Beyond the roots of American popular music

Examining the legacy of Alan Lomax

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At its 45th annual award ceremony earlier this year, the Recording Academy's National Trustees, the body behind the Grammy Awards, posthumously bestowed a "Trustees Award" on Alan Lomax, America's most widely renowned folklorist and ethnomusicologist, who died last July at the age of 87. His daughter, Anna Lomax Chairetakis, received the award on his behalf. Her acceptance speech eloquently distilled her father's life: "Alan wore many hats—musical anthropologist, writer, preservationist, recording engineer, artist manager/publisher, musical arranger, radio producer, advocate, promoter, innovative thinker—and he wore them all in one cause. Essentially, he believed that the main sources of music, dance, poetry and fantasy spring from the people who confront life's joys and cruelties first hand, in the raw, with little padding and few defenses. He found out that the beautiful in music is honed over long eras, and is nurtured by the local and the particular; that it swims in the many big cultural streams of earth, and thrives within their multitudinous, juicy variants and amalgamations."

The preservation and appreciation of ethnic folk music had been the content of Alan Lomax's life since 1933 when, at the age of 18, he made his first expedition through the southern United States with his father, John Lomax. These early trips involved hauling hundreds of pounds of recording equipment to rural communities to capture the music of the likes of Son House, Memphis Slim, Jelly Roll Morton and many other lesser known performers. Recordings were made and catalogued into the Music Division of the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. By 1940 alone, the younger Lomax's recorded contributions numbered in the thousands. He had by then co-authored several books with his father on American folk music.

When the Lomaxes visited Angola Penitentiary in Louisiana in 1933 to record music of convicts, they met for the first time Huddie Ledbetter, a black inmate imprisoned for murder. Alan was particularly struck by what he described as Ledbetter's "panther-like" good looks, his clear voice, his confidence, and his mastery of the 12-string guitar. From that point on, he became a staunch advocate and promoter for the artist, who would later become famous as "Leadbelly." The Lomaxes ended up recording Leadbelly's vocal appeal for a pardon and delivering it to the governor, who responded within one month by freeing him.

The Great Depression of the 1930s led to a deep-going radicalization in the American working class and intelligentsia. The mass struggles of the labor movement which resulted in the founding of the CIO politicized many, Lomax among them. The Communist Party, although thoroughly Stalinized by this time, was looked upon as the party of Lenin and the October Revolution, and a significant section of radicalized workers and intellectuals joined and supported it. While he was not openly a member, Lomax was very active in the party's musical benefits in the New York area and recruited musicians to perform in them.

During this time a singer named Woody Guthrie had become attracted to this musical scene. He had been radicalized by the experience of the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma, where his family, like so many others, had to pick up and leave home after the devastation of its homestead farm. His music was informed by his experience of the harsh conditions and unfair treatment of the poorest layers in society. When Lomax met Guthrie, he had already heard the singer perform and felt he would be an important addition to the radio program that he created and directed called "American Folk Songs," and later, "Wellsprings of Music." These were part of a series of radio broadcasts which aired on CBS in the 1940s called "American School of the Air." Lomax did everything he could to promote and encourage Guthrie to continue to use his musical talents as the best weapon on behalf of the downtrodden people of whom he sang.

Guthrie and Leadbelly became fast friends and performed together quite often. Later in his life, Lomax felt that one of the most important things he had accomplished was to bring these two musicians to the world's attention. In his interview for the PBS series "American Roots Music" which aired in the fall of 2001, he said, "And I think I helped them a lot in appreciating the wonder of the tradition they inherited from all the people in their background. And perhaps in that way, I helped them make the enormous impact that they did on the music of our time. I suspect that they're two of the most influential folk musicians of the last 50 or 60 years, and part of this is due to the fact that they came to town with their whole, fresh, powerful, pure folk repertory intact—living, vibrant, and with the impact of a country mule ready to kick a hole into the future."

The McCarthyite witch-hunt of the 1950s was likely the reason for Lomax leaving the US to live in England, where he continued broadcasting radio shows about folk music. Popular interest in American folk music grew enormously. Unbeknownst to Lomax at the time, a Glasgow-born musician by the name of Lonnie Donegan recorded and popularized Leadbelly's tunes (as well as others), with a guitar style borrowed from Louisiana, creating "skiffle" music, which became massively popular in Britain. "Skiffle" greatly influenced many groups, most notably The Beatles, who in turn had a huge impact on the development of rock and roll music.

Meanwhile in the US, the late 1950s and early 1960s saw folk music achieve considerable popularity. A vibrant folk music scene emerged in the Greenwich Village section of lower Manhattan as well as in Cambridge, Massachusetts, attracting talented musicians like Dave Van Ronk, Joan Baez, Eric Von Schmidt, Bob Neuwirth and others. The first Newport Folk Festival was held in 1959 in Newport, Rhode Island. Its organizers were George Wein, a jazz impresario, and Albert Grossman, manager of folk recording artists such as Peter, Paul and Mary and Odetta. The festival was the site of seminars and workshops where over the next few years hundreds of folk and blues artists made their first appearances before thousands of eager fans. Lomax was very active in these events and brought many of the musicians whom he had recorded years earlier.

Lomax became very enthusiastic about a young musician who called himself Bob Dylan, (after the poet Dylan Thomas) and had entered the Greenwich Village folk music scene emulating his idol, Woody Guthrie. Lomax said of him, "I knew Bobby Dylan back in the days when he lived

in the village.... I was terribly impressed with the fact he had really learned Woody's style ... Woody lived Whitman's dream, and Dylan had the genius to see that and feel it.... When Dylan became popular, he became popular as another Woody Guthrie, really, on his first couple of records, and was a person who was reflecting about life, who was concerned about justice and injustice and equity and poverty and all that."

By the time of the 1965 Newport Folk Festival the popularity of folk music appeared to have reached its zenith, with artists such as Joan Baez, Phil Ochs, Richard and Mimi Farina, Tom Paxton and Judy Collins enjoying widespread popularity; at the same time electric blues was just beginning to acquire a new and enthusiastic audience. The 1965 festival was made infamous by two episodes: audience members' booing of Dylan's electrified band (although it is not entirely clear to this day whether those in the crowd expressing disapproval did so because of the poor sound quality, the band's short set—only three numbers—or the amplified instruments) and Lomax's wrestling match with festival organizer Grossman. The latter semi-comical episode followed Lomax's demeaning introduction of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band (Grossman's act): he described their music as "purely imitative" and basically asked for the forbearance of the audience. The pair of middle-aged men ended up rolling around in the dirt of the festival grounds.

Lomax and others no doubt had legitimate concerns about the corrupting influence of the commercial music industry. There was an element of misplaced radicalism in the hope that they could maintain a pure "people's music." However, as Lomax himself knew only too well, or should have known, music can't stay the same. It is influenced by its surroundings and constantly changing. That is precisely why the work of Lomax and other archivists is so critical. His outburst at Newport expressed a rather formal, if not rigid, notion of the value of certain musical forms over others, as well perhaps as a desperation in the face of what may have seemed to him the blatant exploitation of traditional blues by profit-hungry interests.

However, to turn the debate over the future of popular and folk music in 1965 into a conflict between "electric" versus "acoustic," much less white versus black, largely missed the point. Artists, including musicians, always face the problem of striving for the highest aesthetic, intellectual and moral standards, whatever the genre—"commercial," "folk" or otherwise—in which they work.

Many of the artists recorded at an earlier time by Lomax benefited from the popularity of later popular music which borrowed heavily from them. In the sixties, British bands like John Mayall's Blues Breakers, Cream and The Rolling Stones were greatly influenced by early recordings of the Mississippi Delta blues. The popularity of these overseas bands in the US and the devotion and respect that those musicians showed for the original bluesmen made celebrities of Southern blues artists like Charley Patton, Son House, Robert Johnson, Skip James, Fred McDowell, Gary Davis, John Hurt and others.

Lomax recognized that the folk music of all countries was a precious resource. Starting in the 1950s in England, he began recording Irish and Scottish rural folk music. He then went on to record folk music of Spain and Italy. In 1960, after he had moved back to the US, he recorded music of the islands off the coast of Virginia and Georgia, then two years later visited and recorded the music of the West Indies. Subsequently he traveled all over the world, recording and cataloging ethnic music.

Lomax's involvement with the Voyager Music Project in the late 1970s reveals his stature as a truly international musicologist. Two spacecraft, Voyager 1 and Voyager 2, were launched in August and September 1977, to make fly-by encounters of Jupiter and Saturn. The powerful gravitational force of both these planets would have the effect of slinging the craft forcefully out of the solar system and into interstellar space. The late Carl Sagan, who had long been convinced of the likelihood of the existence of extra-terrestrial intelligent life, was on the NASA team that planned and implemented this mission, as well as previous Pioneer missions that also explored the outer reaches of the solar system. Pioneer 10 and 11 both included plaques with a map of our solar system and a representation of a man and a woman, in a gesture of good will to whatever intelligent life may intercept the craft in interstellar space, after its original mission was completed.

Sagan wanted to take the opportunity of the Voyager mission to expand on this concept and committed the project to include a representative selection of music from the earth among other digitized data, including sounds and photos from earth, as a kind of time capsule to the cosmos. The idea was to depict and describe life on planet earth, particularly the role of humanity, to any extraterrestrial beings who might encounter the craft in its limitless travels.

Sagan sought out Alan Lomax to assist in the gathering and selection of the music, as the latter had established a reputation as one of the most knowledgeable of all musicologists. Lomax's subsequent influence on the project was a surprise even to Sagan. "Most of the music on the Voyager record that is not in the Eastern or Western classical traditions was recommended to us by Lomax. He was a persistent and vigorous advocate for including ethnic music at the expense of Western classical music, and the pieces he brought to our attention were so compelling and beautiful that we acceded to his suggestions more often than I would have thought possible.... We are particularly grateful to him for his help in broadening our transcultural musical perspectives, as well as in substantially enhancing the beauty of the Voyager record's musical offerings." [For the complete list of the music included, *see* http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/spacecraft/music.html, NASA's Voyager mission web site.]

In the process of creating and assembling recordings of indigenous music from all parts of the globe, Lomax accumulated an encyclopedic body of musical knowledge. He developed a theory called "cantometrics," which categorizes the components of the music of vastly separated cultures and compares them based on numeric data. Utilizing this system, any piece of music can be rated through measuring 37 different parameters—such as range, accent, melody shape, tremolo—on a scale of one to thirteen. This ostensibly allows an objective comparison between quite divergent styles of music. Based on his vast research in this field, he claimed to detect similarities in types of ethnic music that he argued must be more than coincidence.

This theory, however, has critics among musicologists, including Bruno Nettl of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who asserts that many of the cantometrics' parameters can only be ranked subjectively, therefore undermining the validity of conclusions drawn from the comparisons.

In the early 1990s Lomax developed a software project called the "Global Jukebox," an interactive system of audio-visuals to aid in the study of music and dance worldwide. Over the last decade many of Lomax's early recordings have been issued as "The Alan Lomax Collection" by Rounder Records. His 1993 book, "The Land Where the Blues Began," has been republished by The New Press. Whatever may be said of Lomax's theory of cantometrics, he had a profound appreciation for the central and universal importance of music to all mankind. When one considers the many artists and musical forms that he brought to public attention and the vast influence they in turn have had on musical culture, one begins to appreciate the life-work of Alan Lomax.