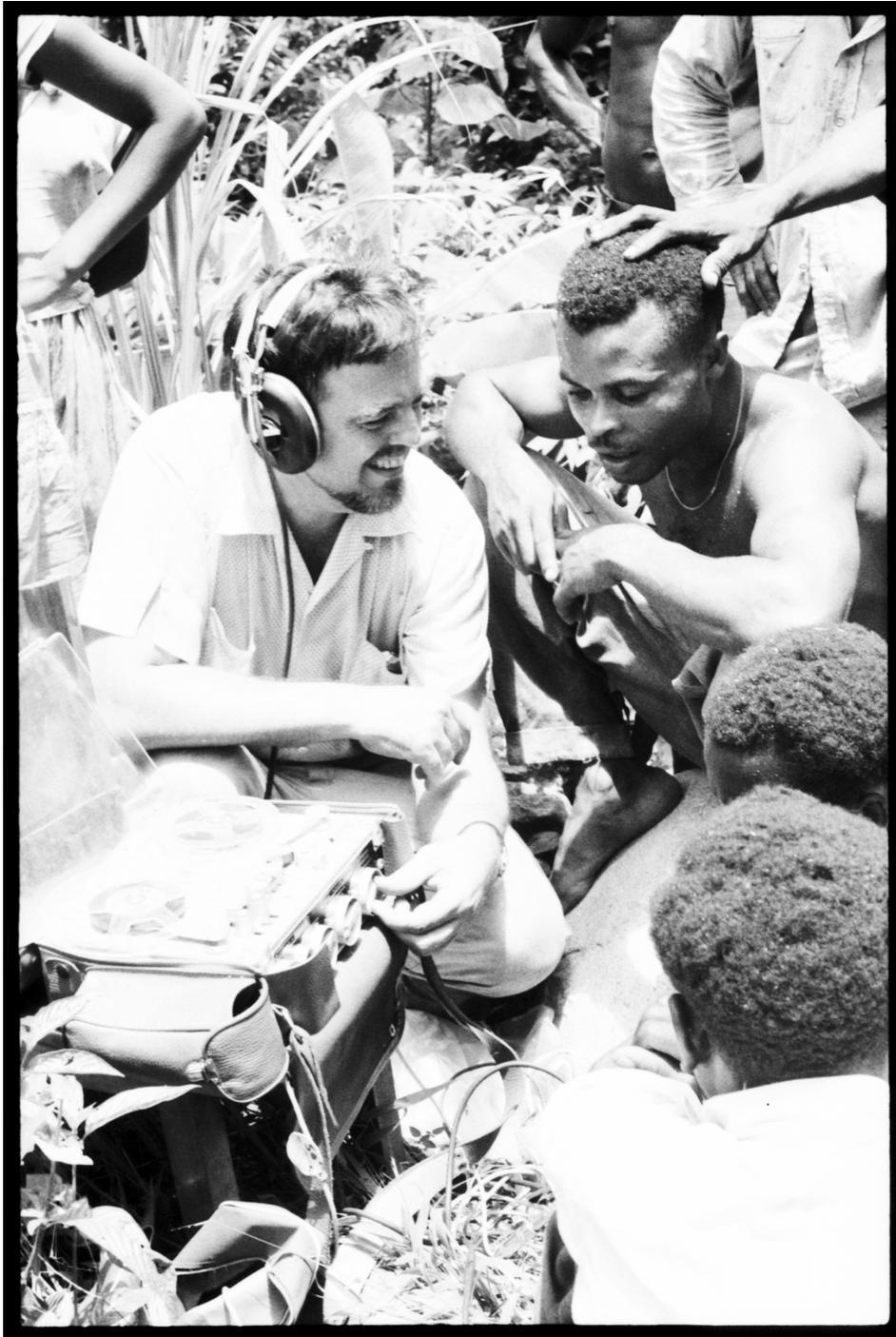
If Lomax saw the existence of a jukebox in a place like the Mississippi Delta or eastern Kentucky mountains as akin to a snake in the garden—a threat to a community's supposedly pure folk music traditions—this new Global Jukebox would allow far-flung audiences to experience and analyze the teeming diversity of local styles in a way that simply listening to a 78 RPM disc, LP, or CD never could. Users of the computerized Global Jukebox would search databases that classified music, dance, and speech based on culture, region, and style. They could read descriptions and analyses and view maps in order to trace patterns and migrations. Lomax wanted to create nothing less than a taxonomy of the world's folk cultures. Observable links between performance style, geography, and social organization would be the ballast for his groundbreaking, if controversial theory, known as Cantometrics. "The evolution of culture and the conditions under which it occurred could be reconstructed. . . . Everyone could find his own place in the cultural world, locate his roots,

and trace his links to peoples and cultures never imagined,” writes Lomax’s biographer, John Szwed. In this way, Lomax’s recordings could also circulate beyond the archive and into the global community, promoting deeper appreciations for the immense value and beauty of all the world’s indigenous cultures. Preserving, celebrating, and circulating these cultures, instead of letting them succumb to global market forces, captures the ethos of “cultural equity” that Lomax championed beginning in the early 1970s and inspired him to establish a nonprofit organization dedicated to that cause known as the Association for Cultural Equity (ACE) in 1983.¹

Lomax, who suffered a debilitating stroke in 1996 and died in 2002, never saw the implementation of his Global Jukebox project. Today, ACE carries on his legacy and mission, which includes the Alan Lomax Archive, a web-based collection of all the recordings, photographs, and films he made while doing fieldwork between 1946 and 1991. ACE partners with the Library of Congress’s American Folklife Center (AFC), which maintains all the original recordings, images, films, and field logs created by Alan and his father, John Lomax, including those from the 1930s and early 1940s when the Lomaxes worked under the auspices of the Library of Congress’s Archive of American Folk Song. Between 1997 and 2003, members of the ACE staff digitized Alan Lomax’s vast archive. For a number of years they could claim the distinction of being the largest sound archive to have the entirety of its collection in digital format. In the spring of 2005, portions of what ACE then called the “Alan Lomax Database” went online, and for several years visitors could listen to forty-five-second snippets of select recordings. In the spring of 2012, ACE launched its full-scale version of the Alan Lomax Archive, which today includes 17,400 sound recordings available for streaming, 5,000 photographs, hundreds of video clips shot during the 1970s and 1980s that are also available on YouTube, and 16 hours of radio interviews, lectures, and discussions. The Global Jukebox Sound Tree, the first step in implementing Lomax’s Global Jukebox, was funded in 2014 but as of this writing has not gone online. Nevertheless, the depth and breadth of the archive is a testament to Lomax’s extraordinary legacy and the passion of those at ACE, including President Anna Lomax Wood (Lomax’s daughter), Executive Director Don Fleming, and Lomax Archive curator Nathan Salsburg, who have dedicated their own careers to making a significant portion of Lomax’s life’s work available to the public.

Figure 1.

“Alan Lomax and possibly Raphael Hurtault listening to playback,” La Plaine, Saint Patrick, Dominica, June 1962. Photograph by Antoinette Marchand.



Though Lomax is perhaps best known for his recordings of artists from the American South, including now iconic figures like Muddy Waters and Fred McDowell, the Lomax Archive reveals that his reach was global. The recordings available to the public range from North America and the Caribbean to western and eastern Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The website's "GeoArchive" makes the geographic range of Lomax's work visible by using Google maps to plot where a particular recording session occurred. By clicking on the icon in, say, Romania, a user immediately sees a list of the sixty-nine recordings Lomax made in the village of Dragus in August 1964 and can listen to those recordings in full by clicking on a particular track. In sections dedicated to sound recordings, photographs, videos, radio programs, and discussions, interviews, and lectures, users can also browse based on artist, genre, location, culture, or recording session year. Additionally, a user can search for a specific piece of music under these headings or by instrument. The ease and pleasure of navigating the site surely makes it all the more inviting and enticing for the world audience Lomax always wanted.

In addition to the vast collection of sound recordings, interviews, and radio shows, the Lomax Archive also presents the photographs Lomax took while on his recording trips. It would be easy to see his photographs as supplementary snapshots to his main project of music recording—the visual analogues of an aural archive. They certainly can be read that way, but they also stand on their own terms as evocative depictions of the people, places, and landscapes he encountered. Though his images are suggestive of the work of Farm Security Administration photographers who documented aspects of America's cultural landscapes during the New Deal, Lomax's photographs make no pretensions toward art and social reform and are all the richer for it. Many photographs document the musicians he recorded in casual repose on their porches or posing near their homes. They also capture the musicians' performances and their physical displays of movement and emotion that Lomax saw as the telling signs of a culture's social organization and psychology.

Some of Lomax's most fascinating and revealing photographs were taken in eastern Kentucky in 1959 while on a recording trip through the South with Shirley Collins, the renowned English folk singer who was then his partner. One day in September, Lomax and Collins visited an outdoor service of the Old Regular Baptist Church, one of the most conservative denominations in Appalachia with a long history rooted in the region. Some of the photographs document the bodily expressions of passion, emotion, and rhythm that characterize powerful preaching. Others, however, evoke the tensions that often

surfaced when strangers with cameras and recorders appeared, particularly in sacred settings like a church service. Certain stares at the camera suggest that some people in attendance felt imposed on, taken advantage of, while occasionally odd camera angles and perspectives reflect the need for surreptitious observation. “The surroundings were pleasantly rural,” Collins remembers in her memoir of the time, *America over the Water*, “but before long I started to feel nervous, fearful even. The people stared at us as we arrived and set up our recording equipment. They didn’t appear hostile nor very curious, but rather they were watchful and silent, and it was that aspect of it that unnerved me.” Collins recalls how one preacher, while on the stand, broke the silent tension by expressing anger at the presence of the recording devices. “I’ve been preaching all my life without the aid of them ’phones. No one asked me if they could be here, and I don’t know who’s responsible, but I ain’t gonna say one single word till them things is *gone!*” Later, another preacher, perhaps wanting to subdue the anger and suspicion directed toward Lomax and Collins, said, “Why, this young man and his little contraptions might be the means of someone knowing that the songs of Zion are still being sung.”²



Figure 2. “Alan Lomax and members of Mt. Olivet Old Regular Baptist Church,” Blackey, Letcher County, Kentucky, September 1959. Photograph by Shirley Collins.

The recording session at the Old Regular Baptist service at Blackey, Letcher County, Kentucky, reveals the tensions that documentary work can provoke even when carried out with the best of intentions. In this sense, the documents in the Lomax Archive can be enjoyed and interpreted not just as historical records of particular cultures but as sources that provoke questions about the ethics of ethnographic fieldwork. A recent article in the *New Yorker* suggests that the field recordings made by Lomax and other documentarians in often poor rural areas possess a “richness” that “seems to transcend any questioning at all.”³ The Lomax Archive suggests otherwise. It testifies to the complexity and ambiguity of these encounters where racial and class differences colored every interaction. The undeniable beauty and invaluable worth of the Lomax Archive does not make it, or any other product of ethnographic fieldwork, immune to questioning or debate. The Lomax Archive provides an opportunity for users to see the ethnographic encounter not simply from the perspective of the renowned folklorist but, in some cases, through the eyes of those he documented. Certainly, the reservations and resentments expressed by some in eastern Kentucky are not always present in such encounters. Some people choose to keep silent out of politeness or reserve. Affection and trust are possible too. But anywhere there exists a power imbalance between those who possess the means to record, archive, and curate another’s culture, the resulting documents must be interpreted, in part, as products of that unequal relationship and not just records of that culture.

The Old Regular Baptist’s preachers expressed two ways of understanding fieldwork (and the resulting archive) that can be questioned and debated, if not easily reconciled. In the mind of one preacher, Lomax engaged in a species of theft that disrespected the congregants and the sacredness of their worship. Once again, it seems, a kind of colonialism plays itself out in the Appalachian mountains: a local product is extracted from the community by outside forces for the benefit of others who live elsewhere. For the other preacher, Lomax’s fieldwork honored and preserved a style of singing of immense beauty and historical importance. His recordings of the Old Regular Baptist’s lined-out hymnody (the “songs of Zion”) testify to the persistence of a sacred singing style that reaches back to the sixteenth-century English parish church. Such recordings also have the potential to nurture in others a deeper appreciation for religious practices in Appalachia, a social purpose Lomax also saw as central to his Global Jukebox project.

To ACE’s credit, they, like Lomax before them, recognize the importance of not simply extracting culture in the name of preservation or for the benefit



Figure 3.
 “Elder Manus Ison preaching at a meeting
 of Mt. Olivet Old Regular Baptist Church,”
 Blackey, Letcher County, Kentucky, September
 1959. Photograph by Alan Lomax.

of folklorists, ethnomusicologists, and the consuming public. A major part of ACE’s mission, which has been enhanced by the digitization of Lomax’s archive and its presence on the web, is returning portions of

Lomax’s recordings, photographs, and films back to the communities where they were created while making them freely available to people all over the world in various formats. They refer to these acts of return as “repatriation,” and they highlight the central importance of making the people’s music available to the people. One relevant example of many is ACE’s recent repatriation work in eastern Kentucky. Here ACE collaborated with local colleges, universities, and community groups like Appalshop (which is dedicated to empowering locals to represent themselves) to make the recordings Lomax made in the area in 1937 and 1959 widely available to sites throughout the state and to present them in the communities where he did his fieldwork. Similar repatriation efforts have taken place in Mississippi, Michigan, the Caribbean, and Europe. Making Lomax’s videos available on YouTube has also reconnected individuals, families, and communities with their cultural heritage. The Lomax Archive’s YouTube channel currently has almost twenty-five thousand subscribers, and Lomax’s films have been viewed close to ten million times. Salsburg, the cura-

tor of the Alan Lomax Archive and the YouTube channel, has highlighted one example, again, from eastern Kentucky, of how this repatriation has benefited the communities. “One of my favorite comments we ever received came from the granddaughter of a leader of a lining-hymn at an Old Regular Baptist Church near Mayking, Ky,” Salsburg said. The woman wrote: “This is my papaw John Wright lining the song!!!!!! I have been to many of his services and there is nothin in the whole wide world like it!!!! It does my heart such good to see and hear him sing again and he looks so wonderful to me!!!! Thank You GOD for being able to see him again till i join him!!!!!!”⁴

Curators at the Lomax Archive, like Salsburg, also produce album-length collections of specific Lomax recordings for release on record labels across the country, including ACE’s own Global Jukebox Records. The sales of these curated records help support ACE’s mission. Salsburg, who is himself an accomplished guitarist and singer whose music draws partly from the ballad, blues, and hymn traditions Lomax recorded, has his own label, Twos and Fews, which is supported by the famed independent music label Drag City. The label releases traditional music, including some of Lomax’s recordings from Scotland. Additionally, Salsburg coordinates with other highly regarded independent labels dedicated to celebrating and circulating Lomax’s historic recordings. Mississippi Records, based in Portland, Oregon, routinely releases LPs drawn from the Lomax Archive. In 2014 Salsburg worked with April Ledbetter and Lance Ledbetter of Dust-to-Digital, an Atlanta-based archival label, to produce *Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings, 1947–1959*, a haunting collection of forty-four recordings and seventy-seven photographs Lomax made at the infamous Mississippi penitentiary. All the recordings and photographs are also available online in the Lomax Archive, but on the Dust-to-Digital release they are presented as a beautifully packaged two-CD set that includes insightful essays by Alan Lomax, Anna Wood Lomax, and Bruce Jackson. Like many of Dust-to-Digital’s acclaimed releases, it has been nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Historical Album.

Just as they do “in the field,” ethical issues often arise in the curating of music created in conditions of poverty and, even, inhumanity, as is the case in the Parchman collection. It is a dilemma the Ledbetters and Salsburg are keenly aware of and do not minimize. What does it mean to turn the emotional and creative expressions of black prisoners not just into recordings for the archive but into a beautifully packaged commodity like *Parchman Farm*? Labels like Mississippi Records and Dust-to-Digital draw significant support from the educated, mainly, but not exclusively, white middle class, many of whom come from backgrounds in punk, independent rock, experimental, and avant-garde

music and who find similar kinds of purity of expression and authenticity in recordings of people from different social and economic backgrounds than their own. Can curated examples of Lomax's recordings like *Parchman Farm* carry out Lomax's and ACE's "cultural equity" mission while existing as objects of art and musical pleasure for consumers? Damon Krukowski, formerly member of the renowned rock bands Galaxie 500 and Magic Hour, and currently part of Damon and Naomi along with his wife, Naomi Yang, addressed these tensions and questions in a laudatory review he wrote of *Parchman Farm*. "From the first moment, this set made my hair stand on end," he writes. "This is music I am not meant to hear. In a just world, it would not have been made. But the world is wrong; at least its music can be right."⁵

If important historical and ethical questions lurk at the heart of any archive, there are some related matters that do in fact transcend questioning and simply demand appreciation. Here I refer to the astounding dedication and brilliance of those who have made the Alan Lomax Archive possible, particularly its curator, Nathan Salsburg. He has worked for ACE since the late 1990s and boasts no professional credentials in library science, digital humanities, folklore, or ethnomusicology. The scope, elegance, and now global reach of the Lomax Archive are all testaments to how innate creativity and passion can produce a resource that is a model for professionals in specialized fields. Like all expressive cultures, the Lomax Archive is not static, and like Lomax himself, Salsburg and others at ACE are dedicated to adapting and changing the archive's capabilities as new technology—and new funding—becomes available. Tapping into new social media outlets for public outreach and rolling out a public version of the Global Jukebox Song Tree are imminent and will only enhance ACE's mission to make the Lomax Archive an ever-evolving instrument of cultural preservation, repatriation, and education.

Notes

1. John Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 384.
2. Shirley Collins, *America over the Water* (London: SAF, 2004), 88–90.
3. Amanda Petrusich, "The Discovery of Roscoe Holcomb and the 'High Lonesome Sound,'" *New Yorker*, December 17, 2015, www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-discovery-of-roscoe-holcomb-and-the-high-lonesome-sound.
4. blogs.libraries.indiana.edu/filmarch/2014/05/15/a-conversation-with-nathan-salsburg-of-the-alan-lomax-archive/ (accessed January 7, 2016).
5. Damon Krukowski, "Parchman Farm: Alan Lomax's Photographs and Field Recordings: 1947–1959," *Forced Exposure*, www.forcedexposure.com/Features/damon-krukowski-parchman-farm/ReviewLomaxParchman.html (accessed March 15, 2016).

