

The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress
presents

the Benjamin Botkin Folklife Lecture Series

AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT

TRADITIONAL MUSIC IN COASTAL LOUISIANA

THE 1934 LOMAX RECORDINGS



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Kluge Center, Library of Congress

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Traditional Music in Coastal Louisiana: The 1934 Lomax Recordings

In the summer of 1934, John Lomax and his teenaged son Alan ventured into the coastal parishes of south-central Louisiana—the area known variously as Bayou Country, Cajun Country, Acadiana, or, for the Lomaxes, Evangeline Country. During this trip, they recorded a diverse admixture of traditional song in English and in a variety of Louisiana French dialects, as well as brass band instrumentals (which they called “Acadian Airs”), fiddle breakdowns, and a Scottish jig rendered on the clarinet. Although often imagined as an isolated enclave of Acadian refugees, the area the Lomaxes explored was teeming with a multifaceted musical culture considerably more complex than the Cajun/Creole division most familiar to us today. For current and future researchers into the history of rural music in coastal Louisiana, these recordings are a central, foundational document, and they tell an important story.

Until recently, however, the scholarly understanding of that musical culture has been somewhat obscured by a simple lack of groundwork on the collections. As was the case until recently with Alan Lomax’s early work in Haiti, little from the 1934 Acadiana corpus has been released commercially over the years, and the large majority of the material had never been transcribed, translated, or studied in any depth. In Joshua Caffery’s *Traditional Music in Coastal Louisiana: The 1934 Lomax Recordings*, the author attempts a more extensive study of the collection, one that relates the broad story of the 1934 songbag. By extension, he seeks to develop a more varied vision of vernacular song in the area.

The somewhat astonishing irony one encounters when studying the 1934 recordings today is that the Lomaxes purposefully ignored the accordion-and-fiddle-based music that has since become celebrated and hallowed as the region’s folk music. In a 1934 report to Carl Engel, then the Chief of the Division of Music, Alan Lomax wrote, “Since all the native bands have become money-conscious, no matter how bad they may be, since they think we are trying to make records of their playing for commercial purposes, since the best of it has been recorded, we have neglected the accordion orchestras.” For the Lomaxes, in other words, the music now considered the folk music of southern Louisiana was commercial and not particularly pertinent to their mission. If not Cajun and Zydeco accordion music, then, what did they find, and why might it be important?

The full answer to that question is diverse and complex, but one part of the response is that they documented the musical network in which Cajun and Zydeco developed, and this deepens our understanding of how these indigenous styles evolved. In the motifs and formulae of ancient medieval lays, for instance, we see antecedents for the concerns of lyric songs in Cajun French. In the juré singing recorded in New Iberia and

Jennings, likewise, we see a basis and a resource for what would become La-La and Zydeco music.

Although the Lomaxes’ disregard for “accordion orchestras” may grate against our current sensibilities, time has proven them correct in the sense that these recordings provide the best—in some case only—glimpse of a buried stratum of Louisiana’s musical culture. In other words, though they perhaps pursued folklore at the occasional expense of folklife, their concern for the music of earlier eras led them to create an invaluable, singular resource. At Avery Island, for instance, a raised coastal salt dome in the marshes of Iberia Parish, they recorded two singers who recreated parts of the Avery Island church congregation’s unique antebellum spiritual repertory. In Amelia, near Morgan City, Louisiana, they made perhaps the only known audio recording of the logging hollers used in the great cypress swamps of the Atchafalaya Basin. From the same singer, John Bray, and from Wilson “Stavin’ Chain” Jones of Lafayette, they recorded two blues ballads featuring the exploits of African-American soldiers in World War I, which may be the only extant recording of such songs.

Throughout the area, they also documented a broad spectrum of French traditional song, and this book brings those recordings into line with the broader transatlantic understanding of how francophone traditional song operated in this distinct corner of North America. In addition to *chansons en laisse*, the medieval song form that is the foundation of French traditional singing, they found rondes, randonnées, and romances, as well as Child ballads and other genres of English traditional song rendered in Cajun French. In short, they found a treasure trove we are only now beginning to appreciate.

In this presentation, which will feature audio and images from the 1934 trip, Dr. Caffery will trace the Lomax trail through southern Louisiana, highlighting the places, peoples, and multifarious musical traditions of this perennially fascinating corner of the United States.

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The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to “preserve and present American Folklife” through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.