

An Open Ear

Rose Skelton speaks to Jayme Stone about revisiting and reinterpreting folk songs collected in the US and Caribbean

I'm no collector,' says Canadian banjo player, composer and folk song gatherer in the liner notes of his second volume of reinterpreted field and folk recordings. '*Nor am I particularly nostalgic. I revel in the act of discovery.*'

It is the joy of discovery, Stone tells me, the rooting out of unfamiliar, unusual and interesting sounds, that has compelled him to make a second album of rearranged songs that were originally collected from around the US and the Caribbean by collectors such as Alan Lomax, his father John Lomax, Artus Moser, Guy and Candie Carawan and Herbert Halpert. The songs were gathered by ethnomusicologists and folklorists – Alan Lomax being perhaps the best known – for research organisations such as the Library of Congress. These institutions wanted to document the work songs, spirituals, hymns, prison songs and sea shanties made by ordinary folk that might be, if not recorded, in danger of dying out. The recordings, which were made throughout the early and mid-20th century, now reside in places like the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC. Jayme Stone is a dedicated visitor to them both.

"It's really the stuff that just wakes up my ear in some way," he says of how he came to choose the ten songs on this album, as well as the 19 songs and tunes on his 2015 *Lomax Project* release (reviewed in #108). There were tens of thousands of songs to choose from – Alan Lomax's recordings number 35,000 alone – but he had to select just a few.

"I tend to like things that are unfamiliar," he says, "like a particular arcane corner of the tradition that I've just never heard anything quite like." 'Mwen Pas Danse' is one of those songs, a curious and upbeat calypso from Dominica, an island in the Caribbean. The song features banjo and accordion – Stone's band includes the vocalist Moira Smiley, who also plays accordion – as well as the playful words, expressions and sounds, which come at the listener in a variety of languages.

"I had never heard anything like it," says Stone. He had been on the hunt for a song that was originally composed for both banjo and accordion. "The song was in Dominican Creole, and they sang a little bit in English and a little bit in French and a little bit in a language I couldn't understand. It's the same recipe that a lot of American music is made

from – you have European-American and African-American influences coming together in unusual ways, so it's like a sister-music to American music. But that song," he says, "I heard it and I thought, I've never heard anything quite like that and that's really attractive to me."

Stone's interest in field recordings goes back 22 years to the year he took up the banjo. He would send away for the recordings from places such as Smithsonian Folkways, the Institution's record label. "They used to have a programme where you could get a list of everything in their catalogue," he says, "and they would take down the original masters and spin you up a cassette tape and send it with the liner notes on foolscap, usually with all the information they had about the artist or that session." When much later he read the biography *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* by John Szwed, a light switched on. "The book lit up all these songs that had been a touchstone for 20 years, and I realised that there was this common thread that so many of the songs I knew and loved came from field recordings. It gave me a chance to delve deeper into some of the lesser-known corners of the collection."

Jayme Stone's *Lomax Project* came first, followed by *Folklife*, his latest release, which brings together some musical reinventions of Lomax recordings, but also includes recordings by other collectors too. By the time he was touring the last album, with collaborators including mandolinist Tim O'Brien, old-time banjo player Bruce Molsky, singer Margaret Glaspy and fiddle player Brittany Haas, new recordings that Stone had discovered were making their way onto the set-list. "I'm always listening to things," says Stone, "and part of the idea of not calling it an Alan Lomax record was being able to open the aperture a little wider."

He brought in a new band – bass player Joe Phillips, fiddler Sumaia Jackson and singer and accordionist Moira Smiley – and some new collaborators too. On 'Buttermilk', where Stone's five-string banjo is fitted with a piece of sound-dampening foam to replicate the tone of early gourd banjos, Dom Flemons, formerly of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, plays the quills, a traditional African-American instrument made from cane reeds. While Stone plucks the banjo in his unusual style, which is neither bluegrass, old-time nor ▶



Michael Wilson

classical (but something of all three), Flemons sings and Ron Miles improvises on cornet. The banjo is understated, as is Stone's way, taking a backseat to the other instruments and musicians, but at the same time pinning the sound together.

"I was well aware on the *Lomax Project* album of having a band of white people playing mostly black music," says Stone, who says this was a scheduling issue rather than choice. "I don't want to say I'm uncomfortable with it but there's definitely a lot of questions about cultural appropriation." Lomax described the kind of music he was looking for as "music with the bark still on," and while he was researching the music, Stone found a typewritten memo at the Library of Congress. In the note, Lomax recounts interviewing a man who owned a record store in Kentucky who talked about how everyone wants to buy tin-pan alley and gospel music, and the pop music from New York.

"Alan on the other hand really wanted to capture 'authentic' music," says Stone, "which is problematic. Because here you have a white man from Texas who's mostly interested in African-American traditions, deciding what is and isn't 'authentic.'" When Lomax met blues musician Lead Belly and he sang a song he learned from the radio, Lomax said he was only interested in songs from the farm, or from the chain gang, "because that's authentic. And that's highly problematic. I try to be aware of, and I'm sensitive about, what it means to be borrowing music from different cultures, especially with the power dynamic that there was in slavery days and the very complex history, even just playing the instrument that I do. I feel that it's important to speak up about the history of it, and to be educated about where the instrument came from."

To that end, the sleeve notes – richly detailed and beautifully designed – bring the histories of these songs and musicians to life. Stone's stories about the original songs also tell the story about his finding of them, so that, just as the banjo doesn't take centre stage on the songs but nevertheless is a sturdy fixture of the music, Stone's own history with these songs shines through. The result is an intriguing layering of stories: those of the original songs, and those of Stone's relationship with them.

On 'Buttermilk', a 1959 song performed by Miles and Bob Pratcher and recorded by Lomax in Mississippi, Stone's notes tell the tale of calling up Miles' granddaughter Ester Mae, who remembers Lomax coming to the house to record her father and uncle and who described, to Stone, what life was like at that time in the Mississippi Hill Country. *'The Pratchers lived a hardscrabble life,'* the notes tell us, *'as sharecroppers, raising cotton and corn as well as their own food – hogs, sorghum, and sugar cane. They'd wake early to milk cows, churn butter, and make molasses before heading out into the cotton fields. Three generations – more than 15 people – lived in a big house with no running water or refrigerator. "But we were happy," Ester Mae recalls, "everyone was around."*

Elsewhere, Stone reminds us that this music, and the act of selecting and collecting it contains complex racial elements that we – as consumers – need to be aware of. On the beautifully-energetic tune 'Boatsman', originally performed by North Carolina fiddle player Marcus Martin and recorded by Artus Moser in 1942, Stone reminds us that what is now a sweet

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melody for us to enjoy, started off life as a blackface minstrel song. *'Minstrel shows were a series of comic skits, dances, and music featuring white actors in blackface – they used burnt cork and later shoe polish – designed to lampoon black people and spread racial stereotypes. It is part of a dark chapter in America's cultural history and the banjo was central to its identity.'*

While Lomax was on a quest for what he called 'authentic music,' untainted by the trends of popular music and lodged firmly in the past, Stone is after something quite different. He asserts that it's quite possible to be deeply rooted in tradition and to have a love and appreciation of what's happening musically today. One of the delights of being on Stone's mailing list is that his show announcements also contain personal notes detailing what he's listening to at the moment. It is through him that I found out about American rapper Frank Ocean, indie-pop singer Feist, and Bon Iver's latest synthesised album *22, A Million*. But it is also through Stone that I have learned some of my favourite traditional clawhammer tunes on the banjo.

"I don't happen to think that there's a rub there," he says of this love for music from all eras and traditions. "I'm a perfect example: I listen to all kinds of music and keep my ear to the ground. I was super influenced by Frank Ocean's new record; that was what I was listening to when I went to the gym before hitting the studio every day. And yet, we can play traditional music too. I think an astute musician in any era is able to listen to all kinds of things and discern what they want to bring into their music, and what they can subvert and make seem traditional again." ♦

+ **ALBUM** *Jayme Stone's Folklife* will be reviewed in the next issue



Alexandra Defurio

Jayme Stone's band: (left to right) Stone, Moira Smiley, Joe Phillips and Sumaia Jackson