

artistic collaborator during her youth. Midway through the book, Wright mentions that McHugh provided the photograph she used for the cover of Stanford's magnum opus, *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You*. Closing the circle with a citation from that work, Wright gives Stanford both the first and the last words of *One With Others*: "I want people of twenty-seven languages walking back and forth saying to one

another hello brother how's the fishing/ and when they reach their destination I don't want them to forget if it was bad." With its emphasis on virtue, instruction and ethical action, Wright's documentary and experimental book has a classical aim. Mourning mingles with delight and instruction, and the death of "one with others" reconfigures our sense of others, and of the purpose of life itself. ■

legit. If, as Wallace Stevens wrote, death is the mother of beauty, Lead Belly married death and beauty all the way to stardom, a mother of a different kind. Nicknamed for a bullet lodged in his stomach, he probed brutal wounds in his music; his muse was a hard life, mellifluously rendered. He was one of the first musicians to make the journey from the joint to the charts, and he probably wouldn't have become famous if the Lomaxes hadn't stuck a microphone in his cell and let him strum and wail.

The Lomaxes found Lead Belly in Angola Prison, in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana. With the sponsorship of the Library of Congress and a portable disc recorder weighing hundreds of pounds, they had been wending their way through Southern prisons, searching for old songs by vocalists and musicians who were unacquainted with the recent crazes for blues and jazz. It was *American Idol* meets *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang*, except that with Lead Belly the Lomaxes chose a bona fide musician, some of whose gems, like "Rock Island Line" and "Goodnight Irene," would become huge hits for others. Nirvana ended their 1993 appearance on *MTV Unplugged* with a rendition of "In the Pines" (which they called "Where Did You Sleep Last Night"); in his introduction to the song, Kurt Cobain claimed that Lead Belly was his favorite performer and joked about how he had failed to persuade David Geffen to buy him Lead Belly's guitar.

Alan Lomax's field recordings of African-American work songs, spirituals and white working-class cowboy songs set the standard for the notion of folk authenticity that became gospel during the 1960s folk revival, which included Bob Dylan and Joan Baez among the younger generation and Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger among the statesmen. Lomax was the first to record Guthrie and Seeger (the latter was the son of Harvard musicologist Charles Seeger). In the early '40s Pete was Lomax's assistant at the Library of Congress, doing archival grunt work that paid dividends to Harry Smith years later when he drew on it to compile the three-volume *Anthology of American Folk Music* for Folkways Records. Though his musical tastes earned him the reputation of being a purist, Lomax liked to mix things up, once the undiluted representation of his discoveries had been well documented. He approved when the bluesmen and cowboys had a bastard and called it rock and roll. Unlike the folkies who worshiped his recordings, he had no problem with Dylan going electric.



Portraits of Stavin' Chain and Wayne Perry performing, Lafayette, Louisiana

## This Is a Recording

by DAVID YAFFE

**O**n August 1, 1934, an African-American musician named Huddie Ledbetter, who was doing time for attempted murder, was released from prison. He claimed that he owed his freedom to a father-and-son team so

impressed with his art that they wanted to share it with the world. Ledbetter was better known as Lead Belly; the duo was John Lomax, an erstwhile academic from Austin, Texas, who obsessively documented American folklore with scholarly precision, and his son Alan, phlegmatic, neurotic and, in his youth, constantly trailing his dad, whose credentials were somewhat more

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Going electric was one thing, plagiarism another. When Lomax was living in London, he was not only surprised to hear Lead Belly's "Rock Island Line" as a skiffle hit for Lonnie Donegan but disturbed to see Donegan's name listed as the composer. The Quarrymen, the earliest incarnation of the Beatles, were too young to worry about such things, sufficiently inspired by Donegan and the skiffle craze to make it to the toppermost of the poppermost. The success of Donegan's cover was proof that Lomax had given musicians the means to cultivate folkloric influences beyond their native ones. (Donegan went to the offensive extreme of copywriting Lead Belly's music as his own.) Alan Lomax had paved a mighty good road, and because he crisscrossed the South more than any other part of the country, the region is still,

whether in the guise of the white cowboy or the black preacher, the laborer or the prisoner, the home of the most imitated American musical vernacular—the land where the blues began, as Lomax would put it in a book title. Years ago, I knew some working-class whites in rural Vermont who were listening to a band called Alabama; I felt certain that the same demographic in Alabama would never listen to a band called Vermont.

**L**ike anything else, pop music has roots, and in *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World*, John Szwed, a professor of music at Columbia and professor emeritus of anthropology at Yale, shows how Lomax's efforts to trace them made him the most significant Baedeker of America's folkways, at a time when even the earliest

music to be heard on the airways was already something to be untangled. Whether recording black field hollers or white cowboy tonks, Lomax was enthralled with the demos of American song, which, without the relatively recent (and, in the 1930s, even more recently listenable) technology of recording, would have been relegated to the dustbin of history. Recording was the only way to document various forms of music that defied traditional notation. The cadence of Lead Belly's voice and style of strumming could not be captured any other way.

Just as he did in his definitive biographies of Sun Ra and Miles Davis, Szwed has packed *Alan Lomax* with original and unsailable research. The story of Lomax in his most influential years, from the 1930s to the '60s, is fascinating. Besides being the first person to record Lead Belly, he undertook explorations of the music of black Florida with Zora Neale Hurston as his guide. It was an eventful trip. In a reversal of the standard script for the Jim Crow South, Lomax watched Hurston talk *his* way out of the jail he had been thrown into by local authorities, who were none too pleased with his interracial musical excavations. Later Lomax was the first to record Woody Guthrie, and he heard the potential in the Everly Brothers and Sam Cooke, among many other young unknowns.

To understand Alan Lomax's fascination with the origins of American culture, one has to trace his family tree. His father was a graduate student at Harvard, which had appointed Francis James Child its first professor of English in 1876, about thirty years before Lomax arrived. John Lomax fell under the spell of another professor, George Lyman Kittredge, Child's student, who, in addition to being perhaps the preeminent Chaucer and Shakespeare scholar of his time, was also, like Child, a scholar of Scottish and English ballads—an oral art form without a reliable paper trail (scholars' source materials were transcriptions of popular songs). When John was a student at the University of Texas, none of his professors saw value in folk songs. It was only when John went to Harvard that Kittredge and others convinced him of the importance of folk songs (some of which were, ironically, indigenous to Texas), and that collecting them would be a worthy scholarly pursuit.

Decades later, John and his son would spend several weeks touring with Lead Belly, and the myths about the tour lasted much longer. As Szwed explains, contrary to folk tales, the Lomaxes never dressed Lead Belly in prison clothes when he performed

## Undersong

When the bottom drops out of August  
 when the bottom drops and the summer disc burns deep in its bed  
 when nerves sing, blaze, and flame their circuit  
 when the bottom of August sticks out  
 and clouds above change shape  
 when bodies inside spin and change shape  
 the bottom falls and meaning peeks out with chagrin  
 the hot skin of August no longer sending messages of summer  
 birds no longer at rest  
 when the winds pick up and the cool air is just behind it all  
 the bottom of the news story reveals itself  
 the story is cold

PETER GIZZI

(the *March of Time* newsreel did). The Lomaxes have also been repeatedly maligned for claiming authorship of the Lead Belly songs when all they did was claim arranging credits (the Library of Congress did not give folk songs the same protection it gave to other songs). In 1983 Alan established the Association for Cultural Equity, which still exists. But in the eyes of some, the idea of the bad white Southerner is simply too irresistible.

Beginning in the late 1960s, Alan Lomax's ideas grew increasingly opaque. He attempted to inquire why, just as every culture has language, people all over the world make music. He called this study cantometrics, and younger musicologists and anthropologists turned up their noses at it. Perhaps this was because Lomax was interpreting folk music not by reading texts but by interpreting the total performance and its social and emotional functions, bringing psychoanalytic and anthropological methods to bear on his analysis. (Fortunately for him, the anthropologists thought it was cutting-edge, as did the National Institute of Mental Health, which funded it.) Szwed, who took Sun Ra at his word when he claimed to have been born in

outer space, doesn't flinch from explaining cantometrics. Lomax, he notes, had found a similarity in all song structures:

Unlike the anthropologists and psychologists who studied the micro-behavioral level of communication primarily in terms of social interaction, Lomax went one step further, seeing those small and largely out-of-awareness behaviors as being the basis of traditional arts. It was the folk artist's job, he believed, to stay close to the cultural norms and baselines of their societies. Their place in their communities was one of underscoring and reinforcing the norm, rather than attempting, like the avant-garde artists, to expand, improve, or confront the existing aesthetic.

Lomax's theory was never as influential as his musical discoveries, but the imperative, as far as he was concerned, was the same: to hear America, or any other country, singing. As he worked on elaborating cantometrics, he never took an academic job, and was always chasing the next grant. When he received the National Medal of the Arts

from Ronald Reagan in 1986, his earnings for the previous year amounted to \$11,531. When he died in 2002, he left a lifetime's worth of unfinished projects. He had made his greatest mark decades earlier, when there was still excitement about discovering new sounds; his was the kind of exploration that fueled the work of Paul Simon, Brian Eno, Ornette Coleman and Philip Glass.

Today, there are library deans who seem to regard books as nuisances, a nearly defunct technology. Meanwhile, record labels collapse as fewer and fewer people buy music of any kind. Everything is digital, compressed, an already existing thing waiting to be downloaded. Whether it's listened to is another story. A recent number-one album sold around 40,000 copies, an all-time low in the history of *Billboard*. The yearning to hear something new becomes increasingly specialized as more people assume that every kind of music has been recorded. What more is there to find? What more is there to say? The story of Alan Lomax reminds us, rather nostalgically, that there was a time when there were new sounds worth recording, and that it was worth living a life of instability to find them. The rock island line, it was a mighty good road. ■

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