

The Problem of Alan Lomax, or The Necessity of Talking Politics During the Lomax Year

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Abstract

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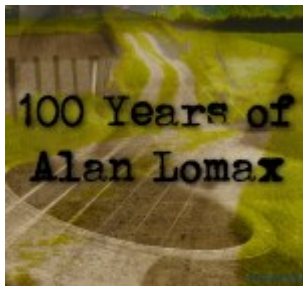
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This week, **Sounding Out!** kicks off an exciting four-part series exploring the work of Alan Lomax, a key figure in sound culture studies, and one whose legacy is in the midst of being reconsidered and refreshed by many scholars, musicians and folklorists alike.

As Guest Editor, we are happy to welcome **Tanya Clement**, Assistant Professor in the School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin. Clement has expertise in a wide variety of fields, from scholarly information architecture and digital literacies to modernist literature and sound studies, and she is currently helping to lead the [High Performance Sound Technologies in Access and Scholarship \(HiPSTAS\)](#), a project you should know about that's using new technologies to analyze and increase access to a range of spoken word recordings.

I'll turn it over to Clement to introduce the series, an expertly-curated set of reflections on what Lomax and his recordings have meant in the past and could mean in the future.

— **Special Editor Neil Verma**

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Alan Lomax (January 31, 1915 – July 19, 2002) was an archivist, ethnomusicologist, film-maker, folklorist, oral historian, political activist, scholar, and writer and many would say he has had the single most influential impact on the preservation of global music traditions. 2015 marks his centenary and this series of posts will both celebrate and interrogate his tireless and controversial crusade to bring attention to, understand, and preserve sound culture.

Below, **Mark Davidson**'s piece will introduce our collection with an exploration into the Alan Lomax "branding" as either saint or sinner with a call for transparency, context, and accuracy with regard to current scholarship and repatriation efforts surrounding the recordings Lomax made over six decades of work. In his approach to Alan Lomax's Southern-based collecting work in our second article, **Parker Fishel** will consider the complex practice of documenting and preserving transforming dynamic community-based traditions into static texts that Lomax and others touted as authentic. Next, **Toneisha Taylor** will interrogate how the Federal Writers Project Folklore and Folkways collection projects, first formed by Lomax's father, has framed how we encounter significant recordings about Black life in the Deep South during and after slavery. Finally, **Tanya Clement** will explore how Lomax's ideas about Cantometrics and the Global Jukebox resound in recent work using computers to categorize and analyze sound in the 21st Century.

By revisiting Lomax's collecting practices and the songs Lomax collected from alternate perspectives in the context of the diverse communities affected by his work, these posts are an attempt to use Lomax's Centenary to celebrate the enduring resonance of folk songs in our sound culture and to bring awareness to the importance and complexities of its continued preservation.

— **Guest Editor Tanya Clement**

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In 1987, two years after the three hundredth anniversary of Johann Sebastian Bach's birth, musicologist Susan McClary [published a now-classic article](#) titled "The Blasphemy of Talking Politics during the Bach Year," in which she reflected on her experiences at a number of Bach events in 1985. Using Theodor Adorno's 1950 essay "Bach Defended against His Devotees" (written on the two-hundredth anniversary of the composer's death) as a jumping-off point, McClary defied Bach scholars who viewed the German Baroque master's music as sacrosanct and unimpeachable, and performed a brazen deconstruction of Bach's most revered works: the Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 and Cantata No. 140 ("Wachet Auf"). For McClary, the turn was critical: "we must *confront* Bach and the canon and resituate him in such a way as to acknowledge his prominence in musical and non-musical culture while not falling victim to it (p. 60)."

What, one might ask, does a canonical "classical" music composer, a contemporary musicologist, and a twentieth-century German theorist have to do with folk music collector Alan Lomax? Aside from a heavy degree of fetishizing by pale male scholars (myself included), it turns out quite a bit.

The "Lomax Year" began on January 31, 2015, the 100th anniversary of Lomax's birth, with events throughout the United States and Europe including concerts, marathon film screenings, and radio broadcasts devoted to his life and work. [Centennial events](#) are ongoing throughout the year, including [a panel at SXSW on March 21st](#) in Alan Lomax's hometown of Austin, Texas.



*Alan Lomax playing guitar on stage
at the Mountain Music Festival,
Asheville, N.C.*

But the current Alan Lomax revival began long before January 31. Over the course of the past five years there have been numerous books, including Lomax's [first full-length biography](#), [websites](#)

devoted to his recordings (e.g., [Louisiana](#), [Kentucky](#)), and recording reissues, all of which have garnered considerable attention in the popular media. There has been an ongoing film and recording series, [The 78 Project](#), in which the project's founders lug across the nation a vintage 1930s Presto recording machine similar to the kind Lomax would have used in search of contemporary musicians playing modern renditions of folk songs. Alan Lomax was even featured on *The Colbert Report* in March 2012, around the time that the massive Alan Lomax Archive of Alan Lomax's Association for Cultural Equity (ACE) launched. The TV spot included a discussion of Lomax's legacy and a performance by Emmylou Harris, Elvis Costello, and ACE executive director and musician Don Fleming, with Colbert helping out the proceedings.

Alan Lomax has become a brand, a larger-than-life figure looming over the entirety of folk music collecting in the United States. His name is the first on people's lips when one mentions the subject (as I have found again and again in my own research on 1930s folk music collectors not named Alan Lomax). And he went to great pains throughout his life to promote this brand. It was, after all, the way that he was able to continue his life's work. This branding effort continues to the present day, largely due to the efforts of [the Association for Cultural Equity](#), which Lomax founded in 1983, and the [American Folklife Center](#) at the Library of Congress, where the Archive of American Folk Song (now the Archive of Folk Culture) is housed. Alan Lomax became the first salaried employee of the Archive in 1937, working there until 1942 when he left for the Office of War Information. But Lomax kept in close contact with the Archive for the rest of his life, lording "Ayatollah-like" (I've been told) over the collections he did so much to foster.

The Lomax Year has also been the impetus for a healthy reappraisal of Lomax's life and career, as evidenced by [a recent Studio 360 radio segment](#), produced by Richard Paul and featuring Dom Flemons, Karl Hagstrom Miller, Dwandalyn Reece, and Patricia Turner. In the 13-minute-long spot, Lomax is at once heralded as the potential grandfather of rock 'n' roll while also criticized for the time that he and his father spent recording black prison inmates in the South, and the overall "folk construction" in which they engaged. The intervention is not unlike McClary's call to "*confront* [Lomax] and the [traditional music] canon and resituate him in such a way as to acknowledge his prominence in musical and non-musical culture while not falling victim to it."



Lightnin' Washington, an African American prisoner, in the prison hospital at Darrington State Farm, Texas

But the “re-situation” suggested by this exposé borders on the same sort of constructed truth of which Lomax himself is accused. By listening to the segment one might come to the conclusion that Lomax had no time for any types of African American music outside of prison inmates: “It would take 14 years before Lomax ever recorded in a black church and he never recorded at a black college.” Or one might think that the Lomaxes’ quest to find “pure” or “unadulterated” versions of songs was unique. Both statements are simply not true. Alan Lomax, in his official capacity with the AAFS, worked with numerous collectors who recorded all types of music. Just one example of many is his collaboration with John Wesley Work III of Fisk University to record African American folk songs and spirituals for use by Fisk and the Library of Congress. As far as fetishizing the untouched or “[pure products](#),” it is a practice that persists in ethnographic research to this day.

Defending Alan Lomax in this way is not a position with which I am comfortable. But relegating him to a decade of his life, and conflating him with “the sins of the father” is no better a stance. There are plenty of places where Lomax can, and should, be justly criticized. There is his practice of taking composer credits for other musicians’ performances (which he somewhat awkwardly defended in a [1990 Fresh Air interview](#) with Terry Gross). Then there’s [the instructions he gave other AAFS fieldworkers](#) to actively deceive their informants: “The recording interview can be as significant as the song itself and is valuable as a fresh field document, especially, if the informant does not know that the interview is being recorded, and if he never learns it.” And there’s [a statement he made to Federal Writers’ Project historian Jerre Mangione](#) in which he boasted that his father was “a fucking genius at getting blacks to sing” while describing, excitedly, the dangers of recording in the Jim Crow South. Not to mention Zora Neale Hurston putting Alan Lomax in

blackface as they traveled the South. And these instances all fall within this same five-year period of Lomax's life.



Stavin' Chain playing guitar and singing the ballad "Batson" accompanied by a musician on violin, Lafayette, La.

What falls away in these discussions is perhaps the most critical piece to this puzzle: the individuals behind the recording. Who were they, and what were their lives like outside of the three minutes that are etched into a lacquered aluminum "acetate" disc? Aside from a few notable exceptions (e.g., Muddy Waters, Jelly Roll Morton), most of these performers remain unknown to the general public. Through this particular sin of omission, we fall victim to the fallacy that perhaps Alan Lomax really *was* the progenitor for the "never-ending folk music revival," or that he really *was* the grandfather of rock 'n' roll. Few scholars have even approached the problem of dealing with the performers in any substantive way, with the exception of perhaps Stephen Wade through his recent book *The Beautiful Music All Around Us*. The problem of the individual extends to the various recent "[repatriation projects](#)" that have been underway for some years. Given what we know about Lomax's fieldwork co-creator-credit practices, how transparent have these repatriation efforts been able to be? What do these plans include for the forthcoming "[definitive Centennial box set](#)"?

Talking politics during the Lomax Year is not blasphemy. It is necessary. But the overall reliance on knocking down Alan Lomax™ misses an important point. It is nearly impossible to make the overly simplistic and poorly nuanced argument that Lomax was simply a product of his time, when that time spanned the better part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The problem of Alan Lomax, then, is acknowledging his importance while resituating him within the larger narrative of traditional music research in the twentieth century, not as a brand, but as an individual in a larger network collectors, institutions, and musicians who fought against what the

rapid disappearance—what Lomax called “[cultural grey-out](#)”—of music and culture throughout the world. Doing so won’t solve the problem, but it’s at least a start.

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Mark Davidson is a Ph.D. candidate in cultural musicology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He is currently finishing up a dissertation on WPA folk music collections, including Sidney Robertson Cowell’s *California Folk Music Project*; Herbert Halpert’s *Southern States Recording Expedition*; and the *Florida Federal Writers’ Project*’s statewide folk music recording survey (which included Zora Neale Hurston and Stetson Kennedy). Mark has also been working with Tanya Clement and the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas to launch a website of the Lomax family’s recordings in Texas. He received an MSIS from the UT School of Information in August 2014, and has worked for the *Journal of the Society for American Music* since 2008.

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Featured image: [Alan Lomax \(left\) youngster on board boat, during Bahamas recording expedition](#). All images via the [Library of Congress Lomax Collection](#).

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