

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Defining the Songs of Incarceration: The Lomax Prison Project at a Critical Juncture

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Abstract

This article illuminates an underexplored moment in the formation of the well-known archive of recordings of incarcerated people collected by the folklorists John and Alan Lomax. In 1934, John Lomax wrote to 350 correctional institutions across the country, asking officials to transcribe the texts of songs “current and popular among prisoners or ‘made up’ by them.” Despite contacting institutions incarcerating people of many races, ethnicities, genders, and ages, however, the Lomaxes ultimately continued to center on music performed by Black men in Southern prisons. Because of this, I position the letter as a critical juncture in the formation of the Lomaxes’ prison work. Choices made by prison officials (whether to respond to the letter and in what manner to respond) and by the Lomaxes themselves (whether to express interest in songs addressed by correspondents) were influenced by perceptions of the role of music in relation to criminality, imprisonment, reform, and race. These perceptions in turn defined the boundaries of the Lomax prison project. The correspondence considered in this article therefore offers a counternarrative to popular representations of music and incarceration and suggests the limits of the well-known Lomax prison song collection.

Late in 1934, a letter made its way into the mailboxes of wardens at prisons and reformatories all over the United States and Canada. It bore an official letterhead and a signature from the Library of Congress, but contained what must have been, at least on a first read, a slightly peculiar request. John A. Lomax, the Library’s Honorary Curator and Consultant in American Folk-Song, was calling on the letter’s addressees to survey the institutions they managed and to determine whether the people imprisoned in them knew any folk music. Addressees were asked to provide Lomax with information about such music, so he could decide if it would be worth taking a trip to make phonograph recordings for the library’s recently founded but rapidly expanding Archive of American Folk Song.¹

Lomax’s letter (Figure 1) made some stipulations. He was asking for information about vocal music: “songs or ballads current and popular among prisoners or ‘made up’ by them and passed around by ‘word of mouth’ rather than by the printed page.” As for topics, Lomax offered a general directive. “Many of these songs, though by no means all of them,” he wrote, “relate to experiences in prison, to the life of criminals in jail or in the ‘free world.’” Also, while he suggested some songs might have shocking or immoral content, he was adamant in his request: “I wish to secure copies of them all, no matter how crude or vulgar they may be.” At the end of his paragraph of instructions, Lomax also stated that, in his estimation, this material was “especially plentiful” among Black prisoners. Although not phrased as a mandatory feature of the music he was soliciting, this supposition was revealing of the impetus behind Lomax’s letter and of his interest in prison music more generally.

The idea for the letter came to John Lomax a year after he first traveled with his son Alan to prisons in Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.² While there, John—a seasoned folklorist—and Alan—a budding

¹John A. Lomax to Institutions, October, 1934, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932–1968, box 1, folder 22, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

²The details of the trip, as well as the Lomaxes’ subsequent work in prisons, are frequently discussed in scholarly literature. Descriptions can be found in John Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2010),

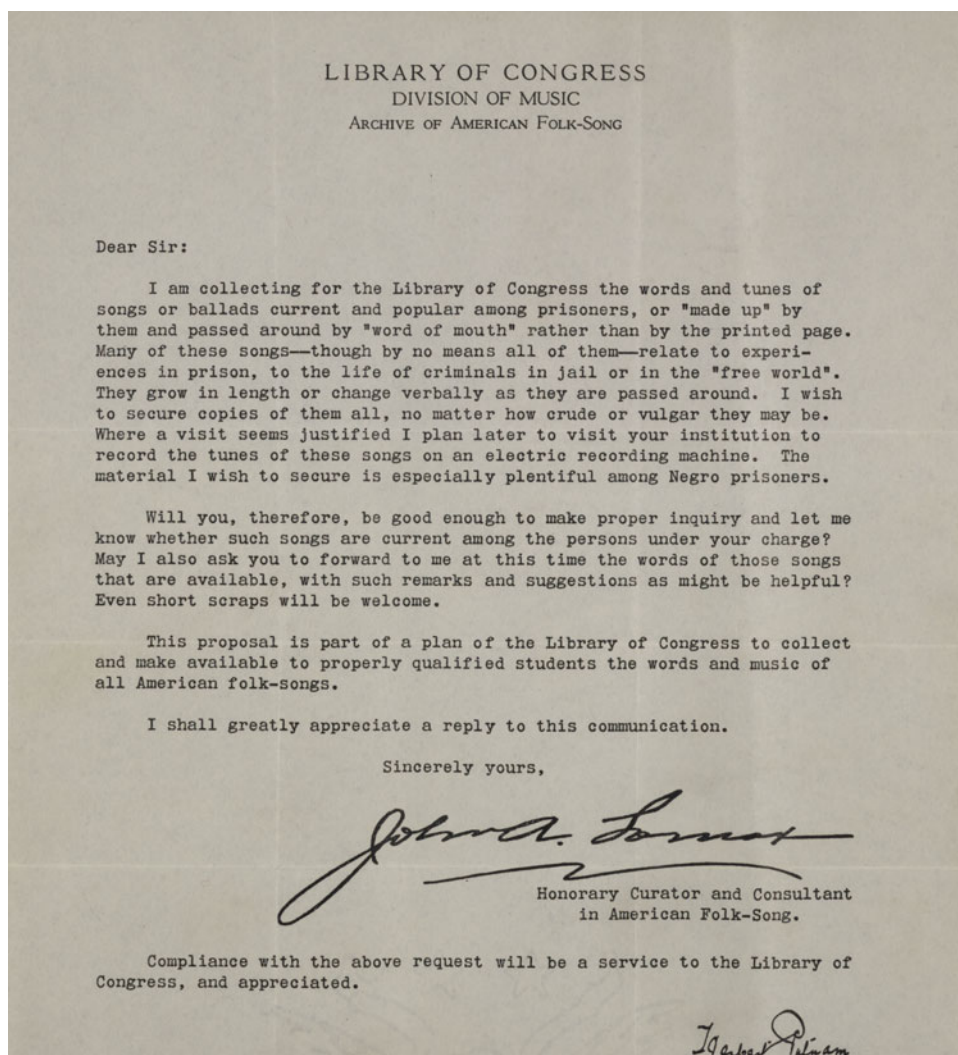


Figure 1. John Lomax's circular letter to prisons and reformatories. October, 1934. American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax papers, 1932–1968.

one, with a rich career ahead—made recordings of field hollers, work songs, and blues music. The performances they recorded featured Black men almost exclusively. After the end of their trip, the Lomaxes sought ways for this project to continue. And continue it did. In subsequent years, the father-and-son duo made many recordings behind bars and, after John's death in 1948, Alan continued to do so on his own. Since then, the songs collected by the Lomaxes in prisons have reached audiences through songbooks and commercial recordings and have become important documents of the heritage of the United States.³ At the same time, they raise important issues about prison labor, the

38–58, as well as in Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 256–313. It should be noted that on this trip, as well as throughout their wide-ranging careers, the Lomaxes recorded in many non-carceral locations.

³The recordings are held in several different Lomax collections at the American Folklife Center, The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. In addition, many of these recordings have been digitized and are available online through the Association for Cultural Equity, a not-for-profit charitable organization. Versions of the songs collected on all the Lomax prison trips have been popularized through the publication of printed folk collections including John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax eds., *Folk Song USA* (New York: Dell, Sloan and Pierce, 1947) and John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Our Singing Country: Folk*

profits and practices of ethnography, and the racial politics amplifying both these issues, given that they were collected by white folklorists in segregated prisons.

The Lomaxes were motivated to pursue this project because they were under the conviction that the survival of Black American folk music in the U.S. South was threatened due to several influences (desegregation, northern migration, and the radio, among them) and they saw Southern prisons—segregated institutions where white wardens and guards exacted vile punishments on Black prisoners—as some of the only remaining repositories of Black American folksong.⁴ Because of this, scholars have often turned a critical eye toward the Lomaxes' prison work, their tendency to romanticize folkloric isolation, and their capitalization on white fascination with “authentic,” uncommercialized Black music.⁵ The Lomaxes' choice to root their prison project in the music of Southern Black men to the near exclusion of women has likewise elicited critique.⁶

In the context of this extensive and widely discussed project, John Lomax's 1934 letter might seem a mere stepping-stone. I argue, however, that it is much more than that. The wide circulation of the letter, sent to 350 carceral institutions in the United States and Canada, brought the Lomaxes into contact with correspondents from institutions incarcerating people of many races, ethnicities, genders, and ages. Through their replies—some obliging the request for information about songs, others declining or ignoring it—these correspondents delimited the corpus of prison music the Lomaxes could access. In turn, through their reactions to some of the obliging responses, the Lomaxes also set boundaries for their project. From a few correspondents they received varied materials: union songs, European folk songs, and children's game songs. On occasion, such materials elicited interest. Ultimately, however, most of the diverse music addressed in these letters was not recorded.⁷ The Lomaxes continued to site their prison work in the South and, with the exception of a few recordings of Black women, they focused their project on Black men.⁸

From a present-day vantage point we can look at the moment surrounding John Lomax's letter as a point in time at which the purview of the Lomax prison project could have taken several routes but a single pathway forward was selected. The project had reached what institutional historians have called

Songs and Ballads (New York: Dover, [1941] 2000) as well as through recordings such as Alan Lomax, *Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings, 1947–1959*, Dust to Digital DTD–37, 2014, compact disc.

⁴The reasoning motivating the initial prison trip is described by the Lomaxes in many of their writings, but is perhaps most concisely expressed in the funding proposal for the project submitted to the Carnegie Foundation by Alan Lomax in 1933. This proposal has survived in the form of a lengthy quotation in John A. Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 129; and Szwed, *Alan Lomax*, 38.

⁵For instance, in his 2010 book *Segregating Sound*, Karl Hagstrom Miller argues that John Lomax was initially drawn to recording in prisons because he had difficulty locating Black informants in the “free world” and came to see freedom as harmful to Black music. In Miller's words, for Lomax, “education, well-paying jobs and any form of participation in larger society caused African Americans to lose their racial core, a core [he] repeatedly associated with poverty, isolation, and pathos.” Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 264.

⁶A 2013 article by historian Shobana Shankar shows that recordings of Black female prisoners—of which John Lomax, along with his colleague Herbert Halpert, collected a few in 1936—have received scant promotion in comparison to those featuring men. Shankar argues that the likely cause behind this lack of promotion was that recordings of female prisoners “did not fit into the love affair that had emerged between the down-and-out [black] male prisoners and musicologists.” Shobana Shankar, “Parchman Women Write the Blues? What Became of Black Women's Prison Music in Mississippi in the 1930s,” *American Music* 31, no. 2 (2013): 183–202. This lacuna in the scholarship on women's music in prisons has been addressed in Benjamin J. Harbert and Consuela Gaines, “Sounding Lockdown: Singing in Administrative Segregation at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women,” in *Popular Music and the Politics of Hope: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, ed. Susan Fast and Craig Jennex (New York: Routledge, 2019), 299–316.

⁷Although this article specifically deals with musical material that the Lomaxes did *not* record, the literature on the recordings that they collected in prisons is considerable. Among the publications on the topic are Szwed, *Alan Lomax*; Erich Nunn, *Sounding the Color Line: Music and Race in the Southern Imagination* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2015); and Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). The recordings have also been addressed in poetry in Tyehimba Jess, *Leadbelly* (Amherst: Verse Press, 2005), as well as in film in *Leadbelly*, directed by Gordon Parks (1976; Hollywood, CA: Brownstone Productions, 2015), DVD. I have also written more specifically on the recordings in my doctoral dissertation. See Velia Ivanova, “The Musical Heritage of Incarceration: The Curation, Dissemination, and Management of the Lomax Collection Prison Songs,” (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2021).

⁸The recordings of women are available on *Jailhouse Blues: 1936 & 1939*, Rosetta Records RR 1316, 1987, compact disc.

a “critical juncture.” This term is perhaps best elucidated in the writing of sociologist James Mahoney.⁹ As he puts it, critical junctures are moments “characterized by the selection of a particular option ... from among two or more alternatives.”¹⁰ The choices available during critical junctures are defined by “antecedent historical conditions,” and, in turn, these choices set off events that influence “the creation of institutional or structural patterns that endure over time.”¹¹ While the term “critical juncture” has mostly been applied to analyses of political policies, it is equally relevant to the discussion at hand. Choices made by the Lomaxes’ correspondents (whether to respond to the initial letter and, if so, in what manner to respond) and by the Lomaxes themselves (whether to express further interest in the songs described by correspondents and, ultimately, whether or not to record and publish them), were influenced by a series of conditions. Chief among these were contemporaneous perceptions of the role of music in relation to the entangled categories of criminality, imprisonment, reform, race, and gender. These perceptions caused the Lomaxes and their correspondents to define the boundaries of the Lomax prison project and to solidify its focus. This article centers on the critical juncture represented by John Lomax’s 1934 letter, on the conditions that affected decisions made by the respondents and by the Lomaxes, and on some of the large-scale repercussions of these decisions.

I first examine the responses to Lomax’s letter and argue that in the process of determining whether or not to share material, the writers of these responses—almost exclusively white wardens and supervisors of penal institutions—acted as *de facto* curators of the material the Lomaxes could access. Their letters suggest their “curatorial” decisions stemmed from assumptions about the type of music Lomax sought, about what type of prisoner might know this music, and about the relationship between knowing and singing this music and a prisoner’s ability to be reformed. Often latent in these assumptions are understandings of the relationships between race, gender, and criminality.

In the final part of the article, I also study the Lomaxes’ interactions with a few correspondents who furnished information about folk songs. These songs diverge from the type of prison music on which the Lomaxes focused. They therefore offer a counternarrative to popular representations of folk music and incarceration during this period and bespeak a time when the limits of the well-known Lomax prison song collection were defined.

Prison Administrators as Curators of the Lomax Archive

Responses to John Lomax’s letter started arriving in November of 1934, many of them dismissing the request in a polite but terse manner. “Sorry, but have nothing we can send,” wrote J. J. Sullivan, the warden of the Minnesota State Farm.¹² Mary B. Harris, the superintendent of the federal Institution for Women in Alderson, Virginia reported similar findings: “There are no such songs in this institution.”¹³ From the Industrial School for Boys in Topeka, Kansas, Lomax received a return copy of his own letter, with only the word “open” scribbled at the bottom.¹⁴

As it appears, some of the administrators who received Lomax’s request had little time or care for it. They were, after all, in charge of Depression-era prisons and were likely more interested in maintaining day-to-day operations in their crowded facilities and retaining financial solvency than in helping conduct a song collection venture.¹⁵ And yet, not all the responses were brief or dismissive. Out of the over

⁹James Mahoney, *The Legacies of Liberalism: Path Dependence and Political Regimes in Central America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

¹⁰Mahoney, *The Legacies of Liberalism*, 6.

¹¹Mahoney, *The Legacies of Liberalism*, 6.

¹²J.J. Sullivan to John Lomax, November 23, 1934, box 3D171, folder 1, John Avery Lomax Family Papers, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

¹³Mary B. Harris to John Lomax, November 27, 1934, John Avery Lomax Family Papers, box 3D171, folder 1.

¹⁴Paul A. Cannady to John Lomax, November 22, 1934, John Avery Lomax Family Papers, box 3D171, folder 1.

¹⁵The challenges of running carceral facilities during this period—as well as the repercussions these challenges had for incarcerated people—have been documented by Ethan Blue in *Doing Time in the Depression: Everyday Life in Texas and California Prisons* (New York: New York University Press, 2014). Although Blue writes about incarceration in only two states, prison populations grew nationwide during this period and the stock market crash of 1929 created just as much financial hardship for penal institutions as it did for the population in general. This worsened prison conditions and increased tensions between prison

100 prison administrators who wrote to Lomax, a significant number were not ungenerous with their responses. While most of these respondents still rejected Lomax's request, they provided ample justifications for their inability to comply. Thus, their letters—now held in collections at the Library of Congress's American Folklife Center and the University of Texas at Austin—constitute an archive laden with information about musical life in prisons during the 1930s.¹⁶ In their rejections, the authors of these letters reveal understandings of the type of prison songs Lomax sought and of music's role in reforming prisoners. Because it is such understandings that led administrators to decline to contribute information about songs, the letters also show evidence of an instance in which actors who were not involved in the Lomaxes' project as either song collectors or musicians shaped their archive. Both by governing musical practices in their institutions and controlling the information available about such practices, prison officials set boundaries for the material the Lomaxes could access. As such, they acted as gatekeepers and, consequently, as *de facto* curators of their archive.

What is particularly interesting here is that the impetus behind the Lomax prison project has historically been explained by describing the reluctance of another set of gatekeepers. The source for this explanation dates to a funding proposal made by Alan Lomax to the Carnegie Foundation for the initial 1933 prison travels.¹⁷ In this proposal, Lomax criticizes Black cultural leaders for what he understood as attempts to suppress folk culture in their communities. He argues that these cultural leaders exerted a strong and deleterious force on what he construed as the average Black American by "broadening his concepts and thus making him ashamed or self-conscious of his own art," by "turning away from revival songs, spirituals and informal church services to hymns and formal church modes," by "ranting against any song that has to do with secular subjects," and by "sneering at the naiveté of the folk songs and unconsciously throwing the weight of their influence in the balance against anything not patterned after white bourgeois culture."¹⁸

The aversion toward the type of material the Lomaxes sought, although here reflected through the interpretation of a white folklorist, has been widely documented. Some of the resistance came from religious Black Americans who were concerned by what they saw as an immoral element in the blues and secular music more broadly.¹⁹ In addition, although folk music was a central topic of concern among many artists and members of the Black intelligentsia and middle class—particularly in the wake of the Harlem Renaissance, which drew heavily on the expressive possibilities of the blues—trepidation persisted. Many were troubled not so much by the lyrics' perceived immorality, but rather by contradictions between the beauty and moral value of Black secular folklore and the identity of the performers of this music: farmers, prisoners, and other members of the Black working class.²⁰

officials and incarcerated people. In 1930, the *Boston Globe* reported that investigators from the National Society of Penal Information expected that riots in prisons across the country were inevitable if overcrowding and poor conditions were not addressed. See Louis M. Lyons, "Bigger and Better Prison Riots or More and Better Prisons," *Boston Globe*, February 2, 1930, B4.

¹⁶The letters are located in the John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers (AFC 1933/001), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; and the John Avery Lomax Family Papers, 1842, 1853–1986, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁷John Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 129.

¹⁸Szwed, *Alan Lomax*, 38. John Lomax also wrote extensively on the resistance he and his son encountered from Black cultural leaders when it came to the music they wanted to record. See John A. Lomax, "'Sinful Songs' of the Southern Negro," *The Musical Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (April 1934): 177–187.

¹⁹As Angela Davis reports in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, a number of successful blues recordings artists stopped singing secular music after turning to religion. After retiring from the stage, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey became a member of the Friendship Baptist Church in Columbus, Georgia and "spent the last years of her life as a Christian devotee, refusing to sing the blues and fervently supporting the church and its institutions." Ethel Waters followed a similar path. Although she continued to record music after joining the church, she turned her focus to religious songs. See Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Random House, 1999), 125.

²⁰As Langston Hughes details in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," some wealthier Black Americans sought to divorce themselves from the heritage of Black folklore. See Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, June 23, 1926, 692–93. More recently, historian, literary scholar, and activist John S. Wright has written about the complicated reasoning behind such trepidations in his interpretation of what an artist like Lead Belly meant to members of the Black intelligentsia. See John S. Wright, "The New Negro Poet and the Nachal Man: Sterling Brown's Folk Odyssey," *Black American Literature Forum* 23, no. 1 (Spring, 1989): 95–105.

In addition, the matter of two white folklorists forging representations of Black working-class men through their work brought forth uncomfortable reminiscences of the stereotyping present in blackface minstrelsy.²¹

Largely due to the latter concern, the intertwined implications about folk culture, social mobility, class, and race in Lomax's Carnegie proposal have not escaped the attention of scholars.²² The proposal has often been quoted and analyzed by those interested in the manner in which the two white folklorists' understanding of Black music and its relationship with class and morality rubbed against that of Black American cultural gatekeepers and influenced the locations in which they worked, the people they recorded, and the music they collected. According to these scholars, because Black cultural leaders guarded their communities from the Lomaxes, their search for Black folk music was redirected to Southern prisons, where such gatekeepers were not present, where white wardens had no stake in safeguarding the cultural production and image of the Black people incarcerated in their facilities and were therefore less resistant to the Lomaxes' request.

While such arguments have brought light to the racial dynamics of the Lomaxes' project, what remains underexplored is the way that parallel ideas about the entanglements of whiteness, class, and morality also shaped the Lomaxes' work. It is for this reason that the letters written in response to John Lomax's 1934 request represent such an important archival resource. They show that the Lomax prison song collection was not only influenced by the reluctance of Black cultural leaders to provide material from their communities, but also by another set of cultural leaders: white prison officials.²³ While the singers the Lomaxes recorded in prisons had many motivations of their own for putting their voice on tape, the crucial role that wardens and prison officials in the U.S. South played in allowing their archive to be constructed is evident. Officials from a number of segregated Southern penitentiaries allowed the Lomaxes access to the Black prisoners incarcerated in their institutions. Meanwhile, administrators who managed either exclusively white-populated institutions or integrated ones with high proportions of white prisoners were often unwilling to assist. When it came to members of their own race, white wardens and supervisors seem to have behaved similarly to the Black cultural leaders criticized in Lomax's Carnegie Foundation proposal. In their letters, they position themselves as guardians tasked with controlling the information available to outsiders like the Lomaxes about musical life behind bars. Their reluctance to assist the Lomaxes shows how their racialized understandings of the role of music in prisoner reform, along with their desire to protect the image of their institutions, determined the songs available to the Lomaxes and influenced the constitution of their archive.

The responses to Lomax's letter have garnered little scholarly attention. Some of them are quoted in Miller's *Segregating Sound*, but the only letter that has been explored in detail is one sent by

²¹As authors writing on the emergence and popularization of the field of folklore in the early twentieth century have frequently pointed out, minstrelsy and folklore have a contiguous history. Karl Hagstrom Miller has argued that on one hand there is a contrast between folklore and minstrelsy: white minstrels often presented purportedly "genuine" Black music, while folklorists sought out members of specific racial and regional communities for the purposes of "authenticity." On the other hand, as Miller puts it, "the folkloric paradigm ascended, in part, by inheriting and perpetuating some of the qualities of minstrel authenticity," regional and racial stereotypes among them. See Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 4–6. Robert Cantwell has identified similar connections between folklore and minstrelsy. See Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 54–55.

²²For instance, Jerrold Hirsch reads the proposal to suggest that "Lomax was comfortable with the socioeconomic implications of his argument that only the poorest, most isolated and segregated...could maintain a vital folk culture" and that, although the statement can be read on its surface as a celebration of Black musical creativity, it is in essence an indictment of Black upward mobility and a plea for the preservation of "the status quo in southern race relations." Jerrold Hirsch, "Modernity, Nostalgia, and Southern Folklore Studies: The Case of John Lomax," *The Journal of American Folklore* 105, no. 416 (Spring 1992): 195. Catherine A. Stewart has likewise read the proposal with a critical eye, pointing out that it not only reaffirms racial hierarchies, but also misses a vital fact: What looked to Lomax like an outright prohibition of the songs he and his father sought was, as Stewart puts it, "a taboo against performing them for white outsiders who might use them as an intellectual weapon against the black community." Catherine A. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 101.

²³Among the respondents, only one (John Leslie) does not belong to the category of "white prison officials." His engagement with the Lomaxes is discussed in the final part of the article.

M. F. Amrine from the Federal Jail in New Orleans.²⁴ Writing with the authority of observations gathered over his fifteen-year employment in prisons, Amrine bristled against what he understood to be the reasoning behind Lomax's request, namely "the idea that prisoners, as a class, are different from the general run of humanity in regard to musical taste." Amrine countered: "People in prison are a cross-section of society" and therefore "they have such songs as have the people outside of prisons, and for the same general reasons."²⁵ Amrine's letter shows his opinion that the Lomaxes' delineation between musical life on the "inside" and on the "outside" was imagined and offers up an alternative to the Lomaxes' conception of isolated musical authenticity. As such, he is a valuable contemporaneous witness whose testimony can be used by scholars both to critique the Lomaxes and to observe that such a critique is not anachronistic.

While Amrine's letter shows that some wardens considered incarcerated people, and their musical practices, to be congruent with those "on the outside," many responses evince a different opinion. Their authors suggest that they, like the Lomaxes, thought of prisoners as having core differences from non-incarcerated people. However, in their role as prison administrators, their aims were of course fundamentally different from those of folklorists. This shaped the ways in which the two groups viewed the distance between prisoners and the rest of society. The Lomaxes saw the distance as a productive force, as it suggested that an isolated musical community could conserve folklore behind bars. Meanwhile, most of the prison administrators who wrote to the Lomaxes imply they understood the distance between incarcerated people and society to be the root cause of criminality and they saw their institutions as places where this distance would be erased through re-education.

This understanding is a key part of the context that led many administrators to reject the Lomaxes' request. Their perspective was inherited from the earlier Progressive era. As historian David J. Rothman has shown, the increased interest in the social sciences during the period precipitated a desire to "understand and cure crime, delinquency, and insanity through a case-by-case approach."²⁶ Regimented and brutal prisons came to be seen as old-fashioned and reformers advocated for a new style of prison, which replicated the features of the "outside" world on a small, controlled scale. By being immersed in a micro-society, these reformers maintained, incarcerated people could be taught to function among others and would be gradually prepared to re-enter society. As Rothman puts it, by the end of the Progressive era "prison adjustment had become social adjustment—the good inmate, the good citizen."²⁷ The persistence of similar ideals into the Depression is evidenced by Lomax's respondents who often suggest they considered themselves tasked with the re-education of the people in their institutions and thought this re-education could only be accomplished if society was replicated behind prison walls. As their letters reveal, these administrators believed music played an important role in the process of social replication and in the transformation of prisoners into "good inmates" and, consequently, "good citizens."

This focus on re-education and reform has been described by Michel Foucault as part of a move, starting in the eighteenth century, toward a system with "less cruelty, less pain, more kindness, more respect, more 'humanity'," a system that works "not to efface the crime, but to transform a criminal."²⁸ However, particularly in the U.S. context, scholars of incarceration have pointed out that the shift toward reform was not evenly applied and that the category of "good citizen," as well the possibility of its attainment, was never available to all. Angela Davis, while agreeing with Foucault that "the locus of the new European mode of punishment shifted from the body to the soul," has noted a crucial difference: "Black slaves in the U.S. were largely perceived as lacking in the soul that might be shaped

²⁴Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 263.

²⁵M. F. Amrine, to John Lomax, July 6, 1935, box 3D171, folder 1, John Avery Lomax Family Papers. For discussions of this letter, see Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 263; Nunn, *Sounding the Color Line*, 85.

²⁶David J. Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and Its Alternatives in Progressive America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 5.

²⁷Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience*, 128.

²⁸Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 16, 127.

and transformed by punishment.”²⁹ As the racial and racist ideologies of slavery were transferred into the prison after the Civil War, ideas about who could and could not be reformed were perpetuated. The arguments about the relationship between race, imprisonment, and reform, developed by Davis, have been expanded upon by Khalil Gibran Muhammad who has argued that, in the Progressive era, rehabilitation was construed through the lens of whiteness and was usually not applied to Black Americans, whom reformers positioned as “a distinct and dangerous criminal population.”³⁰ As Muhammad argues, this paradigm affected systems of incarceration and perceptions of criminality throughout the twentieth century and continues to do so today.

Thus, while statements about race in the letters of Lomax’s correspondents are rarely explicit, it is important to remember the racial lines along which ideas about reform and rehabilitation were conceived, given that they played a part in the constitution of the Lomax collection. Wardens of segregated prisons in the South were sometimes (although not always) receptive to the Lomaxes and allowed them to access and record the Black men and women incarcerated at these institutions. Meanwhile, the responses that bristled at Lomax’s request came from majority white-populated prisons across the country and from carceral institutions in the North, where institutions focused in large part on the rehabilitation of white prisoners. The refusals of wardens from such institutions helped exclude musical depictions of white prisoners, and consequently, of white criminality from the Lomax archive.

Administrator rejections of Lomax’s request for songs often rest on the argument that prisoners at their institution knew no such songs because they were in the process of being rehabilitated, as we will see later. Through such statements, these authors imply a connection between musical behavior and one’s ability to be reformed. Furthermore, while surviving documentation leaves the concrete influences of many of Lomax’s correspondents obscured, their letters echo contemporaneous thought about not only criminal rehabilitation, but also the role of music in prisons. Wardens in Southern plantation-style prisons often appear to have understood music in their institutions as an outgrowth of the antebellum period: prisoners sang as they worked, which sped up their labor. At other times, they sang and performed for the pleasure of white prison officials, much as their enslaved ancestors had.³¹ Meanwhile, both in their substantial descriptions of musical life in their institutions and in their rejections of Lomax’s request, wardens and supervisors of majority-white institutions aligned with popular Progressive- and Depression-era ideas on the intersections between music, imprisonment, reform, and social readjustment. Before turning to the letters, let us acquaint ourselves with some of those ideas first.

Music, Reform, and Readjustment in Carceral Institutions during the 1920s and 1930s

In the first decades of the 1900s, the effect of music on incarcerated people was an increasingly frequent topic of discussion. Some of the most substantial contributions appeared in the work of Willem van de Wall, a Dutch-born community music educator.³² In 1924, after researching and working in prisons and mental health hospitals in New York State, Van de Wall published a

²⁹Angela Davis, “Racialized Punishment and Prison Abolition,” in *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, ed. Tommy L. Lott and John P. Pittman (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006), 360–69.

³⁰Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3–7. As Muhammad argues in this book, the lines according to which whiteness were drawn in this period were closely related to the way that an individual’s ability to be rehabilitated was perceived: the assimilation of immigrant groups (Irish, Italian, Eastern European) into the category of whiteness during this period was concurrent with the reconfiguration of members of these groups as susceptible to reform.

³¹This understanding of the role of music in plantation-style prisons is perhaps most clearly reflected in a 1901 State report from the Louisiana State Penitentiary. After describing in detail the conditions and daily schedule at the prison, the authors of the report describe being entertained by Black prisoners with what they term “old plantation songs and in the quicker and inexplicable Negro chants—not ragtime, but something far more musical...” See “Convict Farmers of Louisiana,” *Daily States*, July 14, 1901, 18.

³²For a more in-depth analysis of Van de Wall’s life and works see Alicia Ann Clair and George N. Heller, “Willem van de Wall: Organizer and Innovator in Music Education and Music Therapy,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 37, no. 3 (1989): 165–78; Andrew Krikun, “Community Music during the New Deal: The Contributions of Willem Van de Wall and Max Kaplan,”

sixty-seven-page pamphlet titled *The Utilization of Music in Prisons and Mental Hospitals: Its Application in the Treatment and Care of the Morally and Mentally Afflicted*.³³

Both the fact that incarcerated people are discussed in the same publication as patients of mental health institutions (albeit in different sections) and their characterization as “morally afflicted” makes the pamphlet a testament to Progressive-era understandings of crime. In his belief that criminal behavior is caused by a moral affliction that can be cured in prison, Van de Wall aligns himself with a particular school of thought, the tenets of which were later synthesized in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*.³⁴ As Foucault puts it, in the late eighteenth century, the penal system shifted its attention away from judging crimes and toward “the soul of the criminal.”³⁵ Although he places the beginning of this process more than 150 years before Van de Wall’s time, the questions he claims the penal system asked after this shift—“Where did [this crime] originate in the author?” and “How do we see the future development of the offender?”—are at the heart of Van de Wall’s work.³⁶

Van de Wall opens *The Utilization of Music in Prisons and Mental Hospitals* by rejecting the term “penal institution” as outdated and claims such institutions should be substituted for “humane, scientific and restorative” ones.³⁷ He argues this shift from a penal to a reformatory model can be best effectuated through music. In the remainder of his text, he positions music as a valuable tool that can be used in prison management for the accomplishment of two objectives: greater discipline and an increased focus on the personhood and individuality of incarcerated people.

A passage from the introduction illustrates how Van de Wall thought these objectives might be achieved. After offering a description of a hypothetical prisoner in a “typical” penal institution, he paints an evocative scene in which music transforms both the prisoner and the institution:

...music floats in as a stream of divine energy and love, and embraces and caresses with the same impartial tenderness and fullness and glow all these encaged convicts, barred by steel, stone and the penal system from human tenderness and loving human self-expression. And at once the evil cage-beast dissolves and the repressed better man wakes up, touched by the divine kiss, Music. He listens to the tunes, chimes in with them; the beautiful strains awaken corresponding harmonious feelings and thoughts, and a craving to express his better self drives him to participate. After the music he is desirous of talking about the people he loves most in the world—he unburdens his soul. He is willing to do and to obey any kind of order for the sake of being allowed to enjoy the music-making or listening once more.³⁸

Here, music turns the prisoner from a dejected non-individual, part of an indiscernible mass of “criminals,” into someone ready to participate in society. It humanizes, all while being a method for control: the criminal-turned-individual is keen to keep this newfound status and is therefore “willing to ... obey any kind of order.”³⁹

While this scenario is hypothetical, Van de Wall uses a florid style and evocative imagery even when describing ostensibly real situations.⁴⁰ As such, the wording in this passage is not incidental. The description of music as something that “floats in as a stream of divine energy and love” suggests Van de Wall’s understanding of its purpose in prisons. He conceived of it as something important,

International Journal of Community Music 3, no. 2 (2010): 165–173; J. Martin Vest, “Prescribing Sound: Willem Van de Wall and the Carceral Origins of American Music Therapy,” *Modern American History* 3, no. 2 (June 2020): 1–24.

³³Willem van de Wall, *The Utilization of Music in Prisons and Mental Hospitals: Its Application in the Treatment and Care of the Morally and Mentally Afflicted* (New York: National Bureau for the Advancement of Music, 1924), 9.

³⁴Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

³⁵Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 18–19.

³⁶Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 18–19.

³⁷Van de Wall, *The Utilization of Music in Prisons and Mental Hospitals*, 13.

³⁸Van de Wall, *The Utilization of Music in Prisons and Mental Hospitals*, 18–19.

³⁹Van de Wall, *The Utilization of Music in Prisons and Mental Hospitals*, 19.

⁴⁰Van de Wall is writing from real experiences that he had while visiting and working in institutions in New York State, but the style and structure of the pamphlet largely obscure the degree to which the events he describes are real, imagined, or composite.

but not inherent, to the carceral space, as something that is introduced into this space not by incarcerated people themselves, but from without.⁴¹ While in the passage quoted above music appears to “float in” on its own, Van de Wall goes on to address the processes through which the artform should be introduced into prisons by qualified educational professionals such as himself.

Van de Wall’s emphasis on didacticism through musical performance places his work at odds with that of folklorists like the Lomaxes who sought isolated musical communities. In addition, while the musical creativity of incarcerated people interested the Lomaxes, Van de Wall was often ambivalent about any inherent creativity they might possess prior to the involvement of qualified professionals. His ideas on the matter are elucidated in a passage from his 1936 monograph *Music in Institutions* wherein he argues some prisoners have a propensity for creativity, but pathological tendencies come through in their art:

Since subconscious preparation is a component of most creative work, it is evident that in the spontaneous creations of many inmates subconscious psychic elements will be discovered. It should not be overlooked that these psychisms are often symptoms of a weak or unhealthy mind rather than of a strong and sound one. Most of the spontaneous so-called “art” productions of mental patients and of prison inmates have nothing to do with art in the technical and cultural sense of the term. In their odd ornamentation and superficial treatment of a subject they show a lack of sound observation and intelligent workmanship.⁴²

In this passage, Van de Wall does not position the music instructor as somebody who needs to introduce music into the prison. The instructor’s role, however, is no less didactic. For Van de Wall, the management of prisoners’ musical creativity necessitates careful redirection away from art that is symptomatic of “a weak or unhealthy mind” and into healthy, “normal” artistic production.⁴³

By the early 1930s, Van de Wall’s ideas had entered the general parlance of individuals involved with music in correctional settings. His 1922 address at the Congress of the American Prison Association reached a wide audience of administrators and his work appeared in the popular press and trade journals.⁴⁴ By the early 1930s, many talks at the Congress echoed his ideology: Music was an important tool for criminal reform and should therefore be applied with care by a knowledgeable professional.⁴⁵

Prison Reform and the Censure of White Incarceration from the Lomax Prison Project

Let us now return to the responses to Lomax’s 1934 letter and consider how the antecedent conditions set by thinkers like Van de Wall, along with wider contemporaneous conceptions of crime and readjustment, affected decisions made by Lomax’s correspondents. Many rejections seem to have been motivated by their authors’ belief that songs like those sought by Lomax would only be present in

⁴¹The pamphlet features only one exception along these lines. Van de Wall gives an account of an older Hungarian woman being charmed by the angelic voice of her seventeen-year-old cellmate. The older woman is teaching the younger one a Hungarian song in return. Upon hearing her cellmate’s performance, she is figuratively transported away from the prison and comes to feel “again at home, and young and happy.” Van de Wall, *The Utilization of Music in Prisons and Mental Hospitals*, 25.

⁴²Willem van de Wall, *Music in Institutions* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1936), 242.

⁴³Van de Wall’s writing does suggest the applicability of a diverse range of musical genres in prisons, jazz included, and he stresses the importance of crafting instruction to the needs of each individual person. This diversity in genre and approach, however, is countered by the unifying concept in Van de Wall’s work: the importance of musical didacticism. No matter the genre, a qualified instructor is needed. In this respect, among others, this leading thinker of music and imprisonment presented a view that contrasted with the Lomaxes’ aims and theoretical outlook. Van de Wall, *Music in Institutions*, 179–80.

⁴⁴See Willem van de Wall, “Music as a Means of Mental Discipline,” *Archives of Occupational Therapy* 2 (February 1923); Willem van de Wall, “How Music Is Saving Thousands from Permanent Mental Breakdown,” *The Etude* 43 (September 1925): 613–14.

⁴⁵See A. N. Dunsmore, “Educational Work in Prisons,” in *Proceedings of the Annual Congress of the American Prison Association* (Washington, D.C.: United States Bureau of Prisons, 1931): 283–90.

an institution like that described at the beginning of Van de Wall's *The Utilization of Music in Prisons and Mental Hospitals*: one seeking to punish rather than to reform. This view appears to have been particularly popular with respondents from juvenile institutions, variously billed as training schools, state schools, or industrial schools.⁴⁶ Among them was Margaret Hutton Abels, the superintendent of the Wisconsin Industrial School for Girls, which held mostly white "delinquent" girls under eighteen.⁴⁷ Abels sent her regrets to Lomax; she could provide no material, since the institution she managed was "educational and correctional but not penal." To this she appended an explanation. Thanks to the efforts of a dedicated music teacher who led a chorus and an orchestra, the school's music was "of very high grade both as to subject and rendition." Thelma Bradford from the State School for Girls in Randolph, Arizona was in charge of managing an institution similar in demographics and mission to Abels's and her response suggests a comparable opinion. Bradford wrote Lomax a lengthy letter asserting the girls at her institution "do not seem to be interested in 'prison ballad,' as they do not feel that this is a prison." Instead, Bradford described the institution as "a home" where the girls were "taught accordingly" through instruction on "some classical pieces, popular music, and folk-songs that all children love to sing."⁴⁸

Letters from many other juvenile institutions offered a similar response. According to Paul S. Blandford, the superintendent of the Virginia Industrial School for Boys, he had no songs to offer.⁴⁹ Blandford justified this through the demographics of his institution—white boys under the age of eighteen—and concluded his letter with a forceful statement: "Our boys are too young to have learned these ballads, and we hope they never will." Blandford's brief letter provides little information about musical life at the school, but suggests that, like other respondents from juvenile institutions, he considered the songs requested by Lomax to be known by a certain type of person housed in a particular type of institution. He understood his mission to be to ensure that his school would not become such an institution and that the boys under his supervision would not become such people.

Two themes emerge from this small but representative sample of responses from juvenile institutions. First, the correspondents show that they aimed to mimic non-penal settings (the school and the home) in their institutions. They suggest this mimicking relied in part on music and resulted in an atmosphere that did not allow the type of song they understood Lomax to be requesting. Second, they assert the importance not of musical activity of any kind, but of careful musical instruction. When Thelma Bradford wrote to Lomax that the adolescents at her school were "taught accordingly," this was no mere accident of wording. Like many of the other respondents from juvenile institutions, she was echoing contemporaneous ideas about the importance of musical didacticism to the transformation of individuals from ones inclined to criminal activity into "good," law-abiding citizens.

Respondents from schools and reformatories were adamant about their inability to provide prison songs and placed emphasis on instructional musical practices largely because they were writing from institutions that were only a few decades old and were still establishing their reputations. Throughout

⁴⁶On the politics behind the names of juvenile institutions in this period see Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience*, 263. Rothman attests that "one symbolic indication of the impact of Progressive ideology ... was the widespread change in the names of juvenile institutions. What had been 'houses of refuge' in the 1830s and reformatories in the 1880s now became almost everywhere the 'training school' or the 'industrial school' or the 'boys' school.' ... Already in the 1880s and 1890s, institutions had begun to adopt the 'industrial school' title. However by the end of the Progressive period, the 'reformatory' label had almost completely disappeared; and behind this shift lay an attempt ... to abandon the remnants of a rigid and fixed style of institutional routine. 'Reformatory' suggested a military model: marching uniforms, rigid rules of conduct, a barracks-like quality. 'Training school' suggested a campus-like atmosphere, an organization no different from others in the community."

⁴⁷Margaret Hutton Abels to John Lomax, December 5, 1934, November 27, 1934, John Avery Lomax Family Papers, box 3D171, folder 1. For a contemporaneous source on the institution and its official purposes, see Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, "Factors in the Commitment of Correctional School Girls in Wisconsin," *American Journal of Sociology* 37, no. 2 (September 1931): 222–30. On the demographics of the institution, see *Juvenile Delinquents in Public Institutions, Volume 3* (Washington, D.C.: United States Bureau of the Census, 1933), 47.

⁴⁸Thelma Bradford to John Lomax, January 18, 1935, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932–1968, box 1, folder 24. On the demographics of the institution, see *Juvenile Delinquents in Public Institutions, Volume 3* (Washington, D.C.: United States Bureau of the Census, 1933), 62.

⁴⁹Paul S. Blandford to John Lomax, December 7, 1934, John Avery Lomax Family Papers, box 3D171, folder 1.

the nineteenth century children had been housed with adult offenders, but between 1899 and 1928 nearly all states established separate juvenile courts.⁵⁰ While this shift was instrumental in the establishment of juvenile institutions, the newfound interest in adolescent well-being led to such institutions being heavily scrutinized by the public and the media. Thus, administrators took care to portray their institutions as focused on re-education and divorced from brutal nineteenth-century-style adult prisons.⁵¹

Yet this shift in the practices of juvenile justice did not have equal effects on all minors. The carceral system tended to prioritize the rehabilitation of white boys and girls, while Black adolescents were subjected to what Geoff Ward has called “Jim Crow juvenile justice”: they were frequently charged and incarcerated alongside adults, with the exception of rare cases in which separate facilities for Black children were built, oftentimes after persistent efforts by Black reformers and activists.⁵² This inequality is reflected in the letters of Lomax’s respondents. Most of them were written by individuals who were in charge either of institutions that admitted only white children or of integrated ones with an overwhelming white majority. They rarely make direct statements about race, but when they do so it is in order to explain the absence of “prison songs.” As an example, we can turn to a letter by M. O. T. Bezanson, the superintendent of the State Industrial School for Girls in Tecumseh, Oklahoma. She rejected Lomax’s request and stated that the girls at her institution have “composed” no songs because, due to their young age, they “have had little opportunity to develop very much originality.” After this, Bezanson goes on to explain the absence of such songs as a result of the non-penal nature of the school and its demographics: “Then too, the inmates are white girls,” she states, “and the atmosphere not penal. We are endeavoring to make it a training school, indeed, with an atmosphere of home life is [sic] so far as we can grant it.”⁵³

The application of the juvenile justice system’s principles differed not only when it came to race, but also along gender lines. This comes through in the letters as well. Responses from institutions for boys tended to provide significantly less information about music. This is likely due to the larger size of such institutions, but it can also be explained through gendered ideas about juvenile incarceration during the period. While many juvenile institutions emphasized a reformative atmosphere, those for boys often described their grounds as a campus, while reformatories for girls were modeled after the home.⁵⁴ The musical activities to which respondents from institutions for boys referred—glee clubs, bands, orchestras—are evocative of an educational setting. Meanwhile, respondents from girls’ institutions tended to emphasize group singing and music-making of a domestic nature.⁵⁵ This difference is present because, as Mary Odem has argued, girls’ reformatories aimed “to train girls to become good housewives and mothers, to channel their misguided sexual energy into preparation for marriage and motherhood.”⁵⁶ In the home-like settings of these institutions, music was part of a program that trained girls in skills valued in the domestic sphere. In addition, because “misguided sexual energy”

⁵⁰Laura S. Abrams and Laura Curran, “Wayward Girls and Virtuous Women: Social Workers and Female Juvenile Delinquency in the Progressive Era,” *Affilia* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 51–52. This change owed itself to a contemporaneous shift in the conception of adolescents as distinctly different from both adults and children in their psychological makeup and needs and, consequently, as individuals with unique needs when it came to criminal reform. A few exceptions to the incarceration of children alongside adults predate this era. Notable among these is the New York House of Refuge, which was founded in 1825.

⁵¹Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience*, 262.

⁵²Geoff J. Ward, *The Black Child-Savers: Racial Democracy and Juvenile Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 3. The degree to which Black girls were even further marginalized by the criminal justice system during that era receives attention from Ward, but is more closely explored in Lindsey Elizabeth Jones, “‘The Most Unprotected of all Human Beings’: Black Girls, State Violence, and the Limits of Protection in Jim Crow Virginia,” *Souls* 20, no. 1 (2018): 14–37.

⁵³M. O. T. Bezanson to Herbert Putnam, December, 1934, John Avery Lomax Family Papers, box 3D171, folder 1.

⁵⁴See Julia Older, “Vacations Reward Good Behavior at Conn. School for Boys Humane System Is Part of New Deal for Delinquents,” *The Hartford Courant*, 10 June 1934, D3. This article details life at the Connecticut School for Boys in Meriden and reports that “there is none of the atmosphere of a correctional institution about the pleasant and spacious campus,” painting a picture of an institution where a careful balance exists: boys are not to be treated like prisoners and are to live in a “pleasant and spacious” atmosphere, all while being rehabilitated in a carefully controlled environment.

⁵⁵D.G. Aldrich to John Lomax, November 16, 1934, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932–1968, box 1, folder 22.

⁵⁶Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 116–117. Also see Steven Schlossman and Stephanie Wallach, “The

was often framed as a key cause of female juvenile delinquency, musical education was seen as a way to channel this energy into a more socially acceptable activity.⁵⁷

All in all, the refusals of many correspondents from juvenile institutions highlight the ways that intersecting ideas about race, class, gender, and age came to delimit the music available to the Lomaxes. The desire to present training schools, industrial schools, and reformatories in a positive light motivated officials to reject Lomax's request. Suggesting that they understood him to be seeking songs that inhabited punitive institutions, they argued that they could be of no help: despite being part of the carceral system, their institutions were not the types of places which would interest Lomax, they felt. They were modern schools whose purpose was not to maintain, but to erase the distance between their wards and the rest of society. By claiming their institutions were *not* prisons, these respondents safeguarded their image and, despite not aiding the project in any way, nevertheless shaped the Lomaxes' collection. Music from such institutions never entered the Lomax archive and, as a consequence, the mostly white boys and girls incarcerated in them were never musically depicted as prisoners.

Such claims were more difficult and often undesirable for respondents from adult facilities to make. As Ethan Blue has detailed, the harsh economic climate of the Depression increased incarceration rates and caused prisons to become overcrowded.⁵⁸ Consequently, wardens were faced with a dilemma. While the tenets inherited from the Progressive era dictated that carceral institutions should aspire to the rehabilitation of (white) prisoners, wardens sought to demonstrate that they had the situation in their overcrowded facilities under control. The letters that Lomax received from adult institutions—despite being less numerous and shorter—show the ways wardens and supervisors of adult prisons used music to deal with this dilemma. In their rejections, correspondents tend to give weight either to one or, often, both of the following two factors: (i) the use of music for rehabilitation and reform and (ii) the close eye they kept on the musical behaviors of incarcerated people.

Among the respondents who placed high value on the surveillance of musical practices at their institutions was Louis E. Kunkel, the warden at the Indiana State Prison. Kunkel emphasized the absence of music in the institution he managed: "Singing is not allowed in any part of the prison with the exception of the Chapel where hymns are sung for Sunday services and occasionally popular songs for entertainments which are given."⁵⁹ Meanwhile, although the letter received from the New Jersey State Prison did not feature such a negative outlook toward music, it similarly suggested an atmosphere of surveillance. George L. Selby, the prison's warden, seems to have been reacting to Lomax's request for songs "no matter how crude or vulgar they may be" in writing that "vulgar documents of any nature are immediately destroyed" at the prison and "such communications are not permitted to come into the institution or go out, and any inmate indulging in same is subject to disciplinary action."⁶⁰

Some respondents from adult prisons reported on didactic musical practices that were occurring along similar lines as those in juvenile institutions. The warden of the Charlestown State Prison in Massachusetts emphasized institutional singing: "We have our trained choir, but their practice is confined to religious music, which is selected for them."⁶¹ The response of J. A. Roswell from the Naval Prison at Portsmouth is a variation on a similar theme. The letter describes the reformatory goals of the institution: "to make men forget as far as possible that they were completely [set] aside from the world"

Crime of Precocious Sexuality: Female Juvenile Delinquency in the Progressive Era," *Harvard Educational Review* 48, no. 1 (February 1978): 77.

⁵⁷On this topic, Odem cites psychologist G. Stanley Hall's arguments for the importance of musical pedagogy, among instruction in other fields, as an important way to "arouse intellectual zest" and thus to achieve an "Aristotelian katharsis for sex, diverting some of its energy for better things." See G. Stanley Hall, "Education and the Social Hygiene Movement," *Social Hygiene* 1 (December 1914): 33.

⁵⁸Ethan Blue, *Doing Time in the Depression: Everyday Life in Texas and California Prisons* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

⁵⁹Louis E. Kunkel to John Lomax, December 5, 1934, John Avery Lomax Family Papers, box 3D171, folder 1.

⁶⁰George L. Selby to John Lomax, December 5, 1934, John Avery Lomax Family Papers, box 3D171, folder 1.

⁶¹James L. Hogsett, warden, December 5, 1934, John Avery Lomax Family Papers, box 3D171, folder 1.

and “to restore self-respect and self-confidence and to better equip the men to take an honorable place in society when released.”⁶² Its text shows, as well, that the restoration of self-respect and self-confidence in the prison population at Portsmouth relied on a strict schedule and music at the institution took place during discrete (and brief) time blocks.⁶³ Roswell, who had recently completed a stint in the prison’s management, writes:

The routine there called for assembly in the auditorium three nights per week three quarters of an hour in advance of the showing of sound pictures. On Tuesdays and Fridays the men sang the popular songs of the day. On Sunday evening they sang the old-time religious songs, and this latter type were sung with very evident devotion.⁶⁴

Finally, an interesting letter came from the director of the Department of Musical Instruction of the Michigan State Prison, E. McFate, who expressed familiarity with the Lomaxes’ earlier publications of prison music, a familiarity that convinced him that there was little of interest he could offer. McFate explains that reading music was a necessity for the men involved in the prison’s many ensembles—its military band, its orchestra, its church choir, its “colored dance or rhythm orchestra,” and its “Hill-Billy group of 7 real hill-billies, who play all the old time barn tunes”—and the music at the institution “therefore [has] little to do with to [sic] the American Prisoner Folk Song as is done by the prisoners on the Southern plantations where of necessity music must be improvised.”⁶⁵

The line that McFate’s letter draws between the literate musical production at the Northern institution where he worked—which was majority-white, even if it did feature musical ensembles populated by people of many races—and the oral practices of Black Southern prisoners is representative of a similar racial bifurcation among Lomax’s respondents. The reluctant responses of officials from majority-white institutions in the North and across the country suggests they perceived a tension between “prison songs” and the modern institutions they were trying to run, and they thought the type of music sought by Lomax to be antithetical to their reformatory goals.

For wardens in the Southern segregated prisons who were receptive to the Lomaxes’ request, the term “prison song” seems to have presented little cause for consternation. It is important to note that the two folklorists did not receive a universally warm welcome in such institutions. In *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, John Lomax quotes the hostile reaction of a South Carolina warden: “if I should let the convicts know that ‘the man from Washington’ had come, and then permit you to walk across the prison yard, a riot would be on in five minutes. I couldn’t be responsible for what would happen. You get away from this place at once, and don’t tell anyone else who you are. And go quickly.”⁶⁶ On the other hand, however, the receptivity with which the Lomaxes were met by other wardens of Southern segregated prisons—as well as the fact that, as the case of the South Carolina warden shows, rejections often had more to do with the maintenance of carceral order than with questions about the relationship between music and reform—stands in stark opposition to the rest of the responses discussed so far.

The reasons behind this variation are manifold. One of the main causes was likely the fact that, as suggested earlier, white wardens in segregated prisons did not see themselves as moral and cultural guardians of Black prisoners to the same degree as administrators who managed prisoners of their own race. Much like the Black cultural leaders criticized in Alan Lomax’s Carnegie Foundation proposal, many officials at majority-white institutions guarded the communities of which they were in

⁶²J. A. Rossell to John Lomax, December 17, 1934, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932–1968, box 1, folder 24.

⁶³The prison’s shift from practices of violent corporal punishment to Progressive-era regimented discipline, and in particular the role of the reformer Thomas Mott Osborne in this shift, is detailed in Rodney K. Watterson, *Whips to Walls: Naval Discipline from Flogging to Progressive-Era Reform at Portsmouth Prison* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014).

⁶⁴J. A. Rossell to John Lomax December 17, 1934, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932–1968, box 1, folder 24.

⁶⁵E. McFate to John Lomax, December 10, 1934, John Avery Lomax Family Papers, box 3D171, folder 1.

⁶⁶Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 133.

charge. They resisted attempts to meddle in these communities and rejected suggestions that their charges might know “crude and vulgar” songs.

The variation in response can also be attributed to the contrasting ways in which ideas about incarceration had coalesced in the North and in the South by the 1930s. While in the North the “modern” carceral institution was influenced by the rehabilitative ideas discussed in the preceding pages, the Southern segregated institutions the Lomaxes visited were shaped by the model of plantation slavery and the people they incarcerated were subjected to brutal labor and corporal punishment. While this difference often leads to an understanding of Northern prisons as “modern” and Southern institutions as antithetical to modernity, Alex Lichtenstein has brought light to the fact that Southern segregated prisons were conceived of in no less “modern” terms than their Northern counterparts.⁶⁷ Lichtenstein has argued that, since the carceral model of the chain gang came about as a result of the abolition of the convict lease system, it was positioned as a less overt mode of punishment and “a model of regional reform and progress.”⁶⁸ Because of this, and because road work performed by chain gangs was crucial to modernizing the region, Southern segregated penitentiaries were increasingly viewed as “the embodiment of penal humanitarianism, state-sponsored economic modernization and efficiency, and racial moderation” in the region.⁶⁹ Lichtenstein’s work situates the chain gang among other vicious and marginalizing realities—“segregation, disenfranchisement, lynching, peonage, poverty, and racism”—that are thought of as signs of backwardness, but were often positioned as central to regional “progress” and formed a central part of “modern” life.

A similarity emerges, therefore, between officials who rejected Lomax’s request and those who allowed recordings to be made. All sought to represent their institutions in a manner consistent with a contemporaneous conception of a “modern” prison. The differences in this conception, established along both regional and racial lines, shaped the Lomax collection into an archive replete with recordings of Black incarcerated men, while silencing the musical evidence of white incarceration and, consequently, excluding representations of white criminality from the archive.

Defining Carceral Spaces, Defining Carceral Musics

Let us now turn to replies to Lomax’s 1934 letter that *did* contain information about folk practices. The most content-rich among these came from three institutions: the Ohio State Penitentiary, the Reformatory for Women in Framingham, MA, and the Vocational School for Girls in Tullahoma, TN. The geographical distance between these three prisons was compounded by disparities in the types of people they incarcerated. The Ohio State Penitentiary could house adults of all races and, typically for the national prison population in the 1930s, was made up predominantly of white male prisoners.⁷⁰ The Reformatory for Women in Framingham held adult women of many races, and the Vocational School for Girls in Tullahoma housed white girls under eighteen.⁷¹ These differences contributed to variations in the types of materials sent from each institution. From Tullahoma, the Lomaxes received the text of a children’s game song. The letter from Framingham referred to songs from Southern and Eastern Europe and the correspondent from Ohio alerted the Lomaxes to folk songs from several genres (with a strong focus on union songs and “hobo” songs). Ultimately, however, the letter trails of all three correspondents ran dry and the Lomaxes never recorded in the prisons in Tullahoma, Framingham, or Ohio.

Let us look at the correspondence with these prisons in turn. In contrast to the letters that rejected Lomax’s request, the exchanges with these institutions offer few clues about *why* the music addressed was never made part of the Lomax prison project. What they suggest, however, is the existence of a broader range of folk music practices in U.S. Depression-era prisons than is present in the Lomaxes’

⁶⁷Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York: Verso, 1996).

⁶⁸Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor*, 160.

⁶⁹Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor*, 160.

⁷⁰*Prisoners in State and Federal Prisons and Reformatories* (Washington, D.C.: United States Bureau of the Census, 1934).

⁷¹*Prisoners in State and Federal Prisons and Reformatories*.

published work. This shows the curated nature of the Lomaxes' prison project and offers a counternarrative to the representations of American incarceration the folklorists presented to audiences.

On December 12, 1934, Lomax received a response from Nell Farrar, the superintendent of the Correctional School for Girls in Tullahoma (Figure 2).⁷² Farrar's letter contains little information about musical practices. It provides evidence, however, that she forwarded what she calls "some copies" of songs. These copies have, in the meantime, been detached from the letter and Farrar's text, which does not provide their titles, is of little help in their identification. The only clues come from pencil markings at the top of the letter, seemingly from a later date, in John Lomax's hand. An encircled "7" at the center top may refer to the number of songs attached. Further pencil markings in the upper left corner show Lomax *did* classify some of what Farrar sent as "prison songs," but what seems to have interested him was something he underlined in his inscription as "one good nursery song." Underneath, Lomax added a reminder: "write for tune." This appears to have precipitated a second point of contact between Lomax and Farrar. In November 1937, he wrote to ask for the tune to the song "Among the Little White Daisies," the words to which he claimed to have received with Farrar's original letter.⁷³ Although Lomax's letter does not indicate the purpose of his request, he likely wrote to Farrar not because he wanted to record in Tullahoma, but rather for comparison purposes: a variant of this song had been recorded a month earlier by Alan and Elizabeth Lomax in Kentucky.⁷⁴

The correspondence from the Ohio State Penitentiary came from John Leslie. Unlike the intended recipients of Lomax's letter, Leslie was an incarcerated man employed at the penitentiary's library, rather than a warden or a supervisor. His writing showed a level of knowledge about American folk music that must have intrigued Lomax and the two men entered into a brief correspondence, over the course of which Leslie provided texts or notated versions of twelve songs.⁷⁵ While Leslie's texts and notations have been detached from his letters and I have been unable to locate them, his letters state that he sent the following songs:

"The Big Rock Candy Mountains,"
 "The Bums' Convention at Montreal"
 "You'll Get Pie in the Sky when You Die"
 "Beside a Western Water Tank"
 "The Pennsylvania Line"
 "Cherry Mine"
 "Frank Dupree"

"You're A Mormon! Go back to Utah"
 "Three Whores from Buffalo"

"Eli"
 "An Indiana Girl"
 "Prison Down in Tennessee"

The first seven songs concern the woes of laborers, unionists, and so-called "hoboes." The next two are humorous ballads, while the last three are songs I have not been able to identify by title alone. Leslie also suggested additional founts for folk songs. "A fruitful source for some of the authentic songs of

⁷²Nell Farrar to John Lomax, December, 1934, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932–1968, box 1, folder 23.

⁷³John Lomax to Nell Farrar, November, 1937, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932–1968, box 1, folder 50.

⁷⁴Alan Lomax, Elizabeth Lyttleton, and Unidentified Group, "Little White Daisy," Middle Fork, Kentucky, 1937, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁷⁵I have located four letters which were exchanged between Leslie and Lomax: John A. Leslie to John A. Lomax, November 12, 1934, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932–1968, box 1, folder 22; John A. Leslie to John A. Lomax, December 10, 1934, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932–1968, personal correspondence file; John A. Leslie to John A. Lomax, Undated [likely late 1934 or early 1935], John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932–1968, personal correspondence file; John A. Lomax to John A. Leslie, November 30, 1937, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932–1968, box 1, folder 50.

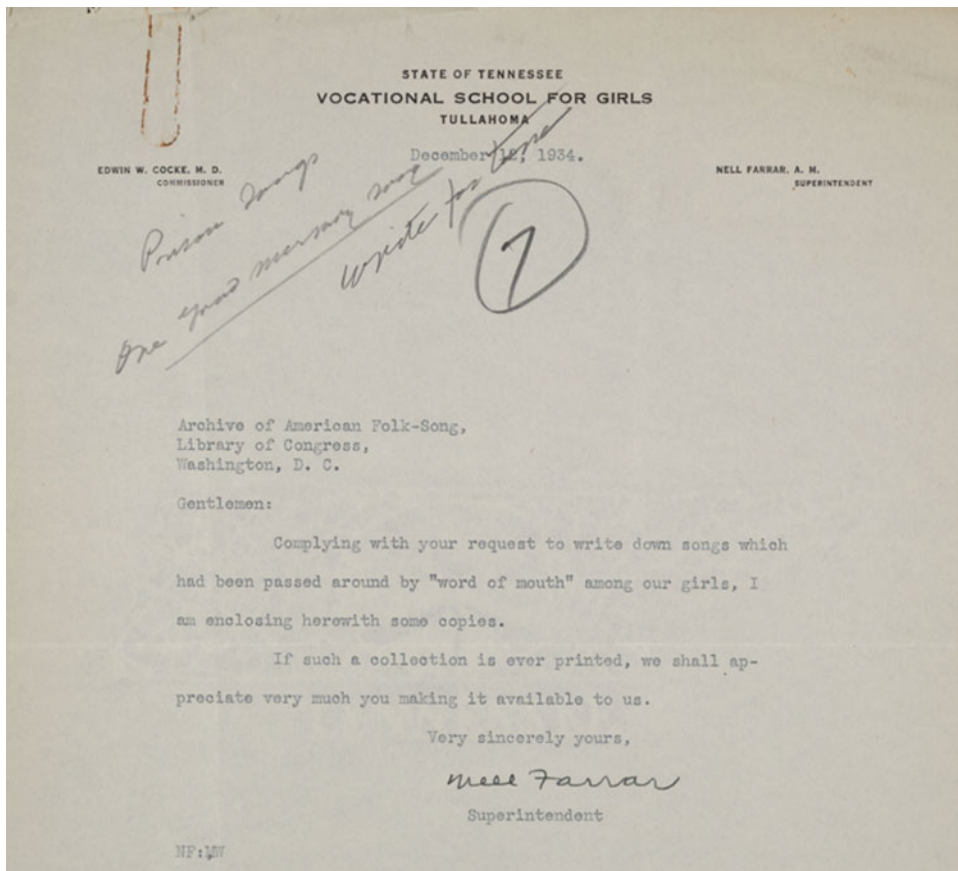


Figure 2. Nell Farrar's letter to John Lomax, December, 1934. American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax papers, 1932–1968.

prisons,” he wrote, “are the various prison publications: the *Bulletin* of San Quentin, *Good Words* of Atlanta, *The News* of this penitentiary and *The Mirror* of Stillwater Minnesota.”⁷⁶ Like newspapers in the “free world,” these publications sometimes published the texts of folk songs as broadside ballads, assuming readers could supply the tunes from memory. Leslie’s assertion links to the Lomaxes’ understanding of musical practices under incarceration in interesting, yet contradictory ways. On the one hand, the printing of songs as text-only versions confirms the Lomaxes’ belief that some prisoners held a large amount of folk music material in their memories. On the other, however, Leslie’s description of prison newspapers across the country indicates that many prisoners had access to print sources through which to supplement musical practices and did not solely rely on oral traditions. This puts into question the Lomaxes’ understanding of carceral isolation by giving evidence of a flow of information between prisons.⁷⁷

The response from the Reformatory for Women in Framingham also offered rich materials. On December 28, 1934, Miriam Van Waters, the reformatory’s superintendent, wrote to Lomax:

⁷⁶Leslie to Lomax, November 12, 1934, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932–1968, box 1, folder 22.

⁷⁷This assertion is supported by the historical research of James McGrath Morris. In *Jailhouse Journalism: The Fourth Estate Behind Bars*, Morris points out that prison newspapers in that time period often reprinted material from other carceral institutions and that “prison writers ... kept a careful eye on each other’s work.” James McGrath Morris, *Jailhouse Journalism: The Fourth Estate Behind Bars* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998), 50–52.

We have a strong International Club here, composed of all foreign-born women. It is under the direction of a woman trained in anthropology, Miss Helen Adams.

A good deal of interesting folk song and folk lore material has come to light. Would you be interested in this material in foreign languages, particularly Russian, Portuguese, and Lithuanian? We have, too, a few doggerel ballads of the traditional sort.⁷⁸

Lomax seems to have never responded, so we cannot know exactly what Van Waters might have eventually sent. However, an article in the *Radcliffe Quarterly* written by Helen Smith, an intern at the reformatory, provides clues about the International Club's activities and suggests parallels between the Lomaxes' prison work and goings on at Framingham.⁷⁹ Smith explains that the woman mentioned in Van Waters' letter, Helen Adams, was a graduate student at Radcliffe College and an intern at the reformatory. At the end of 1934, Adams helped the International Club stage a play based on a folk legend and, for this purpose, she embarked upon a prison folk song-collecting project. Along with another intern, the musician Alice Freeman, Adams met with members of the International Club and transcribed songs they remembered from their home countries. According to Helen Smith's article, these included "some lovely Russian melodies, an unusual [Romani] tune, and interesting Portuguese and Polish songs and dances."⁸⁰ It is almost certainly this collection of songs Van Waters was offering to Lomax. Although these songs were never published, it appears that the musical knowledge of these incarcerated women offered up a living archive of folk song along the same lines as the singers recorded by the Lomaxes.

Thus, despite containing promises of musical material, the letters of these three correspondents did not lead to recordings or other contributions to the Lomaxes' published work. In each of the three cases, there is a valid explanation for this absence. The songs addressed by John Leslie appeared in prison newspapers and this likely deterred the Lomaxes: as was typical of folklorists of their time, they focused on oral traditions. Meanwhile, the foreign-language materials offered by Van Waters did not fit with the rest of the Lomaxes' work, which had focused on English-language songs. Finally, as Alan and Elizabeth Lomax's Kentucky recording of "Among the Little White Daisies" shows, songs like the ones sent by Nell Farrar could be easily acquired in non-carceral settings.

Because of this, information about the musical lives of prisoners in Ohio, Framingham, and Tullahoma has survived in the Lomax archive only in written materials, such as the letters from the prisons' administrators. These materials, however, point to the existence of rich musical communities in the three institutions. Although these communities differed from the ones the Lomaxes studied, they were also populated by people who were often targets of the carceral system in the 1930s. The "hoboes," laborers, and unionists described in the songs from John Leslie's letters were considered closely related in the United States of the early twentieth century, when the term "hobo" was not only a term for people experiencing homelessness, but a word associated with itinerant laborers who populated unions across the country.⁸¹ The concerns of these laborers were frequently the topic of songs written by union leaders. After World War I, with fears of communism on the rise in the United States, union members experienced high rates of incarceration.⁸² While few of them remained in prison into the 1930s, as Leslie's letter suggests, their songs continued to be circulated among prisoners from a variety of ethnicities and backgrounds. Meanwhile, the International Club at Framingham was well-populated, because working class women from South and Eastern European countries were frequently imprisoned on charges of promiscuity and prostitution, but also had a higher chance of being housed in a reformatory like Framingham, while Black women

⁷⁸Miriam Van Waters to John A. Lomax, December 28, 1934, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, 1932–1968, box 1, folder 23.

⁷⁹Helen Dennison Smith, "Music in a Reformatory," *Radcliffe Quarterly* XIX, no. (April 2, 1935): 90–91.

⁸⁰Smith, "Music in a Reformatory," 91.

⁸¹Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), ix–xii.

⁸²Dean Strang, *Keep the Wretches in Order: America's Biggest Mass Trial, the Rise of the Justice Department, and the Fall of the IWW* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), xvii–xix.

tended to be sentenced to hard labor in federal and state facilities.⁸³ Finally, the Vocational School in Tullahoma housed preteen and teenage girls, many of them from the working class, who were often vilified for a range of behaviors—insubordination to authority and broadly defined sexual misconduct among them. They were placed in vocational schools to be re-educated in so-called “proper” modes of behavior.⁸⁴

Children’s songs, European folk songs, and union songs are not the genres that typically come to mind when audiences think of music from American prisons, as they contrast with the musical representations of incarceration popularized by the Lomaxes and the folklorists who followed in their footsteps.⁸⁵ While we cannot expect that even the most prolific song collectors record all material available, we must acknowledge that, despite the diversity of folk music in Depression era prisons, the Lomaxes made choices that shaped narratives about who sang “prison songs,” who populated American prisons and, therefore, who could be seen as a prisoner and criminal. Further, their decision to focus so strongly on Black male prisoners was made during a period when the identities addressed in the songs they chose not to record—union members, foreign-born women, and young working-class girls—were decreasingly associated with crime. While people bearing these identities continued to be subject to legal discrimination, the carceral system began turning its eye away from them. In particular, as Khalil Gibran Muhammad has argued, it is in this period that Black men were unjustifiably stereotyped into what would become, in his words, “the most enduring and potent symbol of criminality in modern American history.”⁸⁶

Conclusion

It is important to remember that the materials published by the Lomaxes are only the front-facing portion of a much richer archive. This archive has missing pieces and lost trails, but it nevertheless yields an understanding of a wider range of folk music practice in Depression-era U.S. prisons. At the same time, there is a crucial difference between the objects discussed here (letters which refer to music, but are essentially silent) and the well-known materials that the Lomaxes’ published (notated songs in printed collections and recordings that can be sounded, respectively, by a performer or a machine). I argue, however, that these silent archival objects can be used to suggest the existence of a lost world of sound, which can inform our understanding of the Lomaxes’ collection of popular, published, sounding materials and what they chose to leave out. In this final section, let us briefly turn to some of these sounding materials.

In 1933, “Lightnin’” Washington and an unnamed group of men incarcerated at Darrington State Prison Farm performed the work song “Great God Almighty” for the Lomaxes.⁸⁷ The text of the song depicts a scene typical of Depression-era segregated prisons in the U.S. South. While at work, a group of prisoners sees a guard approaching. They beg for mercy and try to work faster to avoid punishment. Like many of the songs that incarcerated people performed for the Lomaxes, “Great God Almighty” is skillful, harrowing, provocative, and defiant in the face of hardship. This fact did not escape the

⁸³Nicole Hahn Rafter, “Prisons for Women, 1790–1980,” *Crime and Justice* 5 (1983): 158. Sarah Haley has pointed out that Black women were often incarcerated alongside or in manners similar to men. Only “white women’s protection was codified in the law establishing chain gangs.” Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 5.

⁸⁴Lisa Pasko, “Damaged Daughters: The History of Girls’ Sexuality and the Juvenile Justice System,” *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 100, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 1100.

⁸⁵These include John Henry Faulk, Pete Seeger, Bruce Jackson, and Harry Oster, among others.

⁸⁶Khalil Gibran Muhammad, “Where Did All the White Criminals Go?: Reconfiguring Race and Crime on the Road to Mass Incarceration,” *Souls* 13, no. 1 (2011): 73.

⁸⁷Although this performance is mentioned in the Lomaxes’ field notes and written publications, it appears not to have been recorded. In 1934, when the Lomaxes returned to Darrington, Washington sang this song for them again. This later performance was preserved on tape and deposited at the Library of Congress. See John Avery Lomax, Alan Lomax, Lightnin’ Washington, and Unidentified, *Great God A’mighty*, Sandy Point, Texas, 1934, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. The 1934 recording was later published under the title “Good God Almighty” in *Jail House Bound: John Lomax’s First Southern Prison Recordings*, 1933, West Virginia University Press, 2012, compact disc.

folklorists' attention. In his 1947 autobiography *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, John Lomax reminisced about the first time he heard "Lightnin'" Washington perform:

Lightnin's eyes blazed as he sang ... His color was deep black ... Lightnin' was still young—not yet thirty—serving his second term. His strong, graceful body swayed with the rhythm and fervor of the signing. Lightnin' was leading a song describing the days when convicts were leased by Texas to owners of large cotton and cane plantations, sometimes to be driven under the lash until they fell from exhaustion; many, according to rumor, dying from sunstroke amid the sun-baked rows of corn and cane ... The song pictures what went on in the minds of a gang of field workers, one of whom they thought was about to be punished.⁸⁸

In another passage, Lomax describes the reaction this performance provoked among others at the recording site:

The listeners in the room grew tense as the four strong voices blended in the terrible sweep of the song ... Even outside, in the adjacent iron-barred dormitory the chatter and clamor of two hundred black convicts became stilled into awed and reminiscent silence as the song swept on, growing in power to the end, while Lightnin', blue-black, vivid, poised as if for flight, leaned forward and sang with his three comrades, 'Great Godamighty!'⁸⁹

Lomax combines an exoticized description of Lightnin' Washington's body and, in particular, his skin tone, with a vivid characterization of the sound that Washington and his quartet made as a "terrible sweep." With these words, he positions the performance as rare, awe-inspiring, and capable of stilling those who hear it. Crucially, he draws a contrast between the sound of the prisoners' voices and the silence it inspired in its audience. The interaction between sound and silence, palpable in this passage, also reverberates in many facets of the Lomax prison song collection. In fact, it was an anxiety about silence that spurred the Lomaxes' interest in prisons. They sought to preserve what they understood to be a dying tradition and saw Southern prisons as some of the only spaces where songs like "Great God Almighty" were not dissolving into silence.

At the same time, like all folklorists, the Lomaxes had to make choices. They had to decide which songs to record and preserve as sounding archival objects and which ones to leave unrecorded and under risk of dissolving into silence. This curation has increased the prestige and reach of the recordings by positioning them as rare objects. As Jonathan Sterne has pointed out, historical sound recordings gain cultural value only if most objects of their kind are lost. In Sterne's words, "the interplay between a *bit* of access and large sections of inaccessibility is precisely what makes the past intriguing, mysterious, and potentially revelatory."⁹⁰ If we follow this logic, we can conclude that the Lomax prison recordings have acquired their worth largely as remnants of a lost and silent past: they preserve only a few among the many voices of early twentieth-century prisoners.

Nevertheless, the selective nature of these recordings has also shaped ideas about both race and gender in the United States. The Lomaxes only preserved the voices of Southern Black prisoners as sonic objects, thus keeping the music of many others who populated early twentieth-century U.S. prisons silent. The resultant focus of this collection has influenced the public's racialized and gendered ideas about who is incarcerated and what kinds of music they tend to perform. The manner in which narratives about race have been shaped through the Lomaxes' interactions with Black prisoners has received ample analysis.⁹¹ However, little attention has been given to their dealings with prisoners of other races, with women, and with the many folk practices in prisons across the country. Due to the

⁸⁸Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 160.

⁸⁹Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 161.

⁹⁰Jonathan Sterne, "The Preservation Paradox," in *21st Century Perspectives on Music, Technology, and Culture: Listening Spaces*, ed. Richard Purcell, Richard Randall (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 157.

⁹¹See Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics and Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); and Nunn, *Sounding the Color Line*.

limited nature of such interactions, John Lomax's 1934 circular letter is an important and unique source. The letter and its responses provide information about musics, identities, and lived realities that the Lomaxes did not include in their published materials and therefore help bring further light to the delimited nature of their well-known recordings. Reading these responses alongside the recordings the Lomaxes did make can help focus our attention on the arbitrary and shifting lines along which criminality is constructed, on the plight of a range of people incarcerated in Depression-era prisons, and on the unique and undue hardships faced by the Black men recorded by the Lomaxes. Most importantly, it can change the way we understand the nature of the Lomaxes' song collection and the ways in which the Lomaxes' popular but often contentious recordings have profoundly shaped perceptions of prison life.

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