Alan Lomax and Equality Through Recording

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Alan James Lomax was one of (if not) the foremost ethnomusicologists of the twentieth century. Lomax was a tireless promoter of folk music, discoverer of some of the musicians most influential to modern American music (see bit.ly/3Swh8gB) and was a campaigner for racial equality (see bit.ly/3XYkryt). His influence on American music is often unknown, but to those who know his story, it is crucial. Nobel Laureate and great American folk singer Bob Dylan said it best when, during a concert in August 1997, he paused and turned the spotlight to one man in the crowd.

> "There is a distinguished gentleman here (...) named Alan Lomax (...) Alan was one of those who unlocked the secrets of this kind of music. So if we've got anybody to thank, it's Alan. Thanks, Alan" (Greenberg, 2003).

Alan Lomax was born on January 31, 1915, in Austin, Texas (Szwed, 2010), and grew up in the then-wilds of central Austin's creeks and hills. His father, John Avery Lomax, was already a noted ethnomusicologist of Mexican and Texan cowboy songs. Precocious, Alan studied at both Harvard and the University of Texas (UT) at Austin. In 1933, the morning after he finished his junior year, Alan and his father got into the family's Ford Model A and embarked on their first trip, one fabled trip that would change their lives and American music at large. (Alan later graduated from UT Austin in 1936.)

This trip, backed by a small grant for collecting folk music from the U.S. Library of Congress, would bring the Lomaxes to all 11 southern state penitentiaries (Lomax, 2017), backwoods bars, sharecropped fields, and forestry camps, where they would record folk music in its environment for an entirely archival and noncommercial purpose. Jailhouse blues or labor songs, French-Creole *juré* music, and "sinful" songs coaxed out of their singers (songs with themes forbidden by their church) (Szwed, 2010) were all captured on their trip. Few of them were the traditional English ballads that dominated academic folklore collection and study at the time (Szwed, 2010). In contrast, the specter of slavery was omnipresent on this 1933 trip. In some places, Alan and his father were denied entry once their aim was understood, and they resented when penitentiary hosts forced inmates to sing at gunpoint (Szwed, 2010). Race was not, however, considered by the Lomaxes when they were looking for songs to collect. Rather, they found that the most incredible music, the music they most wanted to preserve, was made by the most marginalized and downtrodden, the ones who would use song to keep the rhythm while laying railroad tracks with a team (see bit.ly/3Zq1HZG), keep the morale in punishing conditions, or keep the faith every Sunday in a black spiritual or hymn (a style that John later claimed had created the best songs America had, a style that held "no vestige of self-consciousness or artificiality"; see bit.ly/3Zqv1PR) (Lomax, 2017, p. 106).

The Lomaxes were not the first to record folk music in the field. A few others had, but it was still new and a technological marvel in portability (Lomax, nd). One goal in their trip was to find pockets of cultural isolation that may still hold folk music uninfluenced by urban culture and where most performers had never been recorded.

In their 1933 trip, the bulk of the recording was done on a custom machine acquired by the Library of Congress (Szwed, 2010). It took up the entire rear seat and trunk of their Ford, weighed over 315 pounds, and embossed (not cut!) a groove with a steel needle at 78 rpm in a blank aluminum disc. It required an AC motor and 75-pound Edison batteries to record for fewer than 8 minutes per side of aluminum disc. Recommended playback was with a sharpened wooden or bamboo needle or cactus thorn; the steel recording needle would ruin the record on playback. The sound quality was poor, limited in bandwidth (not helped by their carbon RCA public address microphone), and warbling (the AC motor driving the disc platter had no speed governor) (Lomax, nd; Szwed, 2010). The equipment also frequently broke down (Lomax, 1934), which was indubitably not helped by eventually traveling "16,000 miles" (Lomax, 2017 p. 96) in their car.

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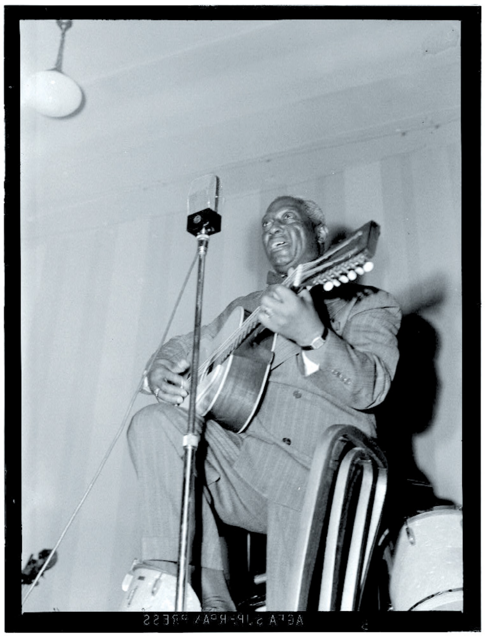

Figure 1. *Lead Belly at the Washington Press Club between 1938 and 1948. Photograph of Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter, courtesy of the Lead Belly Estate. Image available at the William P. Gottlieb/Ira and Leonore S. Gershwin Fund Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/gottlieb.13561.*

They reached the Angola State Prison Farm near Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in July and found an inmate who, in Alan's later words, "performed with an incredible fire (...) Even in a world where there were hundreds of other great singers, (he) would be noticed" (Santelli et al., 2001). They wanted to record but were stymied by the equipment, having recorded only two sides with the then-unknown Huddie (*hew-dee*) Ledbetter, popularly known as Lead Belly (**Figure 1**).

My interest in this story began when, with my colleague Kyle Spratt, we discovered that the founder of our university-affiliated research center, the Applied Research Laboratories at UT Austin (ARL:UT), fixed Lomax's troublesome recording equipment in May 1934 and refused any payment (Lomax, nd). C. P. Boner, a prodigious researcher, an early member and former president (1963–1964) of the Acoustical Society of America (ASA), and a professor of physics at UT Austin, gave a laundry list of problems with the Lomaxes' equipment in a letter digitized by the Library of Congress (Lomax, 1934). A schematic found in the Lomax family papers at the Briscoe Center for American History, Austin, Texas, likely documents the new amplifier Boner built (Lomax, 1933). The schematic depicted a three-stage push-pull vacuum tube amplifier with transformer input, output, and interstage coupling that was remarkably like a schematic that can be found in the prior year's RCA Radio Handbook (RCA Radiotron Company Inc,. 1933). John soon wrote that they were now making "the best (sounding) records" in all their travels, the equipment being "far more durable," and their new recordings will "please even the most sensitive ear" (Lomax, 1934). This information was published, but ARL:UT's link to this cultural watershed was not known to anyone within the laboratories.

In July 1934, Alan and John Lomax returned to the penitentiary with the new equipment and Alan captured Lead Belly in his finest recordings (Lomax, nd). Lead Belly was soon released on good behavior and worked for the Lomaxes, unhappily driving their car and doing other menial tasks (Wolfe and Lornell, 1999). His story as a singing, double murderer was sensationalized by the press on their arrival in New York, New York, but his fame quickly faded. John took him on romanticized folklore lecture tours, forcing Lead Belly to perform for an audience in striped prison garb (Szwed, 2010), and their relationship soon soured. Alan remained on better terms with Lead Belly and got him performances in concerts and on radio.

Having published only six songs, Lead Belly died in 1949 (Wolfe and Lornell, 1999). The following year, the world-famous quartet The Weavers (including Pete Seeger) released a #1 hit single with a recording of Lead Belly's "Goodnight Irene" (see bit.ly/3Z2ljTY). Numerous remakes by other artists, including Creedence Clearwater Revival, Frank Sinatra, Nirvana, and the Beach Boys among them, followed, most of them traditional songs but in the performance style of Lead Belly (see bit.ly/3KDLuvZ turned into bit.ly/3y3C6Kw; bit.ly/3ZrKW0g turned into bit.ly/3KLVa7s).

After graduation, Alan continued recording in Florida, Haiti, and the Georgia Sea Islands (see bit.ly/3IFoVV8) among other locales. He noted commonalities between folk styles in these separated cultures that could be traced to African roots. He made it a principle to pay musicians their normal hourly wage and get them proper royalties despite the personal labor and often not having money for his own rent (Szwed, 2010).

Before, during his service in, and after the Second World War, Alan produced radio plays and pioneering documentaries, notably the first broadcast documentary that featured person-on-the-street reactions recorded the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor (see bit.ly/3EHcsyK) (Szwed, 2010). With CBS Radio, Alan produced a series of radio programs featuring Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly for the classroom that were centered on folk music were heard by an estimated 10 million listeners (Szwed, 2010).

Alan also played a part in the origins of the 1960s folk revival by organizing acclaimed multicultural concert series in Manhattan featuring folk musicians brought in from across the country. He also found sporadic work producing folk music albums from choice recordings in vaults of the big record companies. Some of these releases would also influence the folk revival, but the revival's darling Bob Dylan later claimed to be less influenced by the recordings because he hung around Alan's apartment and heard it firsthand from the performers themselves (Szwed, 2010).

One later and particularly successful collecting trip to Francoist Spain yielded the record that Gil Evans brought to Miles Davis and inspired the Grammy Award-winning album *Sketches of Spain* (see bit.ly/3kASrmT) (Szwed, 2010). A weeks-long recording session of oral history with a then-underappreciated Jelly Roll Morton yielded maybe the best account of the New Orleans, Louisiana, birth of jazz (see bit.ly/3maKfdb).

Later, Alan Lomax was asked by the American astrophysicist Carl Sagan to join the steering committee for the Voyager Golden Record, and almost half of the final choices were originally by Lomax. Reputedly, Debussy was left off in favor of folk music (Sagan, 1978) from the Navajo Nation, Bulgaria, Japan, Azerbaijan, and other cultures and were thus elevated in status next to Bach and Beethoven. During the 1960s civil rights movement in the United States, Alan Lomax worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a youthful wing of the movement formed to mobilize voters and demand constitutional protection of civil rights, to produce documentary albums as well as to bring folk musicians to play at rallies in Washington, DC (Szwed, 2010). Alan Lomax died in 2002 in Florida.

Alan Lomax was a tireless advocate for cultural equity, having found that it is often the marginalized who influence the urban culture, then the urban commercialism reflects and dominates the nation with their newfound performer. Throughout his life, Lomax argued that folk music is the property of the poor (Cohen, 2010; Szwed, 2010) and that they should be given their due equity in society in return. Alan intuitively grasped that folk music is a product of generations of isolation, hard work, survival, and spiritualism and joy and that those creators (or re-interpreters) are stakeholders in society, not because of their social status but because of the beauty of their music.

Acknowledgments

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