

# Alan Lomax, Citizen Activist

## January 31, 1915-July 19, 2002<sup>1</sup>

Alan Lomax's death in July 2002 marked the end of seven decades of a musical life that has generated praise, as well as criticism, mirroring his entire fascinating career. Jon Pareles led off in his *New York Times* obituary with numerous accolades, capturing the life of "a musicologist, author, disc jockey, singer, photographer, talent scout, filmmaker, concert and recording producer and television host," which would sum up much, but not all, of the Lomax story. Mark Feeney in the *Boston Globe* also stressed his invaluable field collecting, his role in documenting and/or promoting the careers of Lead Belly, Muddy Waters, Jelly Roll Morton, Woody Guthrie, and Burl Ives. The *New York Times* obituary stressed that "His gift to all of us was to capture voice after voice, song after song that would have vanished into thin air otherwise." The widely distributed Associated Press wire story remarked on his unparalleled collecting, but noted that "his abrasiveness alienated some of his contemporaries. His politics disgusted others and, in the 1950s, contributed to his seven-year trip to England. Others criticized him as they had his father for compiling 'composites' of folk songs--taking versions from several people and blending them into one." The rock critic Dave Marsh has issued the harshest assessment so far, faulting Lomax on many fronts, particularly his elitist views. And David Hinckley captioned his critical piece in the *N.Y. Daily News*, "Patronage--or pillage? Folk Song collectors like Alan Lomax greatly enriched American music--if not musicians." Lomax was indeed a fascinating provocateur, a highly influential and sometimes controversial cultural broker whose life-long commitment to the wedding of people's music and political activism has yet to be fully understood and appreciated by scholars and pundits.<sup>2</sup>

Born on January 31, 1915 in Austin, Texas, son of folksong collector John Avery Lomax, Alan entered the University of Texas in 1930. The following year he briefly attended Harvard University, but soon returned to the University of Texas, where he graduated in 1936. In 1933 he began accompanying his father on collecting trips throughout the South for the Archive of American Folk-Song of the Library of Congress. The following year he

published his first article, "Collecting Folk-Songs of the Southern Negro" in the *Southwest Review*. In 1937 the twenty-two year old was appointed Director of the Archive of American Folk-Song, and for the next two years he conducted recording trips in Haiti and Kentucky, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, and Vermont. In the meantime he and John published *American Ballads and Folksongs* (1934) and *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (1936), and eventually *Our Singing Country* (1941). In 1939 he recorded Jelly Roll Morton for the Library of Congress, followed the next year by Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly--all seminal interviews that captured not only their songs but also their lives and personalities. By the early 1940s he had relocated to New York City, where he produced a series of folk music shows for CBS radio, and promoted the careers of Burl Ives, Josh White, and the Almanac Singers.



During World War II, working for the Office of War Information and the Army's Special Services section, Lomax continued his radio productions, promoting the war effort through exploring the lives of average Americans. Following the war he received a Guggenheim Fellowship and soon began working for Decca Records, issuing albums ranging from Carl Sandburg to square dance calling, as well as the two Brunswick compilations *Listen To Our Story* (1947) and *Mountain Frolic* (1947). The Brunswick collections were reissues of country and blues recordings from 1927 to 1931 originally

intended for a white or black rural audience, but now repackaged for a burgeoning city folk audience.

Lomax usually tried to connect his leftwing politics with his various folk music activities. In May 1940 he persuaded Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie to assist in editing a collection of protest songs that was subsequently published as *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* (1967). He was not directly involved in forming the Almanac Singers in 1941, but convinced Seeger, Lee Hays, and Millard Lampell that their informal, improvised way of arranging folk music was the best way to introduce traditional country music to city audiences. Later the group included Guthrie, Alan's younger sister Bess, and Agnes "Sis" Cunningham. During World War II he organized a musical group of unionized office workers in Washington, D.C. into the Priority Ramblers. Workers' rights and civil rights were always in the forefront of his activities.

Although Lomax possessed a modest singing voice and adequate guitar skills, he never viewed himself as a performer, but rather as a chronicler of folk music and promoter of folk musicians. In a letter he expressed the importance of his work on CBS's *School of the Air* in 1939-1941, designed for children: "Through them Burl Ives and the Golden Gate Quartet became staff artists on CBS, Woody Guthrie became a well known figure in broadcasting, Lead Belly, Aunt Molly [Jackson], as well as many others, lumberjacks, Virginia fiddlers, French Canadian broadcasts, sea captains had their time with a large public, singing and talking about their lives." His CBS nighttime show, *Back Where I Come From*, "wove together proverbs, sermons, folk tales, folk prose, and song in a poetic way, all performed by this same cast of genuine folk singers. . . . Because of the success of these shows I was able to find a market for the first commercial albums of folk music." Indeed, radio (and later film and television) would remain one of his passions, designed to promote and popularize the folk music he was collecting and listening to. His show *Your Ballad Man*, on the Mutual network in 1948, had only recorded songs, and displayed his wide ranging tastes and knowledge of current country and other performers: Red Foley, Cousin Emmy, Josh White, Bradley Kincaid, Pearl Bailey, Bob Crosby and his Orchestra, Roy Acuff, Pete Seeger, Salty Holmes, Merle Travis, Uncle Dave Macon, and Robert Johnson. His radio work in England during the 1950s demonstrated a similar eclectic approach and interest. Lomax always stressed his

radio work and publishing--his role as a musical interpreter, moderator, and promoter for a wider, general public--while his legacy as a field collector has dominated his popular biography. And there was also his left politics, never far from his consciousness or activities.<sup>3</sup>

For the remainder of the decade, until his departure for England in 1950 because of political and other pressures, Lomax continued his crusade of popularizing folk music, connecting modern America with its musical roots, within the context of his progressive politics. Following the war he became involved with People's Songs, a national organization initiated by Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, and others in early 1946 to promote singing in unions and peace organizations. He arranged a biweekly concert series, "The Midnight Special at Town Hall," for People's Songs beginning in November 1946. A wide variety of performers were introduced to Manhattan audiences at "Blues at Midnight," "Strings at Midnight," "Calypso at Midnight," "Spirituals at Midnight," "Honky Tonk Blues at Midnight," "Ballads at Midnight," and "Mountain Frolic at Midnight." "Late Saturday evening, Alan Lomax plans to start a monumental project," John Wilson reported in *PM*, the progressive daily. "He intends to bring America to New York. Fortunately for Mr. Lomax, he does not mean to move America into the city physically, tree by tree or mountain by mountain. He will do it culturally, folk song by folk song, folk singer by folk singer."<sup>4</sup>

In his Foreword to *The People's Song Book* (1948) Lomax wrote: "At first I did not understand how these songs related to the traditional folk songs. . . . Slowly I began to realize that here was an emerging tradition that represented a new kind of human being, a new folk community composed of progressives and anti-fascists and union members." And he over-optimistically concluded: "Recently the fire of this people's singing movement has begun to run across the country. . . . The singers have a national organization of their own with vigorous branches in many cities. This is their book and ours, a folio of freedom folklore, a weapon against war and reaction, and a singing testament to the future." He enlisted as musical director for Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace's quixotic run for the White House in 1948, where he encouraged E. Y. "Yip" Harburg to write "I've Got A Ballot" for the campaign.<sup>5</sup>

Lomax's leftist politics were somewhat shielded

from public scrutiny, although this did not prevent his being listed in 1950 in the notorious *Red Channels*, which promoted the blacklisting of numerous show business people. He was identified as a folk singer, composer, and author of *Mister Jelly Roll* (1950), his influential story of the "father" of jazz that has remained in print for over fifty years.<sup>6</sup>

While McCarthyism and blacklisting held sway he went to England. Remaining in Europe for much of the fifties, Lomax pursued his developing interest in collecting and disseminating world music. He had been previously influenced by scholars such as George Herzog, Melville Herskovitz, Curt Sachs, and Charles Seeger. Before leaving for England he participated in the Midcentury International Folklore Conference at Indiana University, where many of the world's leading ethnomusicologists gathered. His eight years abroad proved most fruitful. His field recording and photographing in the British Isles, Spain, and Italy, in conjunction with the work of other collectors, initially resulted in the eighteen volumes of *The Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music*, released in 1955-57.

He produced a brief series of radio shows for the BBC on American folk music that featured songs performed by himself and Robin Roberts, a young American singer then assisting Lomax with his collecting in Ireland. For the remainder of his stay in England, until his return to the U.S. in mid-1958, he was involved in numerous radio shows and a television program that helped stimulate the British folk revival. He also welcomed a string of visiting American performers, including Jean Ritchie, Burl Ives, Peggy Seeger, Guy Carawan, who helped connect the British and U.S. folk scenes.

In the midst of his media work and public promotion of folk music, he also began to develop a theoretical construct to understand world music, first articulated in a three-page article, "Folk Song Style," published in the *International Folk Music Journal* in 1956. This was the start of his cantometrics project that would become an increasing part of his life. Anxious to return to the U.S., he ended his most prolific career in England in 1958 when he arrived in New York.<sup>7</sup>

Lomax eagerly plunged into America's burgeoning contemporary folk scene. In early 1959 he organized "Folksong '59" at Carnegie Hall, a concert including Jimmy Driftwood, Muddy

Waters, Memphis Slim, the bluegrass group The Stony Mountain Boys, Mike and Pete Seeger, and the Cadillacs. "The time has come for Americans not to be ashamed of what we go for, musically, from primitive ballads to rock 'n' roll songs," Lomax declared, defending his eclectic approach and acceptance of change. He appeared at Circle Pines summer camp in Michigan with Shirley Collins, was interviewed by Studs Terkel in Chicago for his radio show, and spoke at the Berkeley Folk Festival. A two-month Southern recording trip resulted in the 1961 release of seven albums for Atlantic Records' *Southern Folk Heritage* series, with another twelve volumes issued by Prestige/ International the following year. He continued to publish books, including *The Rainbow Sign* (1959), *The Folk Songs of North America* (1960), the long delayed *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* (1967), and even the co-edited *3000 Years of Black Poetry* (1969).<sup>8</sup>

Always a strong advocate of racial equality, he plunged into the civil rights movement, participating in a musical workshop in Mississippi in 1965, and in a subsequent gathering in Tennessee. A few years earlier he had co-produced with Guy Carawan the album *Freedom in the Air*, documenting the Albany, Georgia, civil rights movement, issued by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). "While I was squirreling round in the past, you were busy with the present, and how I envy you," Lomax wrote to Carawan, as quoted on the album cover. "It must be wonderful to be with those kids who are so courageously changing the South forever. I hope they feel proud of the cultural heritage of their forbears."<sup>9</sup>

If not always the progressive activist, politics were never far from Lomax's consciousness. Indeed, he was directly involved in the Poor People's March on Washington in 1968. "Thousands of the black poor, many coming in mule-drawn wagons, converged on the Capitol to lobby for a better deal, meanwhile living in a village of tents in the parks adjoining the Washington Memorial," Lomax recalled in *The Land Where the Blues Began*. "I had been asked to organize culturally relevant entertainment for the encampment, and there ensued a mighty singing of black folk music along the Potomac, where the black delegates rested after their marches on the Capitol and the White House." He even arranged for Muddy Waters to perform. Here Lomax felt at home, with those who were "underemployed, badly housed, pushed toward

despair and crime by poverty, sharing only crumbs from the rich table of America's boom economy."<sup>10</sup>

Through mid-decade he remained busy in organizing and assisting in programming the Newport Folk Festival. With broad reaching musical tastes, he still usually preferred the more traditional performers, whom he documented in three videos (now released by Vestapol): *Devil Got My Woman: Blues at Newport, 1965*; *Delta Blues Cajun Two-Step: Music From Mississippi & Louisiana, Newport Folk Festival, 1966*; and *Billy in the Lowground: Old Time Music From the Newport Folk Festival, 1966*. These films would foreshadow his five-part *American Patchwork* television series in 1990.

For the remaining three decades of his life Lomax focused on his ethnomusicological research and writings, with little obvious public political involvement. But there is no indication he ever abandoned his lifelong commitments as a citizen activist: to preserve and disseminate the music of the "people;" to promote a just society, based on economic, political, and civil rights; and to shape an ethnomusicological aesthetic that became more complex over time.

Beginning with his sometimes strained relationship with his father as a most confident teenager, and with numerous early successes, he developed a personal style that often ruffled feathers and seemed overweening, but was perhaps necessary to allow him to accomplish so much in promoting and shaping a modern folk music form, style, and popularity. His creation of the Association For Cultural Equity in 1985, now housed at Hunter College, and the related development of the Global Jukebox, are testimony to his far reaching concept of spanning the world's people and cultures to make folk music and dance accessible to all.

Rounder Records has projected the release of 150 CDs of the Alan Lomax Collection in order to thoroughly document his collecting and broadcasting activities. Alan Lomax was more than a song collector, he was also a musical promoter and civic activist, spanning seven fruitful decades.

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Notes:

1 I want to thank Ray Allen, Matthew Barton, and Pete Seeger for their invaluable editorial assistance.

2 Jon Pareles, "Alan Lomax, Who Raised Voice of Folk Music in U.S., Dies at 87," *New York Times*, July 20, 2002; Mark Feeney, "Roots Music Loses a Champion," *Boston Globe*, July 23, 2002; "A Legendary Collector," Editorial/Op-Ed, *New York Times*, July 23, 2002; Associated Press, "Alan Lomax, Folk Music Compiler, Dead at 87," *Post-Tribune*, July 20, 2002; ; Dave Marsh. "Mr. Big Stuff: Alan Lomax: Great White Hunter or Thief, Plagiarist and Bigot?," *Counterpunch*, July 21, 2002, on the web; David Hinckley, "Patronage--or pillage? Folk song collectors like Alan Lomax greatly enriched American music--if not musicians," *N.Y. Daily News*, July 28, 2002.

3 Alan Lomax to Cohen, December 6, 1993, in author's possession; E. David Gregory, "Lomax in London: Alan Lomax, the BBC and the Folk-Song Revival in England, 1950-1958," *Folk Music Journal*, 8/2 (2002), 136-169.

4 John S. Wilson, "Lomax Brings in the Roots," *PM*, November 4, 1946.

5 Alan Lomax, Foreword, *The People's Song Book* (Boni and Gaer, 1948), 3. Lomax can be heard on Ronald D. Cohen and Dave Samuelson, *Songs For Political Action: Folk Music, Topical Songs, and the American Left, 1927-1953* (Bear Family Records BCD 15720), disc 9, cut 25.

6 American Business Consultants, *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television* (N.Y.: Counterattack, 1950), 103.

7 See Gregory, "Lomax in London," for a detailed discussion of his years abroad.

8 "The Folksong Revival: A Symposium," *New York Folklore Quarterly*, vol. 19, June 1963, 135.

9 *Freedom in the Air: A Documentary on Albany, Georgia, 1961/1962* (SNCC-1).

10 Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (N.Y.: Pantheon Books, 1993), 420-421.