

Jayme Stone's Lomax Project

Paul Taunton, National Post

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In his early days, a prominent Canadian critic took issue with his age's promotion of the "lively arts" (read: common) as on par with the fine arts. About a certain premiere at Manhattan's Aeolian Hall, he wrote that Gershwin "had written what must be regarded an occasional work, the *Rhapsody in Blue*. Here jazz stepped from its customary position into the classical framework of the rhapsody. But the clothes mattered little. It was still jazz."

I don't mean to sandbag Leo Edel from a privileged position in the future – it's all too easy to be a critic of a critic whom history seems to have proven wrong on a particular point – but his dismissal of the lively arts strikes a chord with me: the same day I stumble upon the quote, I am to see Jayme Stone's Lomax Project at Toronto's Koerner Hall. Though a friend suggests that traditional music is best set in the kitchen with the musicians facing each other as in a seisiún (and I don't disagree: many musicians from amateurs to professional producers like to record acoustic guitar in the bathroom, after all), I have nonetheless always wanted to see a traditional group take the stage the way a chamber music ensemble would. After all, a kitchen is not so different from a parlour, and at The Lomax Project show, as Stone's banjo solo comes through a couple minutes into the ethereal "Shenandoah", it is another kind of pizzicato.

The contribution, therefore, that Alan Lomax made to American music and culture (and you can include Canada here without being hegemonic) cannot be overstated, something I don't know that I don't know before Jayme Stone's project. "Do you know how wonderful it is for me to hear that someone doesn't know Alan Lomax?" an ethnomusicologist writes me before the show. "He is the shadow that hangs over our whole discipline. I'm pretty sure nobody will ever be able to replicate what he did (in the '40s and '50s with a giant, barely moveable tape recorder at that!)." There were, of course, no digital audio recorders, or even cassette recorders. There was no information superhighway; there wasn't even an interstate highway. This past summer was the 50th anniversary of what we generally know as "bluegrass festivals", if we treat the Fincastle festival over the 1965 Labor Day weekend as the first. Bluegrass is as contemporary as rock 'n' roll: Lomax recorded countless tracks before it emerged, and these songs belong on any stage they take.

Koerner Hall is a beautiful and modern concert hall built at the rear of the Royal Conservatory on a luxurious stretch of Bloor Street in Toronto. One enters through an arcade between the two, and occasionally a solo string or horn player will serenade the incoming patrons from a balcony on the old rear wall. (No luck with a fiddler doing the same, this night.) The upper balcony contains an underrated selection of single seats along the sides – a view that occasionally becomes the best in the house: when the ensemble breaks into the sequenced foot-stomping of "The Devil's Nine Questions", front-row-centre can't compare. The simplicity of the ensemble's rig is obvious from the high vantage, too, composed of a few DI (direct input) boxes on the floor, a few shared microphones, and a handful of well-worn instruments. In fact, Margaret Glaspy and Tim O'Brien pass the same guitar back and forth on stage throughout the performance, singing harmony and playing mandolin, respectively, when not playing the six-string. Meanwhile they trade verses in "Goodbye, Old Paint", the best showcase of Glaspy's idiosyncratic, cracking, charming, back-of-throat voice.

The one instrument needing no microphone or amplification, Joe Phillips' resonant double bass reaches every cubic inch of the hall (his occasional oceanic interludes subverting everything you think of when you hear the phrase "bass solo"). His legato bowing and fingerstyle playing are sometimes employed in the same song, like the aforementioned "Shenandoah", a French-Canadian voyageur song adapted to a sea shanty, adapted again here. The ensemble's instruments weave in and out of each other's spaces, everybody swaying, Brittany Haas' fiddle and Jayme Stone's banjo gravitating towards each other onstage like, well, the old Les Pauls in Crazy Horse.

But there's a different kind of feedback here: the audience's applause after each solo is a welcome interruption. After a long interplay between Phillips' high bass and Glaspy's extended vocal line in "Maids While You're Young", a beautiful song ends with a joke, a delight. The audience laughs, as it does when O'Brien introduces a song with "It goes something like but not exactly like this," or when he comments on banjo-tuning: "Like world peace, not often achieved, but worth it." Worth it because it gives Stone, his mannerisms those of a pesky cub reporter, the chance to banter with the crowd in his hometown. It gives someone the chance to yell out, "What's that

plunking sound?” and then gives him the chance to not miss a beat. “It’s my whole life.” Finally, the dialogue between audience and ensemble comes fully to fruition in the closing number, “I Want to Hear

Somebody Pray”, with an infectious call-and-response, orchestrated by Glaspy, until everyone has sung, and the concert peters out with the final, lingering rhythms of a shaker.



Figure 1: Jayme Stone and band.



Figure 2: Jayme Stone.