

Local as National: Alan Lomax's Nationalist Pedagogy of the Folk

Benjamin D. Haas

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Approved by:

Brigid Cohen

Jocelyn Neal

Phil Vandermeer

## ABSTRACT

BENJAMIN HAAS: Local as National: Alan Lomax's Nationalist Pedagogy of the Folk

Though ascribed a prominent place in narratives of the American folk movement, a comprehensive model for Alan Lomax's work as a folk music collector and promoter during the 1930s and 1940s has yet to emerge. Melding historical models of folk scholarship with his own innovations, Lomax developed a conception of folksong in fundamental tension with itself, one which emphasized the unique contributions of individual folk artists even while positing folk music as a unified artistic language of national origin. Inspired by a Popular Front populism that championed the role of art in left-leaning causes, Lomax maximized the political potential of this inherent tension between national and local, employing folk song as the crux of a nationalist pedagogy designed to supplant the decadence and disaffection of American mass culture with the grassroots (and thereby democratic) language of folk song.

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## Introduction

In most any narrative of American folk music, the figure of Alan Lomax looms large. Spanning seven decades, his career as a collector, publisher, performer, and promoter of folk music helped facilitate an explosion of interest and activity in American folk song during the twentieth century. Though cataloguers of the American folk movement such as Bob Cantwell have described Lomax as “arguably the most important figure in the entire story,” the breadth and diversity of Lomax’s impact make him difficult to characterize.<sup>1</sup> Setting Alan Lomax’s story within his broader narrative of folk music and American public memory, Benjamin Filene casts Lomax as a prominent example of the “cultural middlemen” who delivered folk music to broader audiences, and in so doing:

...made judgments about what constituted America’s musical traditions, helped shape what “mainstream” audiences recognized as authentic, and, inevitably, transformed the music that the folk performers offered.<sup>2</sup>

While Filene’s “middleman” framework does well to acknowledge Lomax’s prominent influence on the shape and public perception of the folk movement, it is less effective in modeling the ideological underpinnings of his activities. Though expressed through the panoply of his activities as a folk music “middleman,” Alan Lomax’s folk music project coalesced around an ideologically-motivated effort to reshape American culture through folk song. Inspired by a Popular Front political sensibility that championed the role of art

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 377.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill:

in left-leaning causes, Alan Lomax employed folk song as the crux of a nationalist pedagogy designed to supplant the decadence and disaffection of American mass culture with the grassroots (and thereby democratic) language of folk song.

If the promise of a national culture based on folk song provided the motivation for Lomax's manifold activities in the 1930s and 1940s, the means of this effort emerged from his skillful negotiation of a fundamental tension between national and local conceptions of folk culture. More than any folk scholar before him, Alan Lomax embraced the figure of the folk singer. Where previous collectors saw a distant and undifferentiated folk past, Lomax perceived a wealth of individual stories, one at least for every song. In his narrative of folk song, therefore, individual singers took a starring role. The folk artists he championed were colorful and diverse, including a prophetic Okie drifter (Woody Guthrie), a protest singer from the coal-mining regions of Kentucky (Aunt Molly Jackson), and a black ex-convict from rural Louisiana (Huddie Ledbetter, aka "Leadbelly"), among others. Capitalizing on their talents and intriguing personal experiences, Lomax promoted these individuals as living proof that folk music remained a vibrant force in the lives of everyday Americans.

Whatever his investment in individual folk singers and their local experiences, however, Lomax most prominently featured these individuals as symbolic representatives of a nationalist folk music tradition. Modifying historical models of folk scholarship that linked folk expression to a distant national past, Lomax conceived of an American folk heritage yet alive in the offerings of his folk singer "discoveries." As working-class individuals whose songs emerged from the reality of their everyday lives, Lomax posited, singers like Guthrie and Leadbelly depicted not merely their own experience, but that of

“the people” writ large. Maximizing this slippage between individual and collective, local and national, Lomax forged a uniquely flexible conception of folk song rife for appropriation in the shifting political contexts of the 1930s and 1940s. In varied activities as archivist, publisher, radio host, concert promoter, and performer, Lomax exploited this local/national tension, promoting folk song as both a wellspring of national unity and a grassroots inoculation against the challenges of cultural imperialism. By studying Lomax’s work of the 1930s and 1940s in terms of this local/national tension, we glean both a clarifying model for the clouded diversity of his early career and a window into the ideological tension underlying Lomax’s appropriation of folk music to leftist political ends.

## Chapter 1: Alan Learns the Ropes: The Lomaxes and Shifts in the American Folk Scene

Though filtered through his own personal and political inclinations, Alan Lomax's distinctive conception of folk song first emerged from his mixed interaction with long-dominant paradigms in folk music scholarship. His primary exposure to this tradition came through his father, John Lomax, who had apprenticed at Harvard with the preeminent American folklorists of his day. Accompanying his father on lecture tours and folk collecting expeditions around the United States beginning in 1932, Alan Lomax gathered early and extensive exposure to the traditions of American folk scholarship.<sup>3</sup> During this experience, Lomax forged a relationship to the historical tradition of American folklore studies which, not unlike that of his father, proved both formative and antagonistic. On the one hand, the Lomaxes perpetuated folk scholarship's tendency to define folk music in terms of its origins, continuing long-running fascinations with isolated pre-modern cultures and the national character of the folk. On the other, their collaborative work during the 1930s considerably expanded prevailing ideas about where, when, and from whom folk song emerged, augmenting a text-based canon of "ancient" Anglo-ballads with recordings of contemporary folk communities of all stripes. For Alan

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<sup>3</sup> Although the Lomax collaboration is most famously tied to their folk song collection expedition to rural black prisons in the summer of 1933, this was merely the most iconic. The summer of 1932, for example, consisted of an extensive lecture tour by John accompanied by his eldest son Johnny as well as Alan. Beginning from their home base in Texas, John and Johnny made their way up the East Coast to Boston to pick up seventeen-year old Alan from his first (and only) year at Harvard University. The three continued across the country to Washington before Johnny was called away to the promise of a government position on the East Coast, leaving John and Alan alone to complete the last leg through California and back home. Though less often discussed than their 1933 journey, these travels proved pivotal in establishing the dynamics of the father/son collaborative relationship that would flourish as the decade progressed. For an in-depth description of John Lomax's 1932 lecture tour, see Nolan Porterfield, *The Last Cavalier: The Life and Times of John Lomax* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 273-287.

Lomax, the ultimate result of this mixed assimilation of traditional folk ideology was a definition of folk music in fundamental tension with itself, one which emphasized the unique contributions of individual folk artists even while promoting folk music as a unified artistic language of nationalist origin. Examining Alan Lomax's collaborative work with his father in the 1930s illuminates the development of this contradictory definition of folk song, identifying Alan's views as a selective adaptation of earlier models.

In his father John, Alan Lomax possessed a direct connection to the most rarified tradition of American folk scholarship. After completing an undergraduate degree at the University of Texas in 1897 and spending approximately a decade as an administrator and English professor in the Texas university system, John Lomax traveled to Harvard for a graduate year in 1906.<sup>4</sup> As a student of prominent English professors/folklorists Barrett Wendell and George Lyman Kittredge, Lomax found an opportunity to lend intellectual heft and prestige to his own fledging endeavors in folk scholarship.<sup>5</sup> Wendell and Kittredge offered not merely an Ivy League pedigree, but a direct connection to the eminent James Francis Child (1825-1896), a Shakespeare scholar and professor of rhetoric who spent much of his forty-year career in an effort to collect and codify the British ballad. Applying an unprecedented sense of encyclopedic rigor to a field dominated by European scholars, Child became the paragon of a newly viable tradition of

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<sup>4</sup> Lomax went to Harvard on a one-year leave from his English instructor position at Texas A&M University and returned to Texas one year later having earned an M.A. in English. For a detailed account of John Lomax's early career in higher education, see Porterfield, *The Last Cavalier*, 33-126.

<sup>5</sup> Raised and educated in the humble and provincial environs of rural Texas, Harvard represented a capstone achievement in Lomax's long search for achievement, authority, and recognition. Given that Lomax was quite aware of this discrepancy in prestige, the interest of his Harvard professors in his native folk poetry proved particularly motivating. Porterfield, *The Last Cavalier*, 109.



American folk scholarship. At the center of this legacy were his early eight-volume collection *English and Scottish Ballads* (1857-1858) and its successor, the ten-part magnum opus *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-1898).<sup>6</sup> Marking the fruition of a career-long collecting effort, Child viewed this latter collection of 305 ballads as a unified and exhaustive account of the British ballad tradition, explaining in the preface that “It was not my wish to begin to print *The English and Scottish Ballads* until this unrestricted title should be justified by my having at command every valuable copy and every known ballad.”<sup>7</sup> This promise of comprehensiveness proved intoxicating to subsequent folk collectors, who embraced the 305 ballads of Child’s collection as a gold standard against which to measure folk song repertoires of all kinds. Harvard’s English department remained the locus of this research even after Child’s death, with his student Kittredge teaching a regular course based around *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*.<sup>8</sup> In coming to Harvard to study with Child’s successors, therefore, John Lomax immersed himself in the most prominent stream of American folk studies tradition.<sup>9</sup>

In propagating Child’s canon of Anglo ballads, his Harvard successors also

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<sup>6</sup> Rosemary Levy Zumwalt, *American Folk Scholarship: A Dialogue of Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 47. Zumwalt explains that while Child published the collection in ten-parts, it was ultimately arranged into a five-volume set shortly after his death. As Child’s Harvard colleague and mentee, Kittredge oversaw this process, including the posthumous publication of the last two sections.

<sup>7</sup> James Francis Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1898), vii.

<sup>8</sup> While the course was not offered during Lomax’s year at Harvard, he found many other opportunities to interact with Kittredge, with the subject often being Lomax’s work in collecting folk song. Porterfield, *The Last Cavalier*, 114-118.

<sup>9</sup> For further explanation of Child’s lingering influence on the American folk movement, see Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 12-46.

perpetuated Child's time-honored preconceptions about the origin and definition of the folk. While the meticulous nature of Child's approach made his collection a milestone achievement, his work was rooted in the core assumptions of his European forebears. Following a mode of thought codified by late-eighteenth century German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder, Child understood the folk as an alternative to the constructed and artificial products of learned culture, one promising a pure and natural cultural expression born of the common people.<sup>10</sup> Exploring this binary as the basis of then-emerging categories of art music and folk music, Matthew Gelbart identifies the roots of this definition of the folk in a shift towards defining music in terms of origin rather than function.<sup>11</sup> Increasingly motivated by the forces of cultural nationalism, Gelbart argues, eighteenth-century advocates of the folk developed an ideology of origins that defined folk expression according to binaries of ethnicity (self vs. Other), time (modern vs. ancient), and compositional origin (individual vs. collective).<sup>12</sup> Forged during "a pivotal moment during the Enlightenment when the 'noble savage' was sought within Europe," this system became inherently linked to Scottish music, thereby turning Scotland into a test case for this ideology of folk origins.<sup>13</sup> In looking to British folk ballads as survivals of an ancient and isolated European past, Child's work rested firmly within this tradition.

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<sup>10</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 9-10. For further analysis of the art vs. folk binary in Herder see: Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of "Folk Music" and "Art Music"* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 197-203.

<sup>11</sup> Gelbart, *The Invention of "Folk Music,"* 14-39.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Gelbart introduces Scotland along with Germany as the two geographical examples around which conceptions of art and folk music converged. See Gelbart, *The Invention of "Folk Music,"* 10-11, 27-33.

Child's ballad canon and its underlying ideology of folk origins had a defining influence on American folk scholarship. The primary vehicle for this impact was a lingering emphasis on the English ballad. Though Child defined the ballad loosely as a "narrative song, a short tale in lyric verse," he maintained rigorous (if sometimes inconsistent) criteria for granting specific ballads canonic status within his collection. For Child, ballads were products of a pre-modern past, emerging from a collective oral tradition among communities in close proximity to nature. Because the modern phenomena of printed music and commercial ballads had corrupted this tradition, the original sources were effectively "sealed and dried up for ever."<sup>14</sup> Consequently, Child largely ignored contemporary folk communities, depending instead on archival sources in order to "select the most authentic copies, reprint them as they stand in the collections, restore readings that had been changed without grounds, and note all deviations from the originals."<sup>15</sup> The result of this process was a collection of mostly fifteenth to seventeenth century British folk songs defined according to text rather than music.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the lingering dominance of Child's folk music canon perpetuated not merely the 305 ballads themselves, but the core ideas that folk music was: 1) a tenuous survival of a proto-utopian and pre-modern past 2) best measured and preserved in terms of text 3) most readily associable with white rural communities of British ancestry.

In examining John Lomax's early work as a folk collector, the influence of

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<sup>14</sup> James Francis Child, "Ballad Poetry," *Johnson's New Universal Encyclopedia*, edited by F.A.P Bernard (New York: A.J. Johnson and Sons, 1874), 365-68. Quoted in Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Francis Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, x.

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of the Child ballad canon and several illustrative examples, see Norm Cohen, *Folk Music: A Regional Exploration*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 4-14.

Child's academic legacy is apparent. At a base level, Child's earlier work founded and legitimized academic folk study in America, opening the door for Lomax to formally pursue a lifelong fascination with the music of his native southwest. Lomax recognized and actively cultivated this connection with the academic folklore establishment, citing early encouragement from Wendell and Kittredge as a primary motivation behind his decision to pursue an interest in cowboy songs.<sup>17</sup> Intrigued by Lomax's cowboy songs as examples of regional vernacular poetry, his Harvard mentors facilitated a long-distance collection campaign via circulars and academic contacts. Supplemented by Lomax's intermittent fieldwork during the years following his time at Harvard, the substantial results of this inquiry became the core of his *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1910).<sup>18</sup>

Though made possible by the patronage of his Harvard mentors Wendell and Kittredge, *Cowboy Songs* marks the beginning of John Lomax's gradual separation from traditional models of American folk scholarship. These distinctions in approach are evident in the front matter of *Cowboy Songs*, which includes both an introduction by Barrett Wendell and a lengthy collector's note by Lomax himself. Reflecting on the value of the collection, Wendell cites two potential uses for the cowboy song repertory. First, Wendell recognizes the songs as a potential verification of his own research on European ballads, in that:

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<sup>17</sup> This encouragement first came during a class with Wendell, in which the professor encouraged students to go beyond the study of canonic literary figures in order to "Tell us something interesting about your regional literary productions." Lomax's subsequent class project on cowboy songs prompted Wendell to arrange Lomax's first meeting with Kittredge, who offered further encouragement and support. See Porterfield, *The Last Cavalier*, 113-115; Roger D. Abrahams, "Mr. Lomax Meets Professor Kittredge," *Journal of Folklore Research* 37 (2000), 99-118.

<sup>18</sup> Porterfield, *The Last Cavalier*, 118-126.

The facts which are which are still available concerning the ballads of our own Southwest are such as should go far to prove, or to disprove, many of the theories advanced concerning the laws of literature as evinced in the ballads of the old world.<sup>19</sup>

Wendell then moves to a discussion of the songs' aesthetic merits, explaining that:

Neither he [John Lomax] nor any of us would pretend these verses to be of supreme power and beauty. None the less, they seem to me, and to many who have had a glimpse of them, sufficiently powerful, and near enough beauty, to give us some such wholesome and enduring pleasure as comes from work of this kind proved and acknowledged to be masterly.<sup>20</sup>

Reading Lomax's collection through the lens of Child's Anglo ballad canon, Wendell identifies cowboy songs as a disembodied repertory valuable primarily for its illumination of more elevated traditions, excluding only a certain exoticist sense of rustic charm. The opening of Lomax's collector's note for *Cowboy Songs* gives some credence to this perspective as well, explicitly identifying cowboy songs with an ancient Anglo-Saxon past.

Out in the wild, far-away places of the big and still unpeopled West...yet survives the Anglo-Saxon ballad spirit that was active in secluded districts in England and Scotland even after the coming of Browning...Illiterate people, and people cut off from newspapers and books, isolated and lonely folk—thrown back on primal resources for entertainment and the expression of emotion—express themselves through somewhat the same character of songs as did their forefathers of perhaps a thousand years ago.<sup>21</sup>

For Lomax, however, these songs are more than guides to an ancient tradition. Rather, they are a vibrant representation of a particular way of life, such that:

They are chiefly interesting to the present generation because they throw light on the conditions of pioneer life, and more particularly because of the information

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<sup>19</sup> Barrett Wendell, "Introduction," *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (New York: Macmillan, 1910), xxiii.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiv.

<sup>21</sup> Alan Lomax, "Collector's Note," *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (New York: Macmillan, 1910), xxv.

they contain concerning that unique and romantic figure in modern civilization, the American cowboy.<sup>22</sup>

In reviewing this divergence of perspective between Wendell and Lomax, two notable distinctions emerge. First, Lomax maintains his predecessor's notion of folk music as a primitive expression of isolated cultures, but expands the canonical bounds of folk scholarship to suggest cowboy songs as the natural successors (if not the direct descendants) of the English ballad tradition. Second, he asserts the songs as something more than discrete artistic objects or an ancient repertory, focusing instead on their performative role within a specific cultural tradition. As further examination will show, these nuanced departures between John Lomax and the academic context in which he developed prefigure the tensions around which Alan Lomax's distinctive appropriations of folk song would ultimately form.

If John Lomax's early work with cowboy songs represents a move away from then-predominant paradigms of folk collecting, his 1930s work with Alan Lomax marks the full flowering of a starkly divergent vision of American folk song. Beginning in 1933, Alan Lomax joined his father on folk song collecting expeditions throughout the southern United States. For the elder Lomax, these trips represented a full-fledged return to pursuits generally abandoned during the twenty odd years since the publication of *Cowboy Songs*. For Alan, an eighteen-year old college student, they marked the beginning of a decades-long career as a collector and promulgator of folk music. Armed with a contract from Macmillan for a new book of American folk songs and a portable recording machine provided by the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk

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<sup>22</sup> John Lomax, "Introduction," *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (New York: Macmillan, 1910), xxv.

Song, father and son embarked on a three-month journey across Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.<sup>23</sup> The first of Alan's many such collecting expeditions throughout the United States (both with his father and, after 1935, other collaborators), this journey and its written products testify to Alan's assimilation of the very characteristics that first distinguished John Lomax from his predecessors.

In many ways, the Lomaxes' collecting trip of 1933 picked up where *Cowboy Songs* had left off, exacerbating that earlier collection's tension with historical models of folk scholarship. Echoing *Cowboy Songs*' fascination with the "isolated and lonely folk" of rural America, their collection *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934) promised to:

...offer a composite of what we and others, in field and forest, on mountain and plain, by the roadside and in the cabin, on big cane or cotton plantations and in prison camp, have set down of the songs of the people—isolated groups, interested only in an art which they could immediately enjoy, and thus an art that reflected and made interesting their own customs, dramas, and dreams.<sup>24</sup>

Despite this mutual penchant for reading folk song through the lens of contemporary cultural experience, however, *American Ballads* expands the project of *Cowboy Songs* in several respects. While *Cowboy Songs* invokes the mantle of Child's Anglo ballad canon, *American Ballads* argues for the self-sufficient vibrancy of an American tradition of folk song that is "more active than in any other country."<sup>25</sup> Extending well beyond geography, this shift constitutes an abdication of the historical and philological methods espoused by Child, Wendell, and Kittredge. Instead, the Lomaxes articulate a folk scholarship based in a living performance tradition, citing *American Ballads* as firsthand

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<sup>23</sup> This contract would ultimately be realized in the form the Lomaxes' first joint folk song collection in 1934. See John and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Macmillan, 1934).

<sup>24</sup> John and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads*, xxviii.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, xxv.

evidence that “ballads are still sung in this country” and “what we may call ballads are still being made.”<sup>26</sup>

This realization of folk culture’s generative nature had a dramatic effect on the form and content of the Lomaxes’ folk collecting, directing them away from the narrow text-based canon of the past and toward an expansive repertory rooted in the experiences of living performers. What it did not change, however, was the Lomaxes’ ongoing alignment with the same ideology of folk origins that had buttressed Child’s canonic folk project. Determined to set folk music as the binary opposite of modern industrialized culture, the Lomaxes translated Child’s pre-modern and proto-utopian conception of the folk to a contemporary context. The result was a folk scholarship that celebrated folk music as a living tradition even while measuring that tradition against static notions of a romanticized “authentic” past. Exploring the function of this incongruity within *American Ballads* uncovers the roots of a fundamental tension that would govern Alan Lomax’s appropriation of folk song for decades to come.

One notable affect of the Lomaxes’ composite perspective on folk music was a remarkable self-reflexivity regarding their methods of collecting. Following from their conception of folk song as a living tradition, the Lomaxes rejected the idea of a folk music canon. In contrast to Child’s promise to possess “every valuable copy and every known ballad” before publishing *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, the Lomaxes introduction to *American Ballads* readily acknowledges its limitations, explaining:

The songs in this book represent the personal choice of the compilers from a large mass of material from which other legitimate and defensible choices might have been made. Necessarily, environment, poetic, and musical judgment have been

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<sup>26</sup> John and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads*, xxvi.



controlling factors.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, the Lomaxes' reject the very idea of a representative or comprehensive collection of American folk song, since "new songs spring up, and almost every current song shows interesting changes."<sup>28</sup> Reflecting on this discrepancy between performed and written versions of folk song, they express regret at the inevitable effect of publication on the language of folk song:

There is thus an element of sadness in imprisoning a folk song in type. For the song at once becomes adult; it grows no more. The printed form becomes a standard, and a fixed standard. So long as the song is passed from one to another by "word of mouth," its material is fluid, frequent changes occurring both in the words and in the music. Growth in length and change in phrase flourish best in freedom of remote mountain coves, the melancholy loneliness of windswept plains, the silence of river bottom regions, the quiet of far-away forest ranges, the monotonous dreariness of life in a prison camp.<sup>29</sup>

From this new perspective, published folk collections such as *American Ballads* were not canonic documents, but rather stilted approximations of an otherwise vibrant cultural practice.

Faced with the prospect of representing a living tradition in static text, the Lomaxes sought out new methods of documenting folk song. This quest for more authentic modes of representation led them to musical recording. Though it bore the expense and inconvenience associated with any emerging technology, portable sound recording equipment allowed the Lomaxes to base their collections in specific musical performances. Enamored with the promise of a concrete connection between their work and a living tradition of folk music performance, the Lomaxes invoked field recordings as

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<sup>27</sup> John and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads*, xxv.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvii.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, xxv.

the gold standard for musical authenticity. As such, the folk song settings in *American Ballads* are intentionally minimalist (melody and text only) in order to avoid reifying a particular harmonization or interpretation. Furthermore, the introduction to *American Ballads* closes with an invitation to examine the Lomaxes' field recordings in the Library of Congress, where "permanent aluminum and celluloid discs reveal with fidelity what was sung into the microphone of our recording machine."<sup>30</sup> In this way, the Lomaxes looked to field recordings to redress the self-admitted shortcomings of their (or any) printed collection.

Despite its notable advantages over printed collections, the Lomaxes' preference for field recording only intensified the latent tensions in their emerging concept of folk song. As demonstrated by their angst regarding the reifying effects of print publication, John and Alan Lomax valued folk song primarily for its status as a living aesthetic tradition. Formed in stark opposition to the repertory-centric folk scholarship in which John Lomax was trained, this perspective shifted new emphasis towards the contexts and communities in which folk song occurred. The introduction and song commentary in *American Ballads* clearly indicate this interpretive stance, carefully narrating the circumstances surrounding the recording of particular songs within the collection. In this way, *American Ballads* marked a seminal move toward a model of folk scholarship that privileged present over past, performance over text, context over repertory, and singer over song.

As suggested above, however, the Lomaxes' break with historical folk scholarship was far from clean-cut. For all their concern with the dynamic character of folk song,

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<sup>30</sup> John and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads*, xxxviii.

they Lomaxes retained rigid benchmarks for judging the performances they encountered in the field. Like Herder, Child, and Kittredge before them, they determined these guidelines according to a binary distinction based in folk song's supposedly primitive origins. Consequently, the folk songs in *American Ballads* are uniformly associated with "isolated" and "lonely" people groups divorced from the mainstream of American life. Protected from the "spread of the machine civilization" through their "life of isolation without books or newspapers or telephone or radio," these folk communities "breed songs and ballads."<sup>31</sup> In this way, folk song and its performers become equivalent to the "remote mountain coves" and "lonely windswept plains" in which they thrive, merging into a collective present-day representation of a pre-modern past.

Comprised of equal parts contemporary performing tradition and timeless cultural symbol, the Lomaxes' dichotomous conception of folk song had dramatic implications for their framing and treatment of folk artists. Self-consciously bridging the gap between historical models of folk song and their own work in *American Ballads*, the Lomaxes identify folk song as a language that both exemplifies and transcends its performers, explaining:

Grimm has said that the folk song composes itself. Its music comes straight from the heart of the people, and its idioms reveal their daily habits of speech. Furthermore, the individual author is so unimportant that he usually is lost sight of altogether. In the spirit of this theory the first line of a cowboy song runs: "My name is nothin' extry, so that I will not tell."<sup>32</sup>

This statement typifies the implicit tension that results from the Lomaxes' mixed assimilation of traditional folk studies ideology. In one sense, their work represented a

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<sup>31</sup> John and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads*, xxvii.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii.

novel turn towards acknowledging the living and contextual nature of folk song, giving new emphasis to the experiences and contributions of specific folk performers. Even so, the origin-centric ideology of Lomaxes' predecessors remained a powerful influence on their thought, driving them to define folk song as a collective product of isolated cultures with special ties to a pre-modern past. For the Lomaxes, therefore, folk singers occupied a unique and privileged locus between past and present, individual and collective. While giving voice to the immediacy of their everyday experience through folk song, they could simultaneously (and somewhat mysteriously) transcend time and place to represent a timeless and collective folk consciousness.

Though the Lomaxes applied their ideological definition of folk song with relative equanimity across a wide range of folk communities, this perspective had a particularly striking affect on their characterization of African-American folk song. Having abandoned the strict folk canon of previous generations, John and Alan Lomax were excited to chronicle the underrepresented tradition of African-American folk song. Consequently, this repertory was a primary focus of their 1933 summer collecting trip and prominently featured in *American Ballads*. Attending to their harsh standards for authenticating folk song, however, the Lomaxes were not interested in just any brand of African-American folk song. Rather, their stated purpose was to “find the Negro who had had the least contact with jazz, the radio, and with the white man.”<sup>33</sup> Turning again to a specific folk song text as an argument for their perspective, they identify integration as a regrettable corrupting force on African-American folk song:

A Negro cook in Houston, Texas, was heard to sing,

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<sup>33</sup> John and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads*, xxx.

“Niggers gittin’ mo’ like white folks,  
Mo’ like white folks every day.  
Niggers learnin’ Greek and Latin,  
Niggers wearin’ silk and satin—  
Niggers gittin’ more like white folks everyday.”

‘Learnin’ Greek and Latin,’ daily association with the whites, and modern education prove disastrous to the Negro’s folk singing, destroying much of the quaint, innate beauty of his songs. Moreover, with most of the Southern Negro ministers and teachers urging their followers to abandon the old songs, a flood of jazz and of tawdry gospel hymns comes in.<sup>34</sup>

Though couched in the context of a deplorable segregationist racial politics, this anecdote draws the implicit tensions of the Lomaxes’ definition of folk song into sharp relief. On the one hand, their willingness to target present-day African-American folk song for collection and preservation marks a progressive expansion of the prevailing academic folk studies agenda. Setting African-American folk communities alongside those of rural whites as equally viable outlets for folk song, *American Ballads* made both implicit and explicit arguments for the value of black culture. Furthermore, their focus on field recording brought individual black voices to national prominence in a manner unheard of during the 1930s. Like all the folk artists represented in *American Ballads*, however, African-American singers are ultimately subsumed under an age-old ideological model designed to merge folk diversity into a unified symbolic collective. Thus, whatever individual interest or contextual intrigue the Lomaxes found in their collected folk artifacts was ultimately subject to reduction in service of broader interpretive goals.

Though broadly instructive in regards to Alan Lomax’s early perspective on folk scholarship, it is important to acknowledge *American Ballads* as a collaborative work. As I address at length in chapter two, Alan Lomax differed significantly from his father

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<sup>34</sup> John and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads*, xxx.

in ways that would ultimately lead them along divergent career paths. As such, it is important to establish a baseline of comparison against which to consider Alan's stance in the Lomaxes' joint work. Alan's first published article, "'Sinful' Songs of the Southern Negro" (1934), offers just such an opportunity. In it, Alan offers his own account of the Lomaxes' joint collecting experience during their Deep South trip of 1933. Notably, he describes their struggle to find appropriately "authentic" African-American folk songs in terms closely akin to those of *American Ballads*. Focusing on their efforts to find suitable songs in New Orleans, Alan gives a thorough description of both problem and solution:

We had found the educated Negro resentful of our attempt to collect his secular folk music. We had found older Negroes afraid for religious reasons to sing for us, while the younger generation were on the whole ignorant of the songs we wanted and interested only in the Blues (which are certainly Negro folksongs, but of which we had already recorded a plenty) and in jazz. So it was that we decided to visit the Negro prison farms of the South. There, we thought, we should find that the Negro, away from the pressure of the churchly community, ignorant of the uplifting educational movement, having none but official contact with white men, dependent on the resources of his own group for amusement, and hearing no canned music, would have preserved and increased his heritage of secular folk music.<sup>35</sup>

Though perhaps stated more delicately than in *American Ballads*, the perspective remains essentially the same. Though interested in African-American folk song and folk artists, Alan Lomax presents the acculturative experiences of these individuals as an obstacle to true folk expression. Like their songs, the experiences of folk singers are valid only insofar as they correspond to a collective folk identity in binary opposition to the modern world.

Although closely aligned with *American Ballads* in its perspective on folk

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<sup>35</sup> Alan Lomax, "Sinful Songs of the Southern Negro," In *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997*, edited by Ronald D. Cohen (New York: Routledge, 2003), 21.

scholarship, “Sinful Songs of the Southern Negro” shows early signs of Alan Lomax’s eventual divergence from his father. In contrast to the more ideological tone of *American Ballads*, Alan Lomax’s account of the trip takes narrative form. While both essays refer to particular folk song performances, “Sinful Songs” consists almost entirely of the stories surrounding the recording of specific songs. Where *American Ballads* refers to “the cowboy,” “the sailor on the Great Lakes,” and “a Negro cook,” “Sinful Songs” calls folk singers by name and renders their point of view through extensive quotation. In this way, Alan Lomax’s account takes the contextual focus of *American Ballads* to another level, fleshing out his folk subjects as distinct personalities.

In choosing to present his subjects as specific individuals rather than generic folk singers, Alan Lomax further dramatized the tension between individual and collective conceptions of folk song that had characterized *American Ballads*. As evidenced in his lament over “contaminated” African-American songsters, Alan Lomax’s interest in individual folk singers did not usurp his tendency to measure folk music against his own rigidly prescribed idea of collective folk identity. Though enamored by particular informants who conformed to his pre-modern conception of the folk (he especially delighted in recalling informant’s unfamiliar reactions to recording equipment), Lomax was equally frustrated with those who failed to measure up (i.e. those contaminated by religious faith, education, or commercial music). Inspired to give new attention to the individuals and situations underlying particular folk songs, he nevertheless continued to evaluate those specifics according to an age-old model designed to segregate artistic expression into broad social categories. Though acknowledging his subjects as individual voices in a tapestry of folk song, Lomax simultaneously cast those voices as

representatives of a folk tradition defined according to its racial and economic distinction from mainstream America.

Observing the distinctive character of the Lomaxes' contributions to folk collecting in the 1930s sheds light on Alan Lomax's later appropriation of the folk song as a social and political tool. Though undeniably a response to the social and political turmoil of his time, Lomax's dichotomous conception of folksong is inherent to the perspectives he developed in his early fieldwork experience. Having rejected the restrictive canons and survivalist approach of early folk song scholars and embraced a conception of folksong as a living entity, Lomax could little ignore the role of local culture and individual experience in defining folksong. His later efforts to popularize this localized repertory, however, necessitated the construction of a broader and more simplistic vision than his own grassroots idea of folksong would readily permit. This tension pervades Lomax's work throughout the 1930s and 1940s, producing an intriguing array of efforts on his part to construct a rhetoric of folksong that would both respect its local progeny and allow for a unified and nationalized appropriation.



## Chapter 2: Alan Lomax and the Grassroots Institutionalism of Folk Music

In 1937, Alan Lomax was appointed Assistant in Charge of the Library of Congress' Archive of American Folk Song, taking over full-time supervision of the archive from his father John.<sup>36</sup> Though only twenty-one at the time, Alan Lomax's experience and philosophical outlook made him a natural choice to replace his father. Jumpstarted by his early folk collecting experiences with John Lomax, Alan had already compiled an impressive resume that included extensive fieldwork in the U.S. and Caribbean, several published articles, and two co-edited folk music collections (*American Ballads and Folk Songs*, 1934; *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly*, 1936). Furthermore, Lomax's frequent collaboration with his father forged a shared understanding between them regarding the nature of folk song and the best practices of folk scholarship. As detailed in chapter one, Alan Lomax largely followed his father in this regard, adopting John's hybrid model of folk scholarship. Combining the rigorous authenticity discourse of historical folk scholarship with a passion for the immediacy present-day folk artists, Alan Lomax joined his father in defining folk song as both an individual aesthetic expression and a unified symbolic language.

Despite his continuing alignment with his father's broader perspective, Alan Lomax's pragmatic application of folk song diverged sharply from that of John Lomax.

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<sup>36</sup> John Lomax began his relationship with the Library of Congress in 1933, agreeing to deposit the products of his collecting expeditions in the Archive of American Folk Song in exchange for a nominal title and some financial assistance in acquiring recording equipment. A more concrete role as "Director of the Archive" came in 1934, though a reasonable salary for this position would emerge only slowly over several years. Though essentially replaced by his son in 1937, Lomax retained an honorary position with the archive into the 1940s. See Porterfield, *The Last Cavalier*, 304-305, 402-405.

Father and son held in common a healthy affection for the language of folk music as well as a corresponding suspicion towards forces that threatened to stifle (e.g. rigid academism) or pollute (e.g. commercial music) that tradition. Separating father and son, however, was Alan's left-leaning political sensibility, one rooted in the idioms of the Popular Front and inclined toward activism. For Alan, folk music provided both inspiration and an outlet for leftist political sentiment, forming a perfect merger of his aesthetic and political ambitions. Inspired by this high view of folk song's political and cultural potential, Alan Lomax turned ever more of his time and energy toward promoting the folk songs he collected. In service of this ideological folk song project, he invoked the dichotomous definition of folk song first forged in his 1930s fieldwork. Fusing his concept of a unified collective folk identity with the discourse of American nationalism, Lomax enacted a nationalist pedagogy of folk music designed to exploit the complex binary between national and local folk identities. Freeing him to appropriate folk song as local product, national icon, or some hybrid of the two, this tension between national and local became the crux of Lomax's efforts to popularize and adapt the language of folksong within the shifting political climate of the 1940s.

In attempting to synthesize the plethora of promotional efforts that emerged from Alan Lomax's complex political and aesthetic perspective on folk song, it is useful to consider his activities within the broader context of the American Popular Front. Constituted as a wide-ranging coalition of political and social progressives, the Popular Front provided the context for a flourishing of politically oriented cultural expression during Depression and World-War Two-era America. While encompassing a diversity of left-leaning political perspectives (communists, socialists, New Deal democrats, etc.), the

movement was most influential as a cultural phenomenon, uniting a variety of artistic and cultural figures around shared principles of anti-facism, anti-racism, and support for organized labor.<sup>37</sup> Mirroring Lomax's penchant for expressing political sentiment through artistic means, the ideology and activists of the Popular Front provided both context and catalyst for his varied appropriation of folk song.

One area of particular resonance between Lomax and the Popular Front is their shared preference for rhetorical adaptations of "the people." First emerging from an acceleration of left-wing sentiment in the 1930s, the Popular Front advocated a bottom-up populist re-imagining of American life. Abandoning the rigid and potentially divisive rhetoric of communism (e.g. worker, masses, proletariat), the Popular Front instituted "the people" as a catchall term for an undifferentiated American populace. During the tumultuous American political reality of the 1930s and 1940s, this rhetoric of "the people" served as a remarkably flexible basis for the political and cultural discourse of the Popular Front. Designating only the vaguest notion of a grassroots democratic public, "the people" could be defined as synonymous with or in opposition to a unified national identity. Thus, the same "people" whom Popular Front activists cited in denouncing the systems of American capitalism in the 1930s were later invoked as the symbolic representatives of American democracy within the more patriotic atmosphere of World War Two.

Working to combine folk song and leftist politics during this same time period, Alan Lomax adapted the Popular Front's rhetoric of "the people" to his own promotional goals. Able to reference a unified symbolic group or a diversified collection of

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<sup>37</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the Popular Front and its cultural apparatus, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996).

individuals with equal aplomb, this concept of “the people” aligned perfectly with Lomax’s own dual conception of folk communities. Adopting the political discourse of the Popular Front, Lomax began advocating a direct correlation between folk song and American democracy. Where early publications like *American Ballads* made this connection only vaguely, the rise of American nationalist sentiment surrounding World War Two led Lomax’s writings during the 1940s toward ever more explicit versions nationalized interpretive framework. The Popular Front rhetoric of “the people” legitimized and enabled this transition, allowing Lomax to nationalize the tension between collective and individual folk identity that had characterized his earlier writings. In this way, Lomax retained the interpretive flexibility to apply the language of folk song to an infinite array of social and political contexts.

Before delving into specific examples of Alan Lomax’s political appropriations of folk song during the 1940s, it is worthwhile to briefly outline his folk song promotion in the period between *American Ballads* and the outset of the Second World War. After collaborating with his father under the auspices of the Library of Congress’ Archive of American Folk Song for several years beginning in 1933, Alan Lomax succeeded his father as head of that institution in 1937.<sup>38</sup> Much like his father, Alan Lomax used the prestige of this position as a springboard for his numerous other pursuits. These included continued collaboration with his father on folk song collections, his own collecting trips across the United States and Caribbean, and general promotion and advocacy for a plethora of folk singers including the Golden Gate Quartet, the Bogtrotters, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Aunt Molly Jackson, Zora Neal Hurston, Burl Ives, and Pete Seeger

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<sup>38</sup> See Porterfield, *The Last Cavalier*, 304-305, 402-405.

among many others. In addition to facilitating recordings and concert performances, this promotion also entailed the hosting and production of folk-music-themed radio programs for the CBS *School of the Air* (1938-40). On these programs as well as the shorter-lived radio series *Back Where I Came From* (1940), Lomax worked to popularize American folk song and singers with a broader audience by inviting folk artists on his program to perform and discuss their music.<sup>39</sup>

Though often expressed with relative subtlety, Lomax's political perspective pervaded his work during the later 1930s and 1940s. In his self-admittedly fanatic effort to offer the "American sound to the American people," Lomax used any and every resource.<sup>40</sup> This included not only a range of folk singers from all walks of life, but also New Deal political connections such as Charles Seeger of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Music Project and B.A. Botkin of the Federal Writer's Project. Fellow Popular Front adherents who shared Lomax's passion for melding folk culture and leftist politics, Seeger and Botkin provided access to an invaluable network for the collecting and distribution of songs, facilitating many of Lomax's connections to the folk artists upon which his project depended.<sup>41</sup> Using these connections and his position at the Library of Congress, Lomax situated himself as a national figure in the American folk song movement. From this position of prominence, Lomax organized such influential events as the 1940 "Grapes of Wrath" concert in New York, at which Woody Guthrie

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<sup>39</sup> Ed Kahn, "1934-1950: The Early Collecting Years," In *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997*, Edited by Ronald D. Cohen (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2.

<sup>40</sup>Reuss, *American Folk Music*, 124. Reuss references a 1968 interview with Lomax in which he described himself as a "fanatic" to get the "American sound to the American people."

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 125-130.

performed his protest brand of folk song to raise relief funds for migrant workers of the Southwest.<sup>42</sup> Lomax also played a prominent role in the organization and promotion of the Almanac Singers, a proletarian folk-singing group consisting of Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Millard Lampell, John Peter Hawes, and Woody Guthrie.<sup>43</sup> Such politically oriented actions and associations did not go unnoticed, and provided a primary reason behind his dismissal from the Library of Congress in 1941.<sup>44</sup>

Even after his separation from the Library of Congress, Lomax advocacy as a national emissary for folk song continued, often in a decidedly political vein. Mirroring a wave of Popular Front support for the American cause in World War Two, Lomax accelerated the nationalist rhetoric of his folksong advocacy. Interestingly, the venues for this nationalist appropriation of folk song remained much the same as those of his earlier, less patriotic efforts. Working in a position for the Office of War Information, Lomax produced a folk-song based radio program entitled *Transatlantic Call: People to People* which aired concurrently on CBS and BBC radio.<sup>45</sup> Another prominent engagement was a 1942 folk music concert at the White House organized at the Roosevelt's behest. Though it represented an ongoing interest in folk song on the part of the first couple, the tenor of the concert differed considerably from the Lomax's 1940 "Grapes of Wrath" concert, serving more as a catalogue of American folk heritage than a protest-oriented benefit.<sup>46</sup> As will become evident through a more in-depth assessment of Lomax's

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<sup>42</sup>Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 75.

<sup>43</sup>Reuss, *American Folk Song*, 148-175.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 124.

<sup>45</sup> Alan Lomax, "Mister Ledford and the TVA," In *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings*, 77-80.

<sup>46</sup> Alan Lomax, "Folk Music in the Roosevelt Era," In *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings*, 91.

writings, this shift of political focus within the context of Lomax's advocacy of folksong is a customary feature, one that demonstrates the flexibility afforded by his conflicted definition of folk song.

Perhaps the most iconic statement of Alan Lomax's embrace of an overtly nationalist version of folk song is found in his preface to the 1941 folk song collection *Our Singing Country*. While on some level an expansion and culmination of the perspective forged by Lomaxes in collections like *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, the preface bears the distinct mark of Alan Lomax's more politically charged style. As implied by its title, *Our Singing Country* conceives of the United States as much more than simply a geographic backdrop for American folk song. Rather, Lomax elaborates his earlier arguments the living nature of the folk to imply a direct connection between American folk singers and the distinctive character of American life. Advocating a reconciliation of folk singers and the American populous writ large, he identifies the purpose of the book as effort to "let American folk singers have their say with the readers."<sup>47</sup> "These people have a lot to say and a lot to remember" explains Lomax, "and that is why this book is mostly in quotation marks."<sup>48</sup> Lomax continues to privilege the immediacy of performed folk song to printed collections, since "a folksong printed, words and tune, only symbolizes in a very static fashion a myriad voiced reality of individual songs."<sup>49</sup> Even so, *Our Singing Country* promises all readers an experience with that vibrant reality, one inherently connected to the experiences of everyday

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<sup>47</sup> Alan Lomax, "Preface," *Our Singing Country*, In *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings*, 59.

<sup>48</sup> Alan Lomax, *Our Singing Country*, 60.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

Americans.

Having recast his folk music project as an explicitly nationalist project, Lomax attempts to further authenticate the connection between folk song and American experience. Stressing the palliative function of folksong, Lomax asserts that “His [the folk singer’s] songs have been strongly rooted in his life and have functioned there as enzymes to assist in the digestion of hardship, solitude, violence, hunger, and the honest comradeship of democracy.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, folk song is not merely the artistic legacy of American history, but a present day force in supporting the American democratic experience. Rooted in the lives of a broadly defined American people, folk songs “reflect human experience with more honest observation, penetrating wit and humor, genuine sentiment, and energetic passion than other forms of American art, cultivated or subsidized.” Even while reflecting this broader human experience, however, folk song emerges from the specific stories of individual singers, a fact Lomax authenticates with a list a several dozen folk singers from whom the songs in the collection were gathered. Representing an idealized American collective by drawing on their own individual experience, “such folk have made America a singing country.”<sup>51</sup>

In evaluating Lomax’s thought process in the preface to *Our Singing Country*, one key element emerges: his penchant for converting his core beliefs about folk song into nationalist rhetoric. Present since his early collecting days with his father, tensions between the ideal folk population and actual folk singers correspond here to the ideas of a national folk identity and the real-life individuals who form that identity. As in his earlier

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<sup>50</sup> Alan Lomax, “Our Singing Country,” 61.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.



work, Lomax conceives of his local folk informants as inherently bound up in a unified national folk heritage, a membership authenticated by their connection to an isolated life uncorrupted by modernity. Possessing this tendency to simultaneously reify and overlook the individual experience of his informants, Lomax is armed with an ideological model characterized by its facile slippage between collective and individual experience. Prepared by his willingness to embrace such a tension during his mixed encounters with previous folk scholarship, Lomax finds nothing objectionable about applying this model to a present-day national context.

Published just prior to *Our Singing Country*, Lomax's 1941 article "Music in Your Own Backyard" offers another perspective on Lomax's burgeoning effort to appropriate folk song in the service of American nationalism. Writing for the young audience of *American Girl* magazine, Lomax explains his perspective on the nature and importance of folk song in explicit terms. Adapting his rhetoric to deemphasize the implicit barrier between listener and audience, Lomax explains that folk song "comes straight from the hearts and experiences of the people."<sup>52</sup> As implied by the article's title, this grassroots quality of folk assures that folk songs might be found in the neighborhood of any child reading the article. For Lomax, this is not merely a hope but proven fact, as evidenced by the 250 songs sent to him in only six months of broadcasting his folk music program on *American School of the Air*. Given that he had long tied his definition of folk song to separation from modern life, this promise of folk song on every street corner seems a significant departure. Within the same article for example, Lomax restates his earlier assertion of folk song's association with "lonely spots where people have to

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<sup>52</sup> Alan Lomax, "Music in Your Own Backyard," In *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings*, 46.

entertain themselves.”<sup>53</sup> For Lomax, however, such conflicts are part and parcel of his conception of folk song. Defined as a language of the “people,” folk song becomes variably associable with any number of communities. When searching out distinctive strands of folk song in the 1930s rural south, Lomax defined the folk as a collective community distanced from contemporary life by their ties to a pre-modern past. Faced with the prospect of spreading folk song to a broader public in the context of World War Two-era America, Lomax needed a more inclusive definition. Subtly redefined as “the people,” the folk in Lomax’s writings of the 1940s are defined not by their distance from American life but rather their exemplification of American ideals. Through this subtle shift of emphasis, Lomax constructs a version of folk song in symbiotic relationship with American national identity, available all who embrace the democratic life experience it represents.

While based in a proposed philosophical resonance between folk song and American ideals, Lomax’s argument was supported and legitimized by his own institutional affiliation. Dating from his time as assistant-in-charge of the Library of Congress’ Archive of American Folk Song, “Music in Your Own Backyard” foregrounds this association. Speaking from his stance as an official government representative, Lomax trumpets that “The Government is eager to keep in perfect form the songs of its people.”<sup>54</sup> For Lomax, this is both a natural and necessary duty, since folk song is “our heritage as Americans” which “almost too-late we realize...is in danger of

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<sup>53</sup> Alan Lomax, “Music in Your Own Backyard,” In *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings*, 47.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

disappearing.”<sup>55</sup> Having embraced folk song as part of a national identity project, Lomax expresses disdain for those whose work patronizes folk expression, particularly “college professors in search of quaintness.”<sup>56</sup> This criticism is a curious one, particularly in light of Lomax’s own frequent and joyful recounting of the peculiar behavior of his informants. Nonetheless, this critique of the gravitas in academic folk scholarship measures precisely how far Alan Lomax had diverged from the model of his father. Though intrigued by the unique songs and personalities of folk artists such as Leadbelly and Aunt Molly Jackson (associations Lomax reiterates in the article), Lomax is no longer content to conceive folk song as merely an intriguing artifact of rural life. Rather, folk singers and their music are a pivotal part of a larger political reality in desperate need of the grounded aesthetic experience they represent.

While Lomax’s effort to merge folk song and American democracy in the 1940s dramatically expanded the scope of folk music scholarship, Lomax continued to judge folk music and scholarship according to his own strict standards. In a 1941 review of Siegmeyer and Downes’ 1940 collection *Treasury of American Songs*, Lomax repudiated the widespread appropriation of folk music by American art music community. Assessing a fifty year history of collaboration between folk collectors and professional musicians, Lomax dismisses classical musicians’ contributions to folk studies as “part-time and amateurish.” In whatever “occasional spurts of interest” have been vouchsafed, the only products have been “rather condescending and self-conscious

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<sup>55</sup> Alan Lomax, “Music in Your Own Backyard,” 48.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

arrangements or thematic use of folk songs.”<sup>57</sup> Though Lomax praises Siegmeister and Downes for understanding “the seemingly incoherent diversity of American folksong as an expression of its democratic character,” he casts their musical settings in a similarly negative light. In an attempt to supplement and apologize for the simplistic virtues of folk song, the collection’s musical introduction reveals “old snobbery” and “the same old romantic attitude.” Key points of contention for Lomax are: 1) the introduction’s apologetic language regarding the gap between the song settings and real life 2) Siegmeister’s proposal that the provided accompaniments might somehow restore their original color and 3) Siegmeister’s decision to collect songs from libraries and New York folk singers rather than the field. For these reasons, Lomax finds the collection’s folk song settings “lacking in acquaintance with folksong itself” and “pretentious, quaint, funny, cute, [and] distracting.”<sup>58</sup>

If *Our Singing Country* and “Music in Your Backyard” present an outline for the integration of folk song and American nationalism, Lomax’s critical review of *Treasury of American Folk Song* presents the underlying motivation for such a merger. After taking Siegmeister and Downes to task for their inauthentic representation of folk material, Lomax ends his review with a reflection on the power of unadulterated folk song. Comparing the songs he encountered in the field with the appropriations of professional musicians, Lomax posits that “not all the arrangers, choral conductors, composers, and music editors can capture, reproduce or even imitate the honest and passionate utterance of American folk song.” Handicapped by their “rigidity of spirit,

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<sup>57</sup> Alan Lomax, “Songs of the American Folk,” In *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997*, Edited by Ronald D. Cohen (New York: Routledge, 2003), 57.

<sup>58</sup> Alan Lomax, “Songs of the American Folk,” 58.

oversophistication of soul, and desire for polite applause” professional musicians like Siegmeister are simply unable to “write music as hot and sure and unashamed as our folksingers and ‘blues-blowers’ have created in America.”<sup>59</sup> For Lomax, then, Siegmeister’s collection represents the fundamental superiority of folk song as an expression of American ideals. More than just a vehicle for inspiring nationalist sentiment, Lomax found in folk song an opportunity for a complete reimagining of American mass culture. In contrast to the top-down cultural productions of America’s art music institutions, folk song offered the prospect of a national musical language rooted in the lived reality of everyday Americans. Conceiving its inherent connection to the democratic experience of “the people” as the basis of a fundamental unity, Lomax could therefore forward the diverse language of American folk song as a symbolic representation of American ideals.

Fashioned as a means of inspiring American cultural unity in the context of World War Two, Lomax’s nationalist appropriation of folk song experienced a notable shift in emphasis in the post-war era. Like his Popular Front colleagues, Lomax had embraced the American military cause as a necessary means of confronting global fascism. Post-war political realities, however, called for a change in stance. As a prominent cultural figure with pervasive ties to the political left, Lomax became increasingly concerned with the escalation of the Red Scare in the late 1940s.<sup>60</sup> Responding to this conservative turn in American nationalist rhetoric, Lomax again turned to folk song as a promising solution

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<sup>59</sup> Alan Lomax, *Songs of the American Folk*, 59.

<sup>60</sup> Lomax’s struggles with red-baiting came to head in 1950, when he was listed in *Red Channels*. Such scrutiny was significant motivation in Lomax’s decision to move to England in 1950, where he remained for the majority of the decade. See Ed Kahn, “1934-1950: The Early Collecting Years.” In *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997*, Edited by Ronald D. Cohen (New York: Routledge, 2003), 5-7.

to the country's political and cultural dilemma. Drawing on the inherent national/local tension that had dominated his folk song project for over decade, Lomax recalibrated his rhetoric of folk song yet again. Whereas the grassroots quality of folk song had served as the symbolic basis for national unity in the face of World War Two, that same characteristic now became the a method of inoculation against the false cultural unity of fascism both at home and abroad.

A prominent example of Lomax's shift of rhetoric in reponse to Cold War politics is his 1947 essay from *The New York Times Magazine*, "America Sings the Saga of America." Beginning on a hopeful note, Lomax suggests that "One of the most heartening things about America in 1947 is the spring freshet of enthusiasm for native balladry and folklore that is running through the country from coast to coast."<sup>61</sup> This trend is not merely escapism, but rather a "longing for artistic forms that reflect our democratic and equalitarian political beliefs." More specifically, American audiences are "hankering after art that mirrors the unique life of this Western Continent—the life of the frontier, the great West, the big city." With this trend in mind, Lomax sets out to answer the question "How has American folklore contributed to a democratic, people's culture?"<sup>62</sup>

Lomax identifies five historical streams (tall tales, Negro spiritual, British ballad survivals, American ballads, minority group folklore) of American folklore and gives numerous examples of their positive embodiment of the American democratic ideal. Tall

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<sup>61</sup> Alan Lomax, "Music Sings the Saga of America," *New York Times Magazine*, January 26, 1947. In *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings*, 86.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

tales and American ballads differ from their European counterparts in that they focus on the common man and his everyday struggles to overcome adversity. Furthermore, American singers have democratized the English ballad tradition, purifying it of its “aristocratic and medieval overtone.” Lomax sees this trend as extending to minority folk song traditions as well, quoting the legendary John Henry’s truism “A man ain’t nothin’ but a man” as a perfect summation of folksong’s democratic sensibility. Though problematic in light of America’s history of oppressing minority groups, Lomax finds a democratic sentiment in the popularity of minority folk music traditions, since “In this sense America has reached out and welcomed the folklore of all the minority groups, racial and national.”<sup>63</sup>

Having proved the American folklore tradition to be inherently aligned with democratic ideals, Lomax turns quickly to a political application of this truth. America, he explains, is a “country striped and streaked with folk cultures of scores of minority groups,” making folklore “a strong current in the American life running counter to any authoritarian, Fascist tendency.”<sup>64</sup> Even still, the past positive impact of folklore does not prohibit its misuse as a tool of authoritarian pedagogy. For this reason, folklore movements must be guided in order to guard against their “dangerous potentialities.” Lomax introduces four potential methods for such corruption: 1) the fallacious use of folklore to “foster arbitrary notions of national or racial culture.” 2) false oppositions of rural and urban folklore 3) “pertrifying” folklore through its improper use in education,

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 87-88.

<sup>64</sup> Alan Lomax, “Ibid.,” 90.

and 4) reifying a folklore tradition over newly created folklore.<sup>65</sup> Thus, Lomax sets up his conception of folklore as a living product of everyday American life as tantamount to an assurance of political freedom, a guarantee facilitated by the grassroots democratic language of folk song.

What is unique in this context, however, is Lomax's application of this idea of musical freedom to the realm of international politics. Seemingly in conflict with his praise of distinctly American folklore, Lomax proposes that folklore has "little or no connection to political boundaries or racist abstractions," and may therefore act as a safeguard against "all authoritarian notions." It achieves this quality by "allowing for the creative right of the individual at the same time that it is flexible in its response to community sentiment." Because "folklore is both democratic and international in its character" and encourages the creative agency of the individual, it "provides 10,000 bridges to stride across and say 'You are my brother.'"<sup>66</sup> Representing a striking shift in rhetoric from his much more frequent invocation of folksong as an American language, "America Sings the Saga of America" converts Lomax's grassroots conception of folksong into the basis for a global campaign against totalitarianism. Stemming from the inherent flexibility of his definition of folklore, this marked shift in rhetoric allows Lomax to convert his chosen repertory from a nationalist tool into an international antifascist one. Just as Lomax's writings of the early 1940s reflect a broader effort to marshal folk song in the cause of World War Two American nationalism, "America Sings the Saga of America" mirrors Lomax's promise that folk song can cure the cultural imperialism of fascism, both foreign and domestic.

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<sup>65</sup> Alan Lomax, "America Sings the Saga of America," 90-91.

<sup>66</sup> Alan Lomax, "Songs of the American Folk," 91-92.



In examining selections from Lomax's writings during the tumultuous political decade of the 1940s, we glean an illuminating perspective on the unique character of his efforts to employ folk song in the exercise of nationalist pedagogy. Adapting the Popular Front's ideological rhetoric of "the people" to a fundamentally flexible definition of folk song that was itself developed around tensions between nationality and locality, Lomax worked to persuade the public of folk song as both American icon and everyday reality. Casting folk song as a democratic local expression of a symbolic national reality, Lomax converted folk song into a source of American cultural unity during World War Two. Readjusted for a Cold War context, this same democratic character made folk song the basis of Lomax's campaign to inoculate America and the world against fascism's artificial and totalitarian versions of national culture. Far from mere coincidence or shortsightedness, this subtly shifting rhetorical method constituted a conscious effort emerging from Lomax's own experience and core beliefs. Freeing him to appropriate folk song as local product, national icon, or some hybrid of the two, these subtle shifts of rhetoric between national and local became the crux of Lomax's efforts to popularize and adapt the language of folksong within the shifting political climate of the 1940s.

## Conclusion

Characterized by an intriguing mix of diverse activity and unified ideological perspective, Alan Lomax's career as folk song collector and promoter during the 1930s and 1940s teems with narrative pitfalls. Simply cataloging Lomax's activities and associations leads to a rather fractured view of a figure for which political passion was an ever-present motivating force. Centering on Lomax's leftist political perspective is similarly narrow, minimizing the hybrid nature of Lomax's response to the shifting political cultural challenges of his time. By examining Lomax through the lens of the national/local binary that pervaded his conception of folk song, my narrative of Lomax's early career seeks a middle course that acknowledges both the ideological underpinnings of Lomax's career and the uniquely adaptive quality of his efforts to popularize American folk song.

Working with his father John in the 1930s, Alan Lomax blended historical models of folk scholarship with his own innovations to develop a uniquely flexible conception of folk song. Emphasizing the unique contributions of individual folk artists even while positing folk music as a unified artistic language of national origin, this model became the core of his diverse efforts to apply to folk song to the challenges of American politics. Maximizing this slippage between individual and collective, local and national, Lomax recalibrated folk to the shifting political contexts of 1940s with ease. Thus, this idiosyncratic model of folk song became the center of a customizable nationalist pedagogy designed to supplant the decadence and disaffection of American mass culture

with the grassroots (and thereby democratic) language of folk song.

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