

MULTIMEDIA REVIEW

Association for Cultural Equity, The Alan Lomax Archive. <http://research.culturalequity.org>.

It is probably safe to say that practically all scholars of American folk music understand the debt that they owe to Alan Lomax. Beginning in the 1930s, Lomax traveled all over the United States and beyond, using the latest technologies to record music, especially in isolated rural communities, first on instantaneous discs in the 1930s for the Library of Congress, then with the newly invented tape recorder starting in 1946, and on into the 1980s and early 1990s with video.

Many of Lomax's earliest recordings are administered by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. Lomax's independent archive, whose holdings begin with recordings made in 1946, has been digitized and archived in the headquarters of the Association for Cultural Equity, which Lomax founded. Now the Association for Cultural Equity has made these vast resources available, online and for free, by creating the Alan Lomax Archive and digitizing 17,400+ digital audio files, 400,000 feet of film, 3000 videotapes, and 5000 photographs. A team of scholars, many of them volunteering their time, has curated the collection, but much of the text attached to the individual recordings originates in Lomax's notes or in introductions he voiced on the tapes themselves.

The recordings that Lomax made for the Library of Congress before 1946 are housed at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. In 2004 the original recordings of Lomax's independent archive were moved from their residence at Hunter College to join those earlier recordings at the American Folklife Center. These recordings are accessible to scholars visiting the Library of Congress. The AFC has placed a few of its pre-1946 holdings on its own website, including at least one of the recordings Lomax made in Kentucky in 1937; these are merely a few scattered examples, and they're offered with very little detail about the recordings themselves. Scholars hoping for access to recordings Lomax made in the late 1930s in Haiti and in eastern Kentucky may have cause to rejoice as well, however, as the Association for Cultural Equity website states that some of the rarer pre-1946 recordings will soon be digitized as well.

Already, there's an incredible amount of diversity represented in the Association's audio archive; a cursory scan of the musical groups represented pulls up Flatt and Scruggs as well as the Dixie Hummingbirds performing at the 1966 Newport Folk Festival, music played for the Esquerra Dancers at the Palma Festival in 1952 (Mallorca, Spain), the Treorchy Male Choir performing railroad songs in Glamorganshire, Wales in 1953, a sermon delivered by Reverend L.W. Williams at a Baptist church in Greenville, Mississippi in 1948, an African American jug band recorded in Memphis in 1959, the Royal Scottish Fusiliers Pipe and Drum Band recorded in Glasgow in 1951, and recordings of songs sung at a wake in L'Esterre, Carriacou (a tiny island in the Caribbean) in 1962.

Almost all of the recordings come with detailed listings, describing the location, language, and even the culture represented by the recording. Users will also find

a description of the original format of the recording, and even brief notes on the session. Unlike many of the Lomax recordings issued on CD, there seems to be minimal editing done to the head and tail of many of these recordings. Those extra few seconds are often magical, as when the tape captures some snippets of conversation and laughter in between songs at an Alabama singing convention in 1959. Hearing the singers debate about which number the leader had called for makes the listener feel like he or she is sitting right there in Corinth Baptist Church in Fyffe, Alabama, even though this recording was made more than half a century ago. In the spirit of completeness there are even brief audio recordings included that were made simply to identify a photo taken, or to mark the beginning of a new camera roll. The description posted at the head of the sound recordings section of the website proudly explains that “Not a single piece of recorded sound in Lomax’s audio archive has been omitted: meaning that microphone checks, partial performances, and false starts are also included.”

In addition to the holdings listed under the heading of “Sound Recordings,” there are also video recordings, discussions, interviews and lectures, and radio programs. The radio section includes a show hosted by Woody Guthrie (who sings along with Burl Ives and others in the course of the show), as well as another one hosted by Merle Travis, a sort of extended public service announcement urging listeners to seek medical attention for syphilis, and written by Lomax for the U.S. government.

Although the archive of video recordings is much smaller in comparison to the audio recordings, there is much here to excite scholars. Again, the recordings are alive—watching a Sacred Harp convention filmed in June of 1982 in Holly Springs, Georgia, we not only hear the call for a new leader and song choice, we see the singers giving the beat with the up and down swings of their arms. We even get a feel for the heat in the packed building as we see several of the singers fanning themselves—not with the expected funeral home fans—but with crimson, football shaped fans that proudly proclaim, “I’m a Bama fan.”

Like any archive, as much as is there, the user will want more. Particularly when scanning the video collections, it doesn’t take long to exhaust everything that’s available—so far there are only seven video collections, all recorded from 1978 to 1983 in various locations in the South.

Under the heading of “Miscellaneous Recordings 1950–1990,” the investigator will find in addition to an extended interview with poet Robert Graves, twenty-eight seconds of an interview with a ten-year-old Harlem boy and “hambone” player, and the intriguing listing for a 1963 recording of Bob Dylan singing in Lomax’s New York City apartment. This last recording’s description states that the performance is followed by Dylan discussing the origin of the song and relating a story about Khrushchev. But what is linked there is only the beginning of an affective private performance of Dylan’s “Masters of War.” Unfortunately, these listings in the “Miscellaneous Recordings” section mark the first recordings in the archive that I’ve found that don’t deliver all that is promised. The Dylan recording breaks off about forty-five seconds into the song; I have not been able to uncover the conversation with Dylan at all, nor is “Bob Dylan” (or even “Robert Zimmerman”) listed elsewhere in the archive’s online indexes other than in association with this recording.

But again, there's a lot to dig through here. Alan Lomax spent much of his later years working with computers on a project he called the Global Jukebox. His hope was that it would make sound recordings, films, and photos available to people anywhere in the world. Lomax evidently hoped that his Global Jukebox would facilitate cross-cultural music comparison. With this giant online archive, the Association for Cultural Equity has taken a tremendous step toward Lomax's goal. Lomax's daughter, Anna Lomax Wood, now the president of the Association for Cultural Equity, says of the new web archive that, "Alan would have been thrilled to death. He would've just been so excited."¹

It's hard not to agree.

Alan Shockley

¹ Joel Rose, "Alan Lomax's Massive Archive Goes Online," 28 March 2012, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/therecord/2012/03/28/148915022/alan-lomaxs-massive-archive-goes-online>.