

• *Book Reviews* •

Alan Lomax: Assistant in Charge: The Library of Congress Letters, 1935-1945.

By Ronald D. Cohen, ed. [American Made Music Series, Vol. 2.] Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010. Pp. xvi+414. 6 black and white photographs, 1 map, endnotes, index. (cloth).

An unequalled pioneer in the preservation and promotion of American folklore, Alan Lomax (1915-2002) was not just the “assistant in charge” for the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress between 1935 and 1945, he was a kind of “music digger” or “folk talent scout,” if I may say so, going to rural regions looking for all kinds of genuine folk music that he could record, document, and preserve. A passionate cultural worker, Lomax made thousands of field recordings, he discovered blues artists such as Son House and Muddy Waters on a plantation, and was in touch with legends like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger (156). Nowadays, hundreds of folk CDs, which include countless artists, were in fact recorded by Alan Lomax. These recordings range in style from cowboy songs to Hawaiian folk, to what he deemed “remarkable Negro Cajun music” (254). In fact, Alan Lomax was not really seeking “future stars” or big names; rather, he was looking for genuine, authentic singers, musicians, and storytellers who represented the diversity of U.S. regions and ethnic backgrounds, although he also travelled a lot abroad. Incidentally, some of his field recordings made later in Europe and Africa reappeared on CD in the “World Library of Folk & Primitive Music” Series by Rounder Records. Despite the fact both men were ethnomusicologists, archivists, and record producers, Alan Lomax should not be confused with his father and co-editor John A. Lomax (1867-1948), although they often worked conjointly at the Library of Congress and published books and anthologies together.

In an early letter Alan Lomax wrote from Florida to his father John Lomax, the young assistant describes the various types of recording he was collecting in 1935: “Spirituals, chanteys, ring-shouts, folk-tales, jumping dances, work songs, ballads, guitar picking, minstrel songs, praying, sermons” (3). Many letters are

accounts of what Alan Lomax was looking for and what he actually found. Some letters from 1939 contain detailed lists of what Alan Lomax was listening to, or the 78 RPM records of artists ranging from Robert Johnson to the Carter Family, which he ordered from companies such as Columbia Records or RCA for the Library of Congress' collections, (154-155). As editor Cohen notes, Lomax "was certainly not only interested in field recordings" (122).

Although the previously unpublished letters included in this collection are numerous, the collection is not comprehensive because many letters have been lost or abridged for this edition. There are no addresses of correspondents and no concluding formulas reproduced here; the texts are simply juxtaposed into a narrative with notes and dates added by the book's editor. Since we have a huge correspondence gathered, we find here a wide network of relationships that goes beyond the US borders. For example, Lomax was in touch with Marius Barbeau, the famous Canadian folklorist working at the National Museum in Ottawa, although only third person allusions to this correspondence appear in this book (see 196, 207, 274, 319). Indeed, during his preparation for his weekly radio show on CBS, Lomax once referred to "some great folk singers" from French-Canada recommended by Marius Barbeau, such as Philéas Bédard, Émile Dushea, plus the legendary *turlutte* singer-songwriter Madame Bolduc, who could not make the trip from Montréal to Washington because she was apparently "too fat to travel" (196).

Among his many trips abroad, Lomax was sent by the Library of Congress to Haiti where he spent months doing field recordings and research about Haitian Voodoo tradition. (Actually, Lomax spelled "vaudou" in French Creole, 36). In fact, Lomax was interested in all musical genres, and his genuine curiosity for music was often contagious. (at a time when records existed for only a few decades). As one might guess, some letters also refer to the lack of funding and copyright issues.

In Alan Lomax, a 21st century ethnomusicologist will find the guide of both an field-seasoned expert and a music-lover, who knew the parents of the legendary

Robert Johnson in Mississippi, and who recognised this bluesman as “the most important folk musician that this area has produced” (256).

While he was still affiliated with the Library of Congress at the beginning of WWII, Alan Lomax went to work as “Special Information Consultant” for the U.S. Army’s Office of War Information (331). His aim, as he wrote in October 1942, was “to utilize folk lore material for wartime education” (334). Lomax was fully aware of the potential powers of national identity and foreign propaganda if used against American citizens. Lomax explains the need for the United States, “to undercut the race issue” inside its own borders, adding in 1943 that racists had to be educated and that “to neglect these Americans is not only undemocratic; in the end it will be dangerous for our country” (368). In 1944, Lomax joined the U.S. Army and remained in the service for a few months even after the end of the war (372). Later on, Lomax pursued his research on music despite having been replaced at the Library of Congress.

The editor of this book, Ronald D. Cohen is a leading American expert on Alan Lomax who has edited numerous books on musicology, including an excellent anthology of writings of Alan Lomax (Cohen 2005). Cohen’s editorial work of in this volume is useful. It adds context for the letters, background on the correspondents, and information about unpublished letters. The endnotes are precise, but sometimes too short. My only quibble would be about the absence of an index of correspondents, which would have greatly improved the ease of navigating the texts, although there is a general index. Cohen considers Alan Lomax to be “one of the most stimulating and influential cultural workers of the twentieth century” (xiv). This book obviously affirms Lomax’s status, but Cohen’s conclusion is rather brief: Lomax left the Army looking for a job or fellowship, and he took part in various projects but never returned to the Library of Congress. Lomax later found work as musicologist in England from 1950 to 1958 (374).

This previously unpublished, edited correspondence is like a rich, condensed body of archival documentation about how folklore was recorded and

institutionalised at the Library of Congress between 1935 and 1945. This book will be important not only for scholars in the history of ethnomusicology, but also in folklore studies, American studies, and the sociology of music, culture, and art.

References

Cohen, Ronald D., ed. 2005. *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings 1934–1997*. New York: Routledge.

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