

The Library of Congress: Alan Lomax and the Soundscapes of the Upper Midwest: 75th anniversary of the 1938 Library of Congress Folk-Song Expedition to Michigan

Episode Title: Mrs. Maté of Delray

From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

“Finnish Waltz,” performed by Apo Juhani on accordion. Recorded in Calumet, MI, Sept. 27, 1938. *Alan Lomax Collection of Michigan and Wisconsin Recordings* (AFC 1939/007, AFS 2282a3), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

In 1938 the Library of Congress dispatched the pioneering folklorist and song collector Alan Lomax to complete a folklife survey of the Great Lakes region. He set off in a 1935 Plymouth sedan, toting a Presto instantaneous disc recorder and a moving image camera. He returned almost three months later, having driven thousands of miles on barely paved roads, with a cache of 250 discs and 8 reels of film. These materials documented the incredible range of ethnic diversity and occupational folklife in Michigan.

On Monday, August 8th, 1938, Lomax visited the Hungarian neighborhood of Delray, just north of River Rouge in Detroit. In Delray he recorded twenty-one discs of singers and instrumentalists, including a woman named Mrs. Maté. Of her, he wrote wistfully:

Mrs. Maté – the gay temperamental romantic skinny glamorous sentimental Catholic Hungarian washerwoman – ... her husband so kind + her dead son on the wall admired across an eternal groaning ironing board – she works some times 3 days + nights with out sleep – sends or gives her money away – has a head full of sweetness and memories + a beautiful garden – she feeds me gingerale + cookies + wants to do my washing free – she is the maid of all work of the old regime in Hungary + she is beautiful + sad + dead – I hope she goes to Heaven.

Here is Mrs. Maté singing two verses of a lyric song, “The Fisherboy’s Sweetheart”.

"Sír a kislány a Balaton partján (The Fisherboy’s Sweetheart)," performed by Mrs. Mate. Detroit, MI, Aug. 8, 1938. *Alan Lomax Collection of Michigan and Wisconsin Recordings* (AFC 1939/007, AFS 2252a), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress [1:51]

When Mrs. Maté finished the song she told Lomax the story in broken English. It’s about a heartbroken young girl who has been abandoned by her lover, a fisherman. She cries on the shores of Lake Balaton, yearning to jump in and swim to her lover’s fishing nets to bid him a last farewell.

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This podcast series marks the 75th anniversary of Alan Lomax's historic documentation of music and folklore in Michigan, and its enduring impact today. If you would like to more about this remarkable trip, and stay abreast of commemorative programming and performances including a traveling exhibition, and the dissemination of Lomax's recordings to their home communities, visit the American Folklife Center's website at www.loc.gov/folklife/lomax. And look for the e-book, “Michigan-I-O,” published by Dust-to-Digital Records in association with the Library of Congress and available through the iBookstore beginning November 1st, 2013.

Alan Lomax's vast documentary collection, including the materials from his 1938 Michigan field trip is housed at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. The Center thanks its project collaborators, which include the Michigan Council for the Humanities, the Michigan State University Museum; the Great Lakes Traditions Endowment; the Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Culture at the University of Wisconsin, the Association for Cultural Equity, and the Finlandia Foundation.

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