

## RECORDING REVIEWS

*Jelly Roll Morton: The Complete Library of Congress Recordings by Alan Lomax.* Rounder 11661-1889-2 (8 CDs), 2006.

If serendipity has a patron saint, I guess it would be San Buenaventura, Spanish for “Saint Goodluck.” If so, that saint should also be the patron of oral historians, whose primary sources lie in the living memories of people who are witnesses to whatever the historian has chosen to research—a place, an era, a personality, an event. The key to all that is in the word *living*: no live witnesses, no oral history.

I start here because the good saint must have been in attendance, hovering unseen in the Coolidge Auditorium of the Library of Congress in May of 1938, when Alan Lomax and Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton met there to begin the now-legendary series of interviews that led to the publication of Lomax’s book, *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and “Inventor of Jazz,”* at least half of which consists of edited transcriptions of those interviews. The serendipity of that meeting becomes clear if, for a moment, we allow ourselves to think the unthinkable: the creation of *Mister Jelly Roll* might never have taken place. Morton died a mere two years after the interviews; his period of residence in Washington, D.C., ended just after the last interview, in December of 1938; Lomax, whose main interest was blues and folk music, not jazz, had just been appointed Assistant in Charge of the Archive in 1937, and his original intent was to give the New Orleans jazzman one short interview; Lomax agreed to that only because Morton himself showed up at the Library and insisted on “setting the record straight” about the origins of jazz—his appearance there inspired by his anger over W. C. Handy being introduced as the “originator of jazz, stomps, and the blues” on the popular radio program *Believe It or Not* in March of 1938; and finally, between the May–June interviews and the final session in December 1938, when Morton spoke about his California years and Anita Gonzales, he was stabbed by a customer in his nightclub and nearly died. Had these interviews not taken place, the loss to America’s musical and social history would have been immense—literally unthinkable—for Morton was not only the first great jazz composer, a formidable pianist, and leader of some of the best small-group performances in the history of recorded jazz, but also an astute observer whose command of the English language, albeit colloquial and idiosyncratic, was such that he became, through Lomax, one of our best monologists and storytellers.

Given that history, the release of the complete Library of Congress interviews by Rounder Records in an eight-CD boxed set should be cause for rejoicing. The set includes the complete recordings of the interviews and *Mister Jelly Roll*, as well as a booklet by John Szwed that includes a gallery of photos and reproductions of historically important documents, many of which have never before been published. Two previous commercial issues of the interviews have long been out of print, and neither of the two was complete (a number of triple X-rated whorehouse songs were not included). In addition, four CDs were released in 2003, also by Rounder, but they contain only the musical performances from the interviews and those parts of

the monologues that overlap the music. The Lomax book itself has gone in and out of print with dismaying regularity over the years. One can only hope that Rounder Records and the University of California Press, who reissued *Mister Jelly Roll* on their own in 2001, can find a way to keep this important material in print, but if the past is any indication, the chances of that happening are probably slim, especially with the recordings.

Morton's reputation for boundless egotism might lead one to suspect that his monologues would be ruthlessly self-centered, but that is far from the case. Musically, he quite generously spreads his attention around to the musicians he saw and heard in New Orleans and in his travels, especially the pianists he admired, most of whom never had a chance to record—Sammy Davis, Kid Ross, and Tony Jackson—and he often gives us valuable and seemingly authentic renditions of their styles. And his brief portrait of legendary trumpeter Buddy Bolden, who supposedly did make one recording that was somehow lost, is one of the most sharply rendered of the reminiscences that agree he was the greatest of them all. But Morton's attention ranged beyond music, and his observations of events like the Robert Charles riots in New Orleans prove him to be an astute eyewitness of US society and its foibles. The monologues are at times crowded with the names and deeds of those who inhabited the nightlife in which he worked, street people with names like Sheep Eye, Chicken Dick, brothers Toolum and Toodoo Parker, Nigger Nate (actually a white man with nappy blond hair), Willie the Pleaser, Okey Poke, and Chinese Smoke. And the monologues often involve the folklore of voodoo and the voodoo practitioners Morton would turn to from time to time, inspired no doubt by his beloved godmother, Eulalie Echo, herself a "hoodoo woman."

Morton's performances include many of his most popular numbers, like "The Pearls," "Wolverine Blues," "King Porter Stomp," "Jelly Roll Blues," "Kansas City Stomps," and "New Orleans Blues"; he also performed four compositions he had never before recorded: "Bert Williams," "State and Madison," "The Crave," and "Winin' Boy." The last two he did record commercially, after the Library of Congress sessions, in an album for the General recording label, *New Orleans Memories*, which was put together in response to a demand created by rumors circulating about the Library of Congress interviews. However, the Library of Congress version of "The Crave" is far superior to the one on General, and the words on "Winin' Boy" had to be cleaned up on the General release, since the Library of Congress version was one of Morton's whorehouse songs, one that he says was popular enough to be a kind of theme song in the days when he worked the New Orleans bordellos.

The set is not without its problems. First, there is the issue of sound quality and the collection's inept remastering. The science of eliminating surface noise on reissues of old recordings has advanced tremendously, but, if not done properly, can result in a loss of high and low frequencies and a recording whose sound is anemic compared to the original. This is what happened with the more recent reissue, as a comparison to the earlier Rounder set verifies.

There are also problems with the poor quality of the work Lomax put into the interviews themselves, as well as his transcriptions and editing for the book, which is full of errors, both of omission and commission. For an example of the former, in the section on the West Coast years, Lomax omits the name of the saloon that

Morton's wife was running in Las Vegas when Morton first arrived in Los Angeles, though Morton clearly identifies it in the recording as the Arcade. Lomax must have thought such details were inconsequential, because he often deletes them. However, armed with the name of the saloon, I was able to locate a photo of the Arcade in my research on Morton.

And then there are the errors of commission. In the interview, when Morton talks about often seeing "my brother-in-law, Bill Johnson," he quickly corrects himself and says "Dink," but Lomax's text still stubbornly insists it's Bill. Also, when Morton talks about singing in a quartet that performed spirituals at funerals in his early New Orleans days, the text of *Mister Jelly Roll* is:

Then we would stand up and begin—  
*Nearer my God to thee*  
 very slow and with beautiful harmony, thinking about that ham—  
*Nearer to thee*  
 plenty of whiskey in the flask . . . We'd be sad, too, terribly sad.<sup>1</sup>

On the recording, however, Lomax clearly prompts Morton with the words about the ham and the whiskey, literally putting words in his mouth, a cardinal sin in the practice of oral history.

At any rate, the new Rounder set compensates for Lomax's lapses not only with the reissue of the recorded interviews but also with the inclusion, on the eighth and last CD, of a transcript of the entire interview, including lyrics to the songs, in PDF format. Also included on that very valuable last disc are the stenographic handwritten notes to those interviews that were not recorded. In other words, this Rounder set finally helps to set the record straight and corrects some of the misconceptions in Lomax's book. The music of Jelly Roll Morton certainly deserves to stand among the best in the American tradition, and these interviews add yet another dimension to his legacy. We should be glad to have them available once more, in spite of the flaws of this package.

Phil Pastras



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*How Low Can You Go? Anthology of the String Bass (1925–1941)*. Dust-to-Digital DTD-04 (3 CDs), 2006.

Eddie Condon described purchasing a ticket to enter Lincoln Gardens, in 1922 or 1923, and hearing the music of King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band flow through

<sup>1</sup> Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and "Inventor of Jazz"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 15.