

Folklife Today

April 2019: Hidden Folklorists

[Bagpipe Music Introduction: John Burgess, "King of the Highland Pipers," from the Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 2004/004), recorded June 14, 1951 in Edinburgh, Scotland. Identified by the Lomax archive as T3476.0, Track 17]

John Fenn: Welcome to the Folklife Today podcast. I'm John Fenn, and I'm here with my colleague Stephen Winick.

Steve: Hi everyone!

John Fenn: We're folklorists at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. I'm the head of Research and Programs, and Steve is the Center's writer and editor, as well as the creator of the blog *Folklife Today*.

Steve: And today on the folklife Today Podcast, we're going to talk about Hidden Folklorists.

John: Now, this is an idea that you came up with for blog posts, Steve, so what exactly are "Hidden Folklorists?"

Steve: Well, I was inspired by the book and film "Hidden Figures," and some events the Library of Congress did focusing on them, so the initial idea was people whose folklore work was insufficiently recognized for a variety of reasons: either they were women or African Americans at a time when contributions from those groups were generally under-recognized, but what quickly developed was another pattern too, where I identified a lot of people who were actually quite famous for other things, and therefore their folklore work took a back seat.

John: and that was the case for the first post in the series, I believe, which was on Allan and Joan Pinkerton. I like that first post because it has one of each kind of hidden folklorist. Joan Pinkerton's contribution is largely unknown because she was the wife of an important man at a time when women too often stayed in their husbands' shadows, and Allan's folklore work is unknown because he was a household name for other reasons. So, Steve, who was Allan Pinkerton?

Steve: In brief, Allan Pinkerton is famous as a 19th-century spy, policeman, bodyguard, and private detective. He was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1819. He emigrated to America in 1842 because his political activism as a member of the Chartist movement made him a target for arrest. In Illinois, he established himself

as a cooper, but through his keen powers of observation he stumbled upon and acted against a ring of counterfeiters, leading to his employment as Chicago's first police detective. He is most famous, though, for founding the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, which he created in 1850, and which still exists today.

John: And he was also friends with President Lincoln, wasn't he?

Steve: Right. In 1861, while investigating a railway case, Pinkerton uncovered an assassination plot against president-elect Abraham Lincoln. The conspirators planned to kill Lincoln in Baltimore during a stop on his way to his inauguration. And so Pinkerton hurried to tell Lincoln about it in Philadelphia.

And luckily, on the same day that Pinkerton met Lincoln, the president-elect received another warning about the plot, this one from an army officer. So he decided that Pinkerton wasn't a crackpot and wasn't just trying to curry favor, and he decided to skip that stop in Baltimore.

John: I also love the follow-up letter you put in the blog, the one from Pinkerton to Lincoln. In the letter he suggests to President Lincoln that he be allowed to form a special force of 18 agents to perform "that class of Secret Service which is the most dangerous."

Steve: right, this letter is part of the genesis of what we now call the Secret Service, and Pinkerton used that term, although Lincoln didn't immediately call his new force that. But as part of the new force, Pinkerton served on undercover missions during the Civil War. After the war, he returned to his detective agency.

John: Pinkerton had a complex legacy, right? I mean, as a Chartist, he was dedicated to workers' rights, but his detective agency often helped companies suppress labor unions.

Steve: Yes, that's a good point! He was also a dedicated abolitionist, and his house was a station on the Underground Railroad. So like anyone else, there was good and bad to be found in his legacy.

John: So he did a lot, but what about his folklore work?

Steve: I got interested in Pinkerton on a tip from a fellow over in the Library's John W. Kluge center, Arun Sood. He had heard tell of a possibly lost book of Scottish folksongs compiled by Pinkerton, and asked if the Library had a copy. It rang a bell; I had heard of it, but we didn't have it. So I looked into the story a bit.

I found out that the Pinkertons' love for Scottish folksongs went back to their youth in Scotland. In 1841, Pinkerton had organized a fundraising concert for his Chartist organization, and caught sight of a young singer named Joan Carfrae. He was smitten and attended her other concerts, eventually becoming her regular escort to and from her appearances. Eventually, he was targeted for arrest because of his political activities, and Joan agreed to marry him and go off to America.

In America, they were taken in as lodgers by Allan's friend Robbie Fergus in Illinois, who was establishing himself as one of Chicago's first printers. According to an account placed online by Pinkerton's family, they spent their time in the company of other Scots expatriates at musical evenings where they could--and I quote--"indulge in nostalgia for Scotland by listening to Scottish ballads."

This piece by the Pinkerton family mentions them helping publish a book of Scottish ballads, and I found further details in newspapers.

So, in the summer of 1842 they met—and I quote from an Indiana Sentinel article—"a herculean Scotchman who sung old country ballads with marvelous effect. The little printing shop of Fergus & Ellis collected and printed these songs. Mrs. Pinkerton folded the little volumes. Allan Pinkerton trimmed them with a shoemaker's knife, punched the holes for the stitches with a shoemaker's awl, and Pinkerton and wife together, with a darning-needle stitched every copy of this, the first songbook ever printed in Chicago."

John: Wow, so the Pinkertons physically made the books?

Steve: yes, isn't that great?

John: it's fantastic...but were they involved in choosing the songs?

Steve: Unfortunately, no account I've seen explicitly says that, but it's likely that they were. After all, they were close friends of the publisher. They were song enthusiasts, and participated in music-making with the publisher. And finally, Joan was a renowned singer, and therefore arguably the most qualified of them all to choose the content. It seems likely from all this that the Pinkertons had an editorial role, and if so, they were definitely early folklorists.

John: All right, I'm guessing everyone is wondering: where can we find this book?

Steve: Yeah, sadly, I've never seen a copy, and no one I've talked to about it has seen one either. There were likely only a few of them printed. Chicago in 1840 had only 4000 people, and of course, the book seems aimed at the Scottish

population, which was a handful. Given that much of the city went up in flames during the Great Fire of 1871, it seems unlikely too many copies survived. Still, we shouldn't give up hope. We would love to know if any copies of this book exist in archives or libraries. We've seen the title given as "Scottish & Country Ballads" and the publisher given as "Fergus & Ellis," although the publisher was usually known as Ellis & Fergus. If anyone hearing this has any information, please get in touch with us at folklife at loc.gov

John: I guess this means we don't know which actual songs were in the book?

Steve: That's right, and we also don't know which songs Joan Carfrae Pinkerton sang. But Allan's description of her as a singing bird reminded me of the great Jeannie Robertson, so here's a recording from our collections of Jeannie Robertson singing "Jimmie Raeburn," a ballad sure to evoke nostalgia for Scotland. It's the kind of song that might have been in the book and also might have been sung by Mrs. Pinkerton

John: Let's hear it!

[Jeannie Robertson sings "Jimmie Raeburn" from the Alan Lomax collection (AFC 2004/004). Recorded in London, England, May 30, 1958. Identified by the Lomax Archive as T3466.0, Track 3]

Steve: That was Jeannie Robertson singing the ballad "Jimmie Raeburn" for Alan Lomax in 1958, and again we're using it to represent the Pinkertons and their lost book of Scottish ballads.

John: It's nice to think of the Pinkertons working to preserve their musical heritage that way. Were there other Hidden Folklorists who wrote down traditional songs in the era before recording technology was prominent?

Steve: yes, one of my favorite Hidden Folklorists posts came from Stephanie Hall. Her blog post was about King David Kālakaua, the last king of Hawaii, but we could certainly argue that his sister, Queen Liliuokalani, was also a Hidden Folklorist, so we'll talk about both of them in this episode to some extent. Both of them were creative artists as well as interpreters of Hawaiian sacred lore. Kalakaua wrote a song which was the Hawaiian national anthem and now the state song. Here's a little clip of the Hawaiian Quintette performing the song.

[Hawaiian Quintette Sings "Hawaii Pono" in Hawaiian. Recorded April 18, 1913, Camden, NJ]

John: So, as Steve mentioned, it was Stephanie Hall who uncovered these hidden folklorists for us. Welcome Stephanie!

Stephanie: Hello!

Steve: So fill us in a bit on the background to King David Kalakaua's work.

Stephanie: King David Kalākaua was born in 1836, when Hawaii was a sovereign nation, and one of the most literate nations in the world at that time. He grew up with a classical education in both English and Hawaiian. People of that time were commonly educated and there were books and newspapers published in Hawaiian. But it was prohibited by Hawai'ian cultural tradition to write down some of the sacred texts. As a result, Hawaiians' knowledge of themselves as a people depended entirely on the memory of those who could chant ancient verses. The king knew that a culture that passes down its knowledge only by oral history is much more in danger of losing essential parts of its traditions and history than one that uses the written word to back up oral traditions. So he needed to find a way forward.

John: How did he go about doing that?

Stephanie: he looked to his predecessor, King Kamehameha II. He had broken the *tabu* system of prohibitions of his time as well. Prior to his time, men and women were required to eat separately. But Kamehameha II knew that customs would need to change for interaction with Hawai'i's new trading partners to go forward, and a king could do what a commoner couldn't, so he sat down to a meal with a mix of male and female guests, breaking a centuries-long tradition. Using that example, Kalākaua took up the task of seeing that Hawaiian oral traditions were written down, including some sacred chants, despite some objections from traditionalists.

John: And so, did his actions bear fruit?

Stephanie: Definitely. For example, one way to help preserve Hawaiian culture and language was to preserve the hula, the traditional dances that made reference to the myths and legends of Hawai'i. Kalākaua called hula "the heartbeat of the Hawaiian people." The chants associated with hula must be performed correctly, so the singers must know the language as well as the dance. And Kalākaua's work has definitely helped to preserve the Hula. Several times in AFC's history, we've featured Hula groups performing sacred chants and dances.

Steve: I remember one just a few years ago: Unukupukupu. Let's hear some of their performance.

[Unukupukupu performs a chant from the Unukupukupu concert collection (AFC 2012/022)]

Steve: That was Unukupukupu, the Halau Hula of Hawaii community college here on the Folklife Today podcast.

John: And we're in the studio talking to Stephanie Hall about King David Kalakaua. So, in addition to the chants that go with traditional hula, Kalakaua is known for writing down one particular chant, isn't he?

Stephanie: That's right, As king, Kalākaua could ask scholars to work with those who had memorized ancient verses to write them down in Hawaiian. The most controversial challenge he set scholars to work on was writing down the *Kumulipo*. This is a sacred chant that is performed only in ceremonial contexts, containing the Hawaiian creation story as well as the lineage of royalty. The *Kahunas*, the keepers of these traditions, understandably objected. But Kalākaua prevailed and worked to see that this and other stories of Hawaiian history and myth were written down.

Steve: And eventually he did a book in English, didn't he?

Stephanie: He did! That book was called *The Legends and Myths of Hawaii: The Fables and Folklore of a Strange People* (1888).

John: So can you tell us how he went about writing it?

Stephanie: The work seems to have been a team effort. In the preface, Kalākaua acknowledged six people who had contributed to the volume, although it is not clear what roles all of them played. Among them were his sister, then heir apparent Princess Lili'uokalani, and Emma Ka'ilikapuolono Metcalf Beckley (later she used the surname Nakuina), both of whom were women, and both scholars fluent in English and Hawaiian, who went on to publish more books of Hawaiian folklore.

Steve: and was King David Kalakaua's book a success?

Stephanie: It had mixed success in the United States. Newspaper stories and travel books about Hawai'i at the time described Hawaiians as "savages" or "a primitive people." So some reviewers doubted that a savage could write a book. It was described as "purportedly" written by King Kalākaua. So he had to endure some insults from an ignorant public, but the book has stood the test of time, especially

for Hawaiians and visitors to the islands. It has been a local best seller since publication and was most recently reprinted in 2018.

John: So you mentioned that his sister princess Lili'uokalani worked on the book, and Steve also talked about her as a "Hidden Folklorist." What can you tell us about her folklore work?

Stephanie: Lili'uokalani became queen after Kalakaua died in 1891. In January 1893, a group of American and European businessmen overthrew Queen Lili'uokalani. They declared martial law and declared themselves the Provisional Government of the new Republic of Hawai'i. The queen fought for the restoration of the Hawaiian monarchy for the rest of her life through diplomatic means. In 1895 there was an uprising in an effort to reinstate the Monarchy. This failed, and the leaders were arrested along with the Queen and some of her supporters. The Queen was given a chance to abdicate in exchange for commuting the death sentences of the rebels. She abdicated on January 24, 1895 and was imprisoned in a room in her own palace until September 4, 1896. During her imprisonment, she translated the Kumulipo, the chant that her brother had first published in Hawaiian. So she was the first to put that into English.

Steve: And that was kind of political, wasn't it?

Stephanie: I think so. Her foreword described it as "folk-lore or traditions of an aboriginal people" and a "souvenir" for her visitors during her imprisonment. Remember, it's a long sacred chant of that tells of the creation of the Earth and gives the succession of Hawaiian rulers to the time of Kamehameha I. She appended her own genealogy at the end. So the "souvenir" she gave her visitors was a statement of her right to rule, connecting her not only to the genealogy of Hawaiian royalty but the very creation of Hawaii and the world.

John: Clever, strategic, and of course, the work of a brilliant Hidden Folklorist. Thanks for filling us in, Stephanie!

Stephanie: Thanks for having me!

Steve: You know, Lili'uokalani is not so much a household name here on the mainland, but I think one of her songs is. She wrote the Hawaiian classic Aloha O'e. Let's hear E.K. Rose with that song.

[E.K. Rose sings "Aloha O'e" in Hawaiian and English. Recorded February 20, 1917, in Camden, NJ]

John: One of the things that comes out in looking at these “Hidden Folklorists” is the really impressive diversity you find in folklife and in Library of Congress collections: even though the folks we’ve talked about so far didn’t record audio for the Library of Congress, we’ve been able to find some great collection items to represent the genres they worked on, whether Scottish ballads or Hawaiian sacred chants.

Steve: Yeah, that’s a great point. People think of us as a center for American folklife, but because there are Americans of so many backgrounds, and because the traditions of our ancestral countries remain important to us, we actually collect material from all over the world. We've got another great example of that. Let’s talk to Michelle Stefano, who wrote about a fascinating set of recordings of Iraqi folktales collected by Sarah P. Jamali. Hi Michelle!

Michelle: Hi strangers!

John: so Michelle, how did you come across this collection?

Michelle: I’m particularly in the international connections at the archive, American Folklife Center, has, to institutions and people around the world, and one of my favorite ways to explore our collections is to leaf through correspondence files, where I often come across fascinating letters sent between our archive, and sometimes higher up in the Library leadership, and wide-ranging institutions, organizations, and people from across the world. That's how I discovered a report about a project in Baghdad, Iraq, centered on Iraqi folktales recorded by a Mrs. Sarah Powell Jamali in 1953. More than that, I found a memo written by the Librarian of Congress in 1953 directing our archive head to set up the field trip, and referring to Mrs. Jamali as “The Gal who will use the recording machine!” I couldn’t resist that phrase, so I made it my title for the blog post!

Steve: Who was Sarah Jamali?

Michelle: She was born in 1908 in Saskatchewan, Canada, to American parents. Her name was Sarah Powell, and Jamali was her married name. She was the wife of a politician who eventually became the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mohammed Fadhel Jamali. He was trained as a teacher here in the U.S., and had gotten his political start in the ministry of Education. Sarah met him at University, first at the University of Chicago and then at Columbia University’s Teachers College. She moved to Baghdad with him in 1932 as a teacher of English. In a 1953 letter from Sarah to the then Librarian of Congress, Luther H. Evans, her affiliation is listed as

Head of the English Department at Queen Alia College, which was a women's college at the University of Baghdad.

John: So, she was a college professor of English who was also married to a prominent Iraqi politician. How did she come to collect folktales?

Michelle: Well, Sarah later wrote that when she began to study Arabic, she began listening to storytelling sessions in social contexts, which were a common pastime. She said she was "impressed by the amount of folklore to be heard on every side," and that she "longed to collect some of the stories before they died or were forgotten." It appears that she was first put in contact with our Archive through Ralph Solecki, an anthropologist working in Northern Iraq, who had borrowed from the Library of Congress an Eicor tape recorder, two microphones, a generator, and a battery, all totaling \$400. He used this equipment to document folk and traditional music of the region, and those recordings eventually became the [Ralph Solecki Collection of Folk Music of Iraq](#), which is mostly Kurdish folk music. I even determined that the equipment most likely sailed to the Middle East aboard the S.S. Exeter, which departed New York Harbor on February 16, 1951. In late August of that year, Solecki wrote to Duncan Emrich here at the archive, to announce that the expedition was over and that the equipment was ready to be sent back to Washington, D.C. But in his letter, he alludes to previous conversations he had with Emrich about Sarah Jamali, and the possibility that she would next use the recorder to document Iraqi folk tales.

Steve: So the recording equipment then just stayed in Iraq?

Michelle: Yes. And then there's a flurry of letters, including between Mrs. Jamali and the Librarian of Congress, in which she promises to document Iraqi "stories, proverbs, poems, and songs...beginning in Baghdad and working outward as opportunity arises." She says she expects it will be primarily Arabic as opposed to Kurdish. The Librarian agreed, and then he had the Archive send her tapes and spools, writing that great memo referring to her as "The gal who will use the recording machine." A year later, she sent two tapes to the Archive, the recordings that now comprise the [Sarah P. Jamali Collection](#). And even after she was done with it, the equipment stayed there. It went to the University of Baghdad with the help of the Rockefeller Foundation, which reimbursed the Archive for it.

John: So there's a fantastic backstory to the collection, right? But what's on the recordings?

Michelle: Well, the recordings have primarily one woman's voice telling stories. And I was at a disadvantage not speaking Arabic. But it's great to work here at the Library of Congress, because we have great colleagues who speak most of the world's languages. So I called my friend Muhannad Salhi from the Africa and Middle East Division. He gave them a listen, provided me with some background information about Iraqi history, and he came along with me to tell you about them.

Steve: Hello Muhannad...it's great to have you on the podcast!

Muhannad: Oh, thank you for having me!

John: so what kinds of stories did you hear on the tapes?

Muhannad: Well let me begin by saying that when Michelle mentioned the name Jamali to me, the first question I had was is she related to Muhammad Fadil al-Jamali? Muhammad Fadil al-Jamali was a prominent politician in Iraq during the era of the monarchy in Iraq. He was Prime Minister twice, and served as Foreign Minister for at least eight terms, and I believe he was also involved in education. After the 1958 revolution, which was a pretty violent revolution, the monarchy and its supporters...actually, they killed the monarchy and most of its supporters, whom they deemed as stooges of imperialism, and Mohammed Fadhel Jamali fell into that category. So he was initially condemned to death, and then that sentence was commuted to about ten years in jail, and then due to foreign pressure, because he had made a lot of friends in his portfolio as foreign minister, they commuted that to three years. He served three years, and then was allowed to leave the country, and went to Tunisia, where he died I believe in 1997.

As far as the stories themselves, they are folktales in a form of colloquial Arabic that's distinct to Iraq. A lot of them are humorous, they involve romantic stories or plots, that sort of thing. For instance, one story is about a woman whose family is trying to pressure her into marrying her cousin, and she always comes back and says no I can't do that, because I'm married. So the family's asking well, who are you married to? I've never met this man! So she says, well, my husband only comes at night and leaves at night, so none of you were able to see him, or ARE able to see him. So the family starts to get worried, I mean, is she consorting with some jinn, some spirit? Eventually they appeal to the king of the land, and they say, "this is the story with our daughter, what are we supposed to do about it?" And it turns out that the king is actually the secret husband! Another story is about a horrible miser and his miserly exploits, and he is married to a young woman who outwits him, and eventually ends up killing him.

Steve: Wow, let's hear a bit of that story

[Storytelling in Arabic by Bahiya Jamali from Sarah P. Jamali Collection (AFC 1955/004)]

Steve: Again that's a folktale from the Sarah P. Jamali collection, and we're here with Michelle Stefano and Muhannad Salhi. So in general, the stories in the collection seem to be the types of stories you find in the classic Arabian story collections like the Thousand and One nights. But oral versions in a local dialect. Is that a fair understanding, Muhannad?

Muhannad: Oh yes, absolutely. I mean, remember that when they started collecting the corpus of the Arabian Nights, what they did was compile all these stories from various areas, and then put them into one big corpus. So, once it's committed into writing it's in classical Arabic, so anybody that reads Arabic is able to understand them. Nonetheless, the oral traditions persist, and you get them...they have to local flavor of the region they're from, or the city or the town that they're from. And so sometimes you can hear the same story from somewhere in Morocco, or somewhere in Iraq, and the moral is the same, but again it sounds quite different because of the local flavor. It's the same with jokes, for example, you hear the same jokes, they have the same punchline...but again it has that local flavor that makes it a little bit different.

John: So was it surprising to you at all that we had this great collection of stories and Arabic material in our archive at the American Folklife Center?

Muhannad: Well, the American Folklife Center has a magnificent collection, but no actually I wasn't surprised because I've been consulted before on other recordings I believe from Morocco and Egypt. I also believe that you have some of the earliest Arab American recordings but I haven't had a chance to see those yet.

[Lute music interlude; oud played by Kenan Adnawi from the Lubana Al Quntar and Kenan Adnawi: traditional music and song from Syria collection (AFC 2015/009)]

John: So, Michelle, that's not the end of the story, right?

Michelle. Right. For Sarah, there was another kind of imprisonment after the 1958 revolution, for her. She wrote that she found herself confined to her home in Baghdad with lots of time on her hands. She used the time to translate some of the stories she had recorded into English. She published 24 of them in a book called [*Folktales from the City of the Golden Domes*](#), which has at least one story

from the audio collection here at the American Folklife Center—the one Muhannad mentioned about the miser killed by his wife!

Steve: You know it's funny, but that's exactly like Queen Liliuokalani's story: a political prisoner under house arrest, but she uses her time to translate folklore texts.

John: And this book by Sarah led you to another discovery about the tapes, didn't it?

Michelle: Yes, and this was really exciting, although all of it is. But her book contains a heartfelt preface in which she mentions that she often recorded her mother-in-law, Bahiya Jamali, who was “an excellent storyteller” according to Sarah. But she said that Bahiya was shy about letting anyone else in the family know that she was telling stories for a tape recorder, because she thought they might disapprove. I started to suspect that the recordings in the collection that we have were of Bahiya Jamali, since the same woman's voice is heard throughout all of them. So I got in touch with Sarah's sons, Abbas F. Al-Jamali and Usameh Jamali, and her granddaughter, Fatima Jamali, and they confirmed that it's Bahiya, her mother-in-law, on the tapes!

John: Wow, that's some amazing detective work.

Michelle: Thank you John!

Steve: I also love the fact that Sarah Jamali left behind writings about her love of folklore. And you put one inspiring quotation in the blog that I'd love for you to read.

Michelle: Yeah, OK, so this is what she wrote: These are some stories of long ago that have lived on until today, but soon there will be no more of the old storytellers to pass them on from generation to generation. If they live at all, it will be in the pages of books or as voices on tapes and records. However, I hope that the new generation will love folktales so that they may live in the future as long as they have lived in the past.

Steve: Words of wisdom from a Hidden Folklorist, Sarah P. Jamali.

Michelle: Hidden no more

[Lute music interlude; oud played by Kenan Adnawi from the Lubana Al Quntar and Kenan Adnawi: traditional music and song from Syria collection (AFC 2015/009)]

John: and now we have one more hidden Folklorist to talk about, one who wrote pretty extensively about folklore but is better known for other writings. This is the great novelist Ralph Ellison, whose best known novel is *Invisible Man*. Steve uncovered some of his folklore work on the blog. So, how did you get interested in Ellison?

Steve: Well, I didn't say this in the blog, but I got interested in Ellison before I was a folklorist myself. In fact, my mother had a copy of *Invisible Man*, and I read it in my teens and was blown away by its simultaneous realism and weirdness. And then I read it again in college and gained a better appreciation of it.

And over the years as I studied folklore I noted some of the folklore connections in the novel. These are well known, and scholars have commented on them, including Henry Louis Gates, Trudier Harris, and others. In fact, one of my mentor figures in graduate school was John Roberts, who became the first African American president of the American Folklore Society, and in his presidential address at AFS, with me sitting raptly in the audience, he talked about folkloric background to *Invisible Man*, so I've been aware of some connections between Ellison and folklore pretty much since I've been studying folklore!

John: so how did Ellison get his start as a folklorist?

Steve: Just to give you his background, he was born in 1914 in Oklahoma City, the grandson of slaves. In some of his writings he talks about identifying with folklore characters like Ulysses and Brer Rabbit when he was a child. One of the points he makes is that African American culture has both African and European folkloric roots. He went to University at Tuskegee Institute, but he ran out of money in 1936 and had to take a break from college. And at that point he went to New York City to try to earn some money, and this became the start of his writing career and also his folklore career. He met Richard Wright, who convinced him to try his hand at writing. And he began publishing essays and short stories in periodicals like *The Negro Quarterly*, *The New Republic*, and *Saturday Review*. But they still didn't pay the bills, so he got a job with the WPA Federal Writers Project, collecting folklore and life histories. So like Zora Neale Hurston, Stetson Kennedy, Sidney Robertson Cowell, and so many others in our AFC collections, Ralph Ellison was a New Deal folklorist.

John: What kinds of things did he end up collecting?

Steve: everything from life histories and proverbs to folktales and legends. He collected in writing, and most of the material ended up in the Library of Congress's Manuscript Division.

John: OK, so do you think his collecting had an influence on his later writing career?

Steve: I really do. A small example is the phrase "I'm in New York but New York ain't in me," which Ellison collected from a Floridian named Lloyd Green in Harlem, and then placed in the mouth of his character Mary Rambo, a kind of mentor and mother figure to the narrator of *Invisible Man*. Mary was worried that New York might corrupt the narrator, and held up herself as an example: I'm in New York but New York ain't in me.

John: But you found what you think is a much more significant example, right?

Steve: Yes, I got really interested when I turned up a story Ellison collected about an invisible man. So we're going to hear that story. He collected it from Leo Gurley on June 14, 1938. Now, because Ellison collected in writing and we have no audio for this, we're going to have a dramatic reading by Solomon HaileSelassie. But I should say that these are the words that Ralph Ellison wrote them down. So it's kind of a disclaimer that if you find the language offensive or out there, this is exactly what Ellison wrote.

[Harmonica music interlude. Phil Wiggins from the Phil Wiggins and friends concert collection (AFC 2014/030)]

Solo: I hope to God to kill me if this aint the truth. All you got to do is go down to Florence, South Carolina and ask most anybody you meet and they'll tell you its the truth.

Florence is one of them hard towns for colored folks. You have to stay out of the white folks way; all but Sweet. That the fellow I'm fixing to tell you about. His name was Sweet-the-monkey. I done forgot his real name, I caint remember it. But that was what everybody called him. He wasn't no big guy. He was just bad. My mother and grandmother used to say he was wicked. He was bad all right. He was one sucker who didn't give a damn about those crackers. Fact is, they got so they stayed out of his way. I caint never remember hear tell of any them crackers bothering that guy. He used to give em trouble all over the place and all they could do was give the rest of us hell.

It was this way: Sweet would make hisself invisible. You don't believe it? Well here's how he done it. Sweet-the-monkey cut open a black cat and took out its heart. Climbed up a tree backwards and cursed God. After that he could do anything. The white folks would wake up in the morning and find their stuff gone. He cleaned out the stores. He cleaned out the houses. Hell, he even cleaned out the dam bank! He was the boldest black sonofabitch ever been down that way. And couldn't nobody do nothing to him. Because they couldn't never see im when he done it. He didn't need the money. Fact is, most of the time he broke into places he wouldn't take nothing. Lots a times he just did it to show 'em he could. Hell, he had everybody in that lil old town scaird as hell; black folks and white folks.

The white folks started trying to catch Sweet. Well, they didn't have no luck. Theyd catch 'im standing in front of the eating joints and put the handcuffs on im and take im down to the jail. You know what that sucker would do? The police would come up and say: "Come on Sweet" and he'd say "Youall want me?" and they'd put the handcuffs on im and start leading im away. He'd go with em a little piece; Sho, just like he was going. Then all of a sudden he would turn himself invisible and disappear. The police wouldn't have nothing but the handcuffs. They couldn't do a thing with that Sweet-the-monkey. Just before I come up this way they was all trying to trap im. They didn't have much luck. Once they found a place he'd looted with footprints leading away from it and they decided to try and trap im. This was bout sun up and they followed his footprints all that day. They followed them till sundown then he came partly visible. It was red and the sun was shining on the trees and they waited till they saw his shadow. That was the last of Sweet-the-monkey. They never did find his body and right after that I come up here. That was bout five years ago. My brother was down there last year and they said they think Sweet done come back. But they caint be sho because he wont let hisself be seen.

[Harmonica music interlude. Phil Wiggins from the Phil Wiggins and friends concert collection (AFC 2014/030)]

John: So basically, it's a story that's literally about an invisible man.

Steve: Right, and more than that, you can see some of the themes of the novel here. Gurley's invisible hero, Sweet-the-monkey, finds invisibility to be an advantage when confronting all the limits placed on him by society, whether racial or otherwise. But because his only protection IS invisibility, he is eventually discovered and defeated.

John: Invisibility also has the effect of negating Sweet. The narrator can only remember Sweet's nickname and invisibility, describing him only in terms of what he's not: not big, and not visible.

Steve: Right. And the end of Sweet's tale points out further perils of his invisibility, as it ultimately calls into question his very existence. In the end, the narrator and hearer are left not knowing whether Sweet comes back. Without knowing his name or description, they're not likely to ever find out.

John: You have a quote in the blog from the scholar Sarah Rutkowski, who points out that "In *Invisible Man*, invisibility signals both the narrator's inability to be seen for his true self and his own reclamation of his identity by disappearing from his tormentors. Invisibility is both the source of and the solution to his predicament."

Steve: Exactly, and that's what you see in *Sweet the Monkey* too. Another thing it has in common with the novel is its combination of the familiarity and realism of some of the story mixed with the surreal and fantastic elements of the plot. It makes you hear things in a new way. Like the phrase "They never did find his body." That sounds all too familiar in the Jim Crow south, but in this case it's because he literally disappeared and became invisible. So the story raises uncomfortable questions, just like Ellison's novel.

John: Yeah, that really is a great find!

Steve: Thanks! If listeners check out the blog, they can see the manuscript, and also some draft pages from the novel—we have Ellison's papers here at the Library, including his rough drafts!

John: That's fantastic! So did he do any more folklore work?

Steve: Not directly, but he did continue to write and speak about folklore, and there's a lot of folklore in his subsequent writings too. One of my favorites is [a 1955 interview he gave to *The Paris Review*](#), in which he described folklore in a wise and beautiful way, revealing a folklorist's approach within his practice as a writer. So once more, here's Ralph Ellison's words about folklore:

[Blues music interlude. Phil Wiggins (harmonica), Rick Franklin (guitar), Marcus Moore (violin), and Junious Brickhouse (dance) from the Phil Wiggins and friends concert collection (AFC 2014/030)]

Folklore...preserves mainly those situations which have repeated themselves again and again in the history of any given group. It describes those rites, manners, customs, and so forth, which insure the good life, or destroy it; and it describes those boundaries of feeling, thought, and action which that particular group has found to be the limitation of the human condition. It projects this wisdom in symbols which express the group's will to survive; it embodies those values by which the group lives and dies. These drawings may be crude, but they are nonetheless profound in that they represent the group's attempt to humanize the world. It's no accident that great literature, the product of individual artists, is erected upon this humble base.

[Blues music interlude. Phil Wiggins (harmonica), Rick Franklin (guitar), Marcus Moore (violin), and Junious Brickhouse (dance) from the Phil Wiggins and friends concert collection (AFC 2014/030)]

John: Some great words from Ralph Ellison. That's our first episode about Hidden Folklorists. We have some people to thank, of course. First of all, Stephanie Hall, Michelle Stefano, and Muhannad Salhi who appeared as themselves. And then Solomon HaileSelassie, who played Leo Gurley and read the quote from Ralph Ellison.

Steve: And let's thank our engineer Jon Gold, and our intern Gabriel Cowan. The staff of the American Folklife Center, and our great colleagues throughout the Library of Congress.

John. And of course, thanks to our listeners! We'll see you next time on Folklife Today!

[Hawaiian guitar finale, played by Ledward Kaapana, from the collection Ledward Kaapana: master slack key guitar player from Hawaii, 2017 July 5 (AFC 2017/028)]