



Alan Lomax, 1915-2002

2015 is the 100th anniversary of the birth of the great Alan Lomax. No doubt most people reading this newsletter have some knowledge of the work of this tireless man, who believed sincerely and deeply that the job of preserving the musics and cultures of the world is a desperately important mission. He was concerned that commercialization and mass communication were "graying out" these areas and devoted his long life to their preservation and dissemination, by putting on concerts, making films, writing books, forming organizations, lecturing, and maybe most importantly, traveling the US and the world and recording music and interviews that quite probably would otherwise have been lost to time.

Alan worked with his father John Lomax for a few years, and continued later on his own and with others, recording thousands of interviews and songs for the Library of Congress. In 1942 Congress cut funding that made this possible, but Alan continued on his own. The resulting recordings, from the mid-40s into the 1990s, have been digitized and were uploaded this year by his own organization, the Association for Cultural Equity, which Alan founded in 1983.

I have only begun dip into this treasure, consisting of 17,400 recordings from small snippets to whole songs and interviews, but soon came across an interview with the amazing Big Bill Broonzy whose words underscore Alan's point about commercialization "graying out" the purity of the culture. Here's a partial transcript. My apologies for anything misquoted, or for anything edited out that shouldn't have been:

BBB: Well I'll tell you the whole thing... They found me in Arkansas. And they tell me they says we want you to... make some records. They sent some fella; not the big shot... it's some little guy, come down in a car... I say why sure... I wants to make a re-

cord, so, come to Chicago. I get to Chicago, then I meets the big shot. And the big shot introduced me to some other fella... And he's gonna sit down with me and tell me to play. All right, I'll play... He says now look, he says, now you got to take out this part of that song, and you gotta put something else in there, in between there, because this is, not, right. And you're not making CHORDS. You're making something that, uh... I don't understand what you're making... And there I am, sitting up there, and I don't know one chord from another, but I still gotta do this because I'm in Chicago, and I has no money, and no train fare to get back home, and... I gotta do what he said. So now I gotta FORGET what I know, and try to do what he tell me... So now I gotta go and work and work and study and study all night to try to find out what he meant by "take this out and put that in." So finally I did learn that. And that's why I think that they sent me to Europe, or got me to come to Europe, because I learned how to make C, F, G, B flat, A flat, and C sharp, and some few diminishes, and some few sixes, and ninths, and things like that...

AL: They say, change this, and...

BBB: ...That's why a lot of...blues singers, have come to Chicago and New York and different places, and they say, "Aw, that guy flopped." See? And the people, the people of America, really, and all over the [places] I been... They CRAVE to hear the real thing...

AL: Suppose [producer Lester] Melrose calls you [to do] a record session for him... how's it go?

BBB: Well, you see the way those things went, when I was notified to get ready, I'd have a contract with the company to make so many numbers. ...I get my songs together by myself. Then I call in the leader, which was MY leader, then, the feller that did my arranging and one of the greatest men that I ever met in my life, one of the best fellows TO me... taught me a lot: [Chicago-based jazz saxophonist and bandleader] Sax Mallard. And he would sit down with me, and I'd sing what I was singing and I'd make the chords that I was

making, and he said, "Well you just make what you making and sing what you sing, so I'll put down what I wanna put down, and I'll have the band to play, according to the way what you doing." And he get the band together, himself... and then here comes some little guy, that know NOTHIN' about NOTHIN', and he come up and says to Sax Mallard, says well you should be making... this that and the other, or some seventh or some ninth, some aug-u-mented or some kind of a crazy thing, and Sax Mallard would say well I'm sorry, say but I'm playing it the way the man's singing. And a lot of times they'd have an argument about that. Then Melrose would come in and say "Well I want it to go like THIS." Then they'd cut the whole thing off and they'd start back over brand new again, and I'd sing there for maybe, for, for, sing one song five times, and a lot of times I'd sing, and sing, and sing, and sing, and then they'd finally, Sax Mallard would say well Bill... [We have to] change that tone because we gotta make the correct chord. (voice rising) Well now I gotta forget MY idea and MY feelings, and sing it the way the MAN wanted. Then if the song DON'T SELL, they come to me and say well you're no good, you flopped...

AL: Dirty stuff.

BBB: Well all right, that's what happens... You take a couple of friends of mine, I won't call their names, they're... from Mississippi, in Chicago now. The greatest blues singers ever was. Greater than I'll ever be and ever was in my life. They won't make it. Because... they gotta CHANGE from what they was to stay, on, what I call, that meal ticket. That is, making some, getting paid for something they doing. (voice up) And if he's gonna get paid, gotta DO like that man said do, or he don't get no pay. And he can't live without money. In the city of Chicago. New York.

And that's why Alan Lomax's collections are so important. They're the "real thing." See Wikipedia for details about the Lomaxes and about Broonzy. And here's the link to the fabulous collection. Have fun:

<http://research.culturalequity.org/audio-guide.jsp>