

‘The Age of the Golden Ear’: *The Columbia World Library* and Sounding out Post-war Field Recording

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Abstract

This article responds to Alan Lomax’s pronouncement that the mid-twentieth century constituted ‘the age of the golden ear’, when ‘a passionate aural curiosity overshadowed the ability to create music’. It examines a project born out of Lomax’s own aural curiosity and his foregrounding of recording technology – the *Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music* (1955) – using it to sound out the history of mid-century ethnographic field recording. By retracing the production of the *World Library*, this article explores the various agencies compressed into the audible exteriors of field recordings, as they were produced by and for specific technologies and formats, circulated through international networks, and as they became part of the aural public sphere of post-war Europe. It concludes by considering some of the implications of this sonic labour as field recordings find their way into new, digital, listening environments.

Writing in 1960, Alan Lomax heard how his present would sound as our past: ‘To the musicologists of the twenty-first century our epoch may not be known by the name of a school of composers or of a musical style. It may well be called the period of the phonograph or the age of the golden ear, when, for a time, a passionate aural curiosity overshadowed the ability to create music.’¹ This article examines a project born out of Lomax’s own passionate aural curiosity and his foregrounding of recording technology – the *Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music* – using it to sound out the history of mid-century ethnographic field recording. Released by Columbia Records in 1955, the *World Library* was Lomax’s brainchild, but required a complex network of international collaboration, technologies, institutional support and competition, legal and aesthetic frameworks to materialize. More than simply telling its story, this article attempts to get a handle on the various agencies compressed into the *World Library*, and what the implications of this compression are for listening back on the twentieth century, as its music and its sounds continue to resonate.

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1 Alan Lomax, ‘Saga of a Folksong Hunter’ (1960), in *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934–1997*, ed. Ronald D. Cohen (London: Routledge, 2003), 173.

The first task is to make sense of its incredible title: ‘Columbia’, ‘world’, ‘library’, ‘folk’, and ‘primitive’ are terms that offer a feast for critical analysis. It is not possible to grapple adequately with the genealogy and politics of each term here, but for my purposes the most important point is that ‘world’, ‘folk’, and ‘primitive’ stand, in the twentieth century at least, as Western constructs for the classification and circulation of sounds and sound objects.² Recordings – commissioned, produced, archived, reproduced, disseminated, consumed – occupy a central space in the movement of music in the twentieth century, straddling phenomena of nationalism, globalization, and cosmopolitanism, being at once carefully controlled by a host of gatekeepers, business interests, advocates, state funders, collectors, validators, interpreters, and also evading such control in the hands and ears of listeners.³

To probe the history of field recording, then, is to conduct a material history. Certainly a *World Library* connotes materiality; and understanding musical traditions in the long twentieth century requires understanding how they have been represented on record, how ‘intangible cultural heritage’ has been made tangible.⁴ The *World Library* speaks to ethnographic field recording more broadly in its modern means of production coupled with its representations of music as pre- or anti-modern. As constructs for circulation, the terms folk and primitive serve to present peoples and musics as existing uncontemporaneously from those doing this subjectifying through the power of definition.⁵ Ana Maria Ochoa terms this splitting of time a ‘division of sonic labour’,⁶ which captures the use of modern technologies to represent aesthetic stasis that is a feature of the *World Library*: Lomax, on the sleeve of the volume of English music, wrote of the music it housed as ‘an echo from the land of melody that England must have been two centuries ago’, as though his microphone was dialled into the traces of pre-industrial history, re-sounding the nation.⁷

The *World Library* serves as a productive object of study on several levels: as an entextualization of mid-century cultural politics, and attitudes towards musics and their collection; as a means to understand more about the practices of cultural production behind the recording of the world’s musics and their movement; to fathom the kinds of transnational

2 Fred Myers, “Primitivism”, Anthropology, and the Category of “Primitive Art”, in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Chris Tilley, Webb Keane, Susanne Kuechler, Mike Rowlands, and Patricia Spyer (London: Sage, 2006), 267. Please note that hereafter I will not place these terms in quotation marks but I intend them to be read in accordance with this idea: as constructs for the classification and circulation of sounds.

3 Martin Stokes, ‘On Musical Cosmopolitanism’. *The Macalester International Roundtable* (2007), 1–2. <<http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlrtable/3>> (all websites last accessed 3 May 2014).

4 ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage’ is the term used by UNESCO to describe ‘traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants’. <www.unesco.org/culture/ich/?pg=00003>

5 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Myers, “Primitivism”, 269.

6 Ana Maria Ochoa, ‘Sonic Transculturation, Epistemologies of Purification and the Aural Public Sphere in Latin America’, *Social Identities* 12/6 (2006), 817.

7 Columbia SL-206. There is a strong political dimension to preservation and representation. Bruno Nettl writes: ‘We should ask ourselves whether we should continue encouraging people to keep up their old practices, asking them to do what they perhaps would not wish to do, just for the sake of the rest of the world. I have no answer.’ Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 170.

labour – institutional, material, sonic – involved in constructing these musics; to explore how sound is treated in converting oral traditions into aural anthologies; to amplify the liminal space where scholarship and major record labels overlap. More, it tells us much about how two mid-century technologies – magnetic tape and the long-playing record – impacted on fieldwork and its products, and the agency of these technologies runs centrally through this article. While the *World Library* should be considered as a whole, in order to make sense of it as a work of cultural production and to get close enough to trace its specificities, the bulk of my analysis is dedicated to the production of two albums in the collection: those of Scottish and of English music. Even within Europe, where Lomax conducted his fieldwork, the political climates and institutional and disciplinary configurations, in various nations after the Second World War, were starkly different, and each volume of the series in which Lomax was involved as fieldworker has a very different story.⁸ The networks through which the *World Library* was produced, though, were very much international, and central to my aims is a theorization of how field recordings are rendered suitable for the public ear, how the *World Library* was a product of, and fed back into, the aural public sphere – to borrow another useful term from Ochoa – of post-war Europe.⁹

This is most commonly theorized as mediation. But Jonathan Sterne has recently argued that ‘media are not middle terms, intervening in otherwise more primary, fundamental, or organic relationships’, and his proposed alternative, *mediality*, seems a better fit for the *World Library*.¹⁰ Media did not come to the field recordings housed in the *World Library* after the fact, stealing them away, corrupting pure communication; media were *built into* the recordings in the first instance. It was produced according to a sensibility of what I would like to term the audio-exoteric: a project of writing sound with a quality of mediality, constructed specifically for communication to the general public. So when Martin Stokes prompts us to think about music in a global field of translation – in which, drawing on literary theory, ‘originals may be produced with translation in mind, and thus, in a sense, already be “translated” at the point of origin’ – we can bring this thought to the *World Library*, perhaps to the history of ethnographic field recording more broadly: the audio-exoteric is compressed into what we hear at, or even before, the point of production, in efforts to legitimate, preserve, and disseminate certain musics and musical traditions.¹¹

This article builds on the emerging corpus of scholarship on Lomax’s work in Europe – which so far is good on establishing his movements and detailing what he recorded, but less

8 I am grateful to Goffredo Plastino for highlighting to me the differences between Lomax’s work in Britain and that in Italy and Spain. For details of Lomax in Italy, see Plastino, ‘Un Sentimento Antico’, in *Alan Lomax, L’Anno più Felice Della mia Vita. Un Viaggio in Italia 1954–1955*, ed. Goffredo Plastino (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2008), 16–86.

9 Ochoa, ‘Sonic Transculturation’, 807.

10 Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 9–11. Sterne draws on Adorno in making this argument, as does Raymond Williams in defining *mediation*, moving beyond the sense that the term must always imply interposition, in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1983), 204–7. Other terms exist (mediatization, mediafication), but the meanings of all of them are far from settled. I agree with Sterne, that *mediality* is the term that most evokes a *quality of media*, rather than a (usually pejorative) process or historical sequence. Sterne, *MP3*, 9–11, 251–2.

11 Stokes, ‘On Musical Cosmopolitanism’, 13.

good on addressing the agency of recorded sound, and probing the labour involved in constructing and disseminating a world library.¹² I will explore these histories and ideas by first retracing the genesis and production of the *World Library*, before drawing out some of its implications for music historiography and the conceptualization of sound. I will then conclude by shifting perspective to the present digital dissemination of field recordings, addressing the agencies of the past.

Making World Music

Recording the world's music was not a new idea in the 1950s. From the very onset of the recording industry, commercial labels – alongside and sometimes in collaboration with folklorists, anthropologists, philologists, and enthusiasts – were active in making recordings and establishing markets globally.¹³ This history is also one of interconnection between sound archives and colonial outposts and administrations; and many recordings were made with educational or preservationist intentions, which may or may not have been connected with commercial motivations.¹⁴ Despite the overlaps, commercial ventures drew the ire of academically inclined folklorists: George Herzog wrote in 1936, 'the commercial companies can hardly be relied upon to put out authentic records of primitive music. The pseudo-primitive or the broken down primitive melody is considered more saleable'; Béla Bartók went even further, announcing the following year, 'it is well known that these companies are also busy recording the folk music of exotic countries; those records are bought by the natives, hence the expected profit is there. However, as soon as sales diminish for whatever reasons, the companies withdraw the records from circulation and the matrices are most likely melted down.' This, for Bartók, 'represents vandalism', and he encouraged nations to legislate against such wanton destruction, trumpeting: 'the radio and gramophone, therefore, will sooner or later develop into a calamity equivalent to any of the seven Egyptian plagues, even topping them, because the spread of these devices is infinite'.¹⁵

12 See E. David Gregory, 'Lomax in London: Alan Lomax, the BBC and the Folk Song Revival in England, 1950–1958', *Folk Music Journal* 8/2 (2002), 136–69; and John Szwed, *The Man who Recorded the World: A Biography of Alan Lomax* (London: Heinemann, 2010), 244–305.

13 Kay Kaufman Shelemay, 'Recording Technology, the Record Industry, and Ethnomusicological Scholarship', in *Comparative Musicology and Anthropology of Music*, ed. Bruno Nettl and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 279–81; Pekka Gronow and Ilpo Saunio, *An International History of the Recording Industry*, trans. Christopher Moseley (London: Cassell, 1998).

14 For an upbeat take on this history, see Robert Reigle, 'Humanistic Motivations in Ethnomusicological Recordings', in *Recorded Music: Philosophical and Critical Reflections*, ed. Mine Doğan-tan-Dack (London: Middlesex University Press, 2008), 189–210; for another long historical view, see Stephen Cottrell, 'Ethnomusicology and the Music Industries: An Overview', *Ethnomusicology Forum* 19/1 (2010), 3–25.

15 George Herzog, *Research in Primitive and Folk Music in the United States* (Washington, DC: American Council of Learned Societies, 1936), 20. Béla Bartók, 'Mechanical Music' (1937), in *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 294–5.

It is a familiar refrain – often repeated and resounding still. Lomax, for his part, riffed on the entropy theme with his concept of ‘cultural grey-out’: a process of homogenization that would ‘fill the human skies with the smog of the phoney’ and unhook music from communities.¹⁶ The notion of cultural entropy was, in part at least, a motivating force behind the *World Library* – Lomax wrote of his intention as to ‘preserve all our best things from decay’.¹⁷ Other agencies were enacted on multiple fronts: technological – the recent availability of magnetic tape and the advent of the LP; professional – Lomax had failed in his agitations for a collaboratively produced set of albums at an International Folklore conference in Indiana in 1950; and, most pressingly, political – his name appeared in *Red Channels*, accusing him of Communist influence in American radio and television in the same year.¹⁸

It was a project bound up with mid-century ideas about culture collecting. It was an outcome of the competing internationalisms of the Cold War. It was an effort to stake out a place for certain traditional musics in a shifting cultural climate. And it was born of Lomax’s political desire to open up channels of communication by using the tools of the culture industry against itself, and, more broadly, to use the past to make a better future. All of which can be found in a letter Lomax wrote to the BBC head of central programme operations, Brian George, hoping to use existing recordings made by the BBC to make up his albums of British music. Lomax wrote:

It is only in the last generation that good recordings, taken from authentic singers in their own places have been made. Now they exist by the hundreds and must be published in such a form that the general public may hear them. This can only be done by a large commercial house. Such publication, now undertaken by Columbia, is bound to enrich world culture, deepen human understanding and forward the ideals of tolerance and freedom.¹⁹

This is not the kind of rhetoric usually associated with major label record releases. But contra to easy arguments about major labels, a monolithic culture industry and musical expropriation – arguments that Lomax made himself, vividly characterizing ‘canned music made in Tin Pan Alley, bottled in movie studios and recording salons, and poured out at a helpless public through millions of black loudspeakers’ – his ideas fell upon favourable ears high up the ranks at Columbia.²⁰

16 Lomax, ‘Appeal for Cultural Equity’ (1977), in *Selected Writings*, 285. Sidestepping an assessment of the veracity of this statement, the frequency with which such sentiments can be found in the history – and present – of musical folklore and ethnomusicology lends weight to Ochoa’s assessment of traditional musics as an ‘inexhaustible fountain of musical youth’, always around to sonically recharge cultural–political arguments and agendas. Ochoa, ‘Sonic Transculturation’, 807.

17 Alan Lomax letter to John Lorne Campbell, 10 October 1950. ALC 04.02.05 (2/2), Correspondence, Index.

18 Szwed, *The Man who Recorded the World*, 247–50; Lomax, ‘Saga of a Folksong Hunter’ (1960), in *Selected Writings*, 179.

19 Alan Lomax letter to Brian George, BBC, 2 January 1951. BBC WAC R21/37, Gram Corres Columbia Records Inc. World Folk Music, 1951–54.

20 Alan Lomax, *The Skiffle Album: Folk Songs Popularised by Alan Lomax and The Ramblers* (London: B. Feldman and Co, 1957), unpaginated.

Goddard Lieberson was born in England in 1911, and was raised in Washington State. He had become politically active by the time he moved to New York in 1939, had accompanied John Hammond on recording trips in the southern United States, and had been stage manager for Hammond's 'Spirituals to Swing' concerts. He was musically omnivorous and supported pop recordings to pay for Columbia's Masterworks division, and rose through the ranks to become president of the label in 1956.²¹ Columbia had its own history of releasing folk music before Lomax came along: with an on and off ownership of Okeh Records, and with its own American Folk Music and Blues Division. It was Lieberson who gave the go-ahead, although not the money, to compile a world library, and Lomax set sail for Europe on 24 September 1950.

After working briefly in Paris, he arrived in London in December, which would be his base for the next eight years. Lomax, intending to gather existing recordings rather than make new ones for his library, set about developing an international network of collaborators and fellow anthologists, and had been casting around for assistance in Britain before he even arrived. From Paris, he wrote to John Lorne Campbell on the island of Canna, asking if he would be willing to edit the British volume. He wrote to Valentine Britten, BBC Gramophone librarian, to explain he was seeking 'records by real country singers and musicians, choirs, etc., the real authentic article – of good acoustic quality – and of both scientific and (some) popular interest'.²² He sought further help from the BBC, with whom he had already worked when broadcasting Transatlantic Call through CBS between 1943 and 1945, asking his contact Geoffrey Bridson to 'round up all the material available in BBC and in England on disc so that I can listen to all of it in one place at one time and maybe sit right down then and there with my Magnecorder and make the copies'.²³

Similar plans and processes of cultural production were unfolding elsewhere. Lomax's diaries contain strings of countries for his library and people to do the work: a to-do list from early 1951 reveals he was planning to write to contacts in Norway, Yugoslavia, Portugal, India, and China, and to travel to the Soviet Union under the direction of Alan Bush, whom he had met in Durham in April. Elsewhere, collating other lists allows the full scope of the projected *World Library* to emerge: albums were mooted, planned, proposed, scraped together, scrapped altogether, completed, rejected, or forgotten for (in Lomax's words) French Africa, British East Africa, North Africa, South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Chile, Mexico, the West Indies, American Indian music, North America, Canada, Australia

21 Gary Marmorstein, *The Label: The Story of Columbia Records* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2007), 132–7, 228.

22 Alan Lomax letter to Valentine Britten, Gramophone, 12 October 1950. BBC WAC R46/309/2, Rec. Gen. Alan Lomax, File 2: 1947–51. Britten pointed him in the direction of Maud Karpeles of the International Folk Music Council, and Douglas Kennedy of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. Valentine Britten letter to Alan Lomax, 17 October 1950. BBC WAC R46/309/2, Rec. Gen. Alan Lomax, File 2: 1947–51.

23 Alan Lomax letter to Geoffrey Bridson, BBC, 25 October 1950. BBC WAC R46/309/2, Rec. Gen. Alan Lomax, File 2: 1947–51. Bridson replied that he could not perform such a task, as records were 'scattered all over the various gramophone libraries, and would make a pile a few feet high'. Geoffrey Bridson letter to Alan Lomax, 3 November 1950. BBC WAC R46/309/2, Rec. Gen. Alan Lomax, File 2: 1947–51.

and New Guinea, New Zealand, Polynesia, Japan, The Ryukyus, Formosa and Korea, Indonesia, Far East, Indo-China–Malaysia, Arab World, Palestine, Israel, Greece and Turkey, Soviet Union, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Holland and Belgium, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, France, Ireland, Scotland, and England.²⁴ Of the eighteen volumes that were released (fourteen in 1955, four appearing subsequently), Scotland and Spain were compiled by Lomax, with some assistance, mostly containing recordings he made himself; five more – Ireland, England, Yugoslavia, and two Italian volumes – he edited in collaboration with others; and eleven were assembled by experts working in each respective area.

Much of this work can be deemed institutional labour, in that Lomax was operating through and seeking collaboration with institutions both large and small. Inevitably this informed and inflected Lomax's actions and the production of the *World Library*. He was keen to stress his institutional connections, stretching from his previous work at the Library of Congress, through his present engagement with Columbia, and into future archival deposits of his collection. The *World Library* was to be 'a real monument', Lomax wrote in a diary entry.²⁵ He played on prestige in approaching folklorists and collectors to work with him; even more so with the singers and performers whose voices and bodies were to be assembled on the discs, as evinced in Lomax's writing to Scottish musicians whose recordings he wanted to use:

Thank you for your songs, which will be listened to by scholars and just ordinary people with the greatest interest and pleasure. The people of Scotland recorded about 25 hours of their folksongs this summer. The whole set will go to the University of Edinburgh folklore archive for the permanent benefit of the Scottish people. Some will go to the BBC Permanent Records Library, some will be published by the Columbia Records Company in New York City, and some will be used in my BBC broadcasts. And all will end up in a museum in the U.S.²⁶

As well as using prestige to build connections and secure access, Lomax shuttled between institutions in securing an income for himself during his time in Europe. As well as funding his work on the back of his, not uncontroversial, share of royalties from 'Goodnight, Irene', he was paid regularly by the BBC for producing programmes for the Home Service and Third Programme, Columbia sent him advances of \$3,000 in 1952 and \$1,000 in 1953, and UNESCO paid him 52,500 Francs in autumn 1953 for twelve radio programmes of fifteen minutes, built from the recordings he had gathered making the *World Library*, and to be made available to broadcasters globally.²⁷

24 ALC 07.03.04, England etc. 1951 – Field Notes Diary; 07.03.06, Britain, etc.; 07.03.23, Britain; 07.03.25, France 1952 Diary.

25 ALC 07.03.25, France 1952 Diary.

26 Alan Lomax letter to Scottish performers, undated. ALC 04.02.12 (1/3), British Isles – Radio Scripts, Transcripts, Correspondence.

27 Alan Lomax letter to Charles Seeger, undated (c. 1954–55). ALC 23.06.05 (2/17), Charles Seeger Correspondence; ALC 24.15.29 (1/2), Bills, Financial Material, 1953.

As well as financing the *World Library*, these institutions shaped its content. Szwed gives the example of Lomax's reluctance to work in Spain while Franco was in power, but being forced to by Columbia's insistence on a Spanish album to sate the appetite for Spanish guitar and flamenco music in the United States.²⁸ Institutional mediality runs even deeper, however; extant collections of recordings were themselves initially made for specific purposes and specific projects. The BBC, for example, was running its own Folk Music and Dialect Recording Scheme (1952–7) concurrently with Lomax's time in Europe, employing Seamus Ennis and Peter Kennedy to make recordings 'for the purposes of broadcasting' according to a clear collectors' brief that stressed sonic intelligibility and avoiding 'material of doubtful authenticity (e.g. music hall or popular songs, singers who have been subjected to outside influences, etc.)'.²⁹

Certainly, too, the institutions to which Lomax was connected in Britain informed the kinds of collaborations he was able to navigate.³⁰ More than many folklorists, Lomax was enmeshed in the mechanisms of commerce and mass media, deeming this a necessary move in questing for what he later termed cultural equity. He proclaimed to Brian George that the *World Library* would 'present the oral tradition in all its magnificence and on equal terms with the tradition of written music', and that 'authentic folklore does not yet compete with Bing Crosby or, even, Béla Bartók'.³¹ Later he wrote to Charles Seeger to defend the project on the grounds that 'the most important fact about our series is that the richest and most powerful record company is willing to publish our field results and that other such companies may follow suit'.³² And Lomax had form on this, compiling a *List of American Folksongs on Commercial Records* in 1942, and describing this music as being 'in a healthier condition, roving the radio stations and recording studios than it has been or ever will be in the notebooks of collectors'.³³

Not everyone shared his opinions, though, and upon his arrival Lomax tapped into a cool seam of suspicion in Britain that conflated his culture collecting and connections to commerce with an Americanized consumer society and commodification. From this footing, he was perhaps not helped by the British media, which published articles making such connections explicit (Figure 1).

28 Szwed, *The Man who Recorded the World*, 269.

29 Brief from HCPOps, 16 May 1952. BBC WAC R46/658/1, Rec Gen, 'Folk Music' 1952–59.

30 Again the situation in Britain differs from that elsewhere. In Spain, for instance, Lomax received no institutional support; while in Italy he worked against institutional recommendations. My thanks again to Goffredo Plastino for these insights.

31 Alan Lomax letter to Brian George, 2 January 1951. BBC WAC R21/37, Gram Corres Columbia Records Inc. World Folk Music, 1951–54. Being folklorists enmeshed in the mechanisms of commerce was the Lomax family trade, John A. Lomax having earlier had a successful career bridging the gaps between the music industries, academic folklore, and the lecture circuit. Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

32 Alan Lomax letter to Charles Seeger, 2 May 1956. ALC 23.06.05 (2/17), Charles Seeger Correspondence.

33 Alan Lomax, *List of American Folk Songs on Commercial Records*. Archive of American Folk Song, Library of Congress, 1942. 1.

THE DAILY MIRROR Wednesday, February 28, 1951

THROUGH THE SWING DOOR

**Mr. Lomax finds them—
Tin Pan Alley
plugs them**

NEXT week a black Citroen will stop at the home of ploughman James Plenderleith at Auchterarder, Perthshire, and two Americans will say: "We've come 3,450 miles to hear you sing—may we come in?"

One of the Americans is thirty-six-year-old Alan Lomax. The other is twenty-four-year-old girl singer Robin Roberts. They are on a month's tour of Scotland and England recording folk songs for an American gramophone company.

They are starting their tour in Auchterarder, because ploughman Plenderleith knows some 200 folk songs

ALAN is a folk song specialist—he looks like a fined-down Orson Welles—not only because he believes that folk songs "contain all the genius of the human race," but they have a commercial value, too. It was Alan a compact six-footer



ALAN LOMAX
"I like to eat."

Last October Alan decided to explore the European folk market, and after Christmas he and singer Robin Roberts did a one

month tour of Ireland. They recorded 200 songs in Gaelic on their £250 86lb portable wire machine.

Commented Alan: "The songs were five hundred years old and they were the most exquisite things I have ever heard—but they weren't commercial."

THE two nightbirds of the trip were a folk song expert who accompanied them with a gallon jar of whiskey that was refilled every morning—"I had to flex my muscles for that," says Alan—and the girl who sang "Goodnight, Irene" in Gaelic.

Alan's trouble is that most folk songs aren't considered fit for public consumption unless edited.

When Alan has finished with England he and Robin go to France—and we'll just keep going round the world until the money runs out."

Back to Paris will be like going home to Robin, who recently sang for a month in the St. Germain des Pres night club, the "Abbaye."

Robin, every man's dream in a sweater, said: "There's nothing like a Paris night club for meeting your old American college friends."

Robin's job on Alan's tours is "to keep them talking and get them singing, otherwise a lot of them won't record for us."



ROBIN ROBERTS
Every man's dream

In England two music publishers have already approached Alan for the rights of his British album—in case there's a hit tune there.

But although Alan doesn't mind his work being commercialised—"I like to eat"—he believes that folk songs are more important than Tin Pan Alley.

In a recent U.S. propaganda "Voice of America" broadcast to China, they played some of Alan's recordings of American mid-West fiddle tunes.

"The Chinese loved them," he said. "I think there's a moral in that somewhere."

Douglas Howell

RADIO Showdown

TWO weeks ago I warned the B.B.C. that "Top Town," their Festival of Britain series of amateur talent, had posed a danger to the rocks because of the slipshod method of recruiting performers. These took no notice, with the result

Entertainments manager Sam Avery confirms this.

This, of course, is denied by the B.B.C. Sham amateurs? Well three of Brighton's Best seven admit they accept professional arrangements.

Figure 1 *Daily Mirror* article, 28 February 1951. Used by kind permission of the Mirrorpix Photo Archives.

Linking Lomax to Tin Pan Alley, linking his sound recording with his food shopping, describing his visit as an exploration of the 'European folk market' – these things did not sit kindly with many of those already working in the field. This in turn prompted Marie Slocombe, head of the BBC Recorded Programme Library, and whose job among other things was to select and reject field recordings for BBC preservation, to write to producers at BBC Glasgow to distance the corporation from Lomax amid these rumblings.³⁴

Initially keen on the project, John Lorne Campbell wrote to Lomax that there should be a volume of Scottish music rather than a single LP to represent Britain. He offered a list of types of song that should be included, and agreed to gather a selection of his own recordings made in the Outer Hebrides for the *World Library*.³⁵ Yet he was spooked by Lomax's

34 Marie Slocombe letter to BBC Glasgow, 17 August 1951. BBC WAC R46/309/2, Rec. Gen. Alan Lomax, File 2: 1947–51.

35 John Lorne Campbell letter to Alan Lomax, 14 November 1950. ALC 04.02.26 (2/4) (1/2), British Isles – Correspondence.

conditional agreement to a Scotland LP, on the grounds that recordings should be sufficiently ‘pleasing’ for the album to sell well, and not only backed out of the project but tried to prevent Lomax working in Scotland at all.³⁶ It was because of this suspicion that Lomax ventured to Scotland to make his own recordings.

But there is another reason for this rejection that links back to institutional labour and, ultimately, competition. Campbell was president of the Folklore Institute of Scotland (FIOS), which had published, under the auspices of the Linguaphone Institute, a set of five twelve-inch discs of Gaelic music in 1950.³⁷ That FIOS intended to continue releasing anthologies of its own was the reason Campbell formally gave for rejecting Lomax’s advances: ‘we prefer to retain the best of our Gaelic folksong recordings for publication in such an album, especially as very careful work will be necessary upon the texts and translations of such songs’.³⁸ So the *World Library* was far from the only project sounding out traditional musics. Other international projects were up and running: Romanian ethnomusicologist Constantin Brăiloiu was working with UNESCO on releasing his *Collection Universelle de Musique Populaire* (1951–8) on 78s; Laura Boulton was releasing LPs of various nations’ musics through Folkways Records. Lomax was aware of these other projects and felt threatened by them. ‘Boulton is very aggressive and is after my job’, he wrote in his diary in 1952; ‘There can’t be two competing series.’³⁹

On top of this, the early to mid-1950s marked a period of renewed interest among major labels in world music, linked to socio-technological developments enabling increased tourist travel, and an awareness of the sales potential of authenticity. Keir Keightley has recovered the story of Capitol Records 1956 series *Capitol of the World*, which wore its authenticity quite literally on its sleeve: ‘Recorded in the country of the music’s origins | Captured in flawless high-fidelity | A remarkable series of albums for world music-travellers.’⁴⁰ It was against such works that the *World Library* was positioned.

Competition for Lomax existed both synchronically and diachronically; as well as competing with other concurrent anthological projects, he was striving for discovery. He became frustrated in Scotland, for instance, writing in his diary on 16 July 1951:

36 Full contents and some analysis of this correspondence are in Ray Perman, *The Man who Gave Away his Island* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2010), 133–40.

37 John Lorne Campbell letter to Alan Lomax, 18 November 1950. ALC 04.02.12 (2/3), British Isles – Research Notes – Correspondence.

38 John Lorne Campbell letter to Alan Lomax, 10 December 1950. ALC 04.02.12 (3/3), British Isles – Transcripts, Research Notes, Correspondence.

39 ALC 07.03.25, France 1952 Diary. For more on Boulton, see Aaron Fox, ‘Repatriation as Reanimation through Reciprocity’, in *The Cambridge History of World Music*, ed. Philip V. Bohlman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 522–54.

40 In Simon Frith, ‘The Discourse of World Music’, in *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 309. Columbia, too, was offering consumers its own take on world music; George Avakian produced albums such as the 1954 *I Love Paris*, with music arranged by Nadia Boulanger-trained Michel Legrand, grappling with the question, ‘How can we express Paris without the usual Eiffel Tower and all that?’ Columbia – CL 555. Marmorstein, *The Label*, 232–3.

This is the second day of the bothy ballad country of Scotland. Here Ford, Ord and Gavin Greig have preceded me, not to speak of the BBC trucks. There is absolutely no chance of recording anything unrecorded, of saving anything unsaved. Old trails, old tunes, old singers and old stuff. I'm growing more and more irritated. At least one should be employed in searching out something new and desperate to be known.⁴¹

Despairing at 'old stuff' while claiming to be (re-)presenting traditions may seem to be a contradiction in terms, but this comment begins to make sense when viewed through the lens of competition. Linked to institutional labour and the recordist's aesthetic preferences, competition becomes entextualized into field recordings themselves, which is to say that another reading of the 'field' in field recording is one of cultural production, as explicated by Bourdieu, in which individuals and institutions are engaged in constant competition and position-taking for cultural legitimacy.⁴²

Zooming in further allows us to examine how these competing and contradictory interests and agencies were enacted. The specificities of mediality and the audio-exoteric, time and temporality, place and movement, and the ways in which sound recordings drift into new networks, can be heard more clearly by following a single recording. Stanyek and Piekut have recently proposed replacing the overused and wilted 'schizophonia' with a corrective term, 'rhizophonia', which describes 'the fundamentally fragmented yet proliferative condition of sound reproduction and recording, where sounds and bodies are constantly dislocated, relocated, and co-located in temporary aural configurations'.⁴³ It is precisely this dislocation, relocation, and co-location that characterizes the movement of field recordings in the *World Library*. I will briefly illustrate these ideas through a recording of 'Haul on the Bowlin' – the very first track on the England volume of the *World Library*.

The BBC arranged a recording session for 8 June 1942 in Bristol. Stanley Slade, a retired sailor and well-regarded shanty singer, was to record a number of songs onto disc, backed by a BBC chorus, with piano-accordion accompaniment for certain tracks. Slade would teach the songs he wanted to record to the professional singers, who were to set down seven or eight tracks – 'Haul on the Bowlin' being one of them. The resulting recordings were then to be used for radio programmes such as *Country Magazine*, and held in the BBC sound archive as library music for 'incidental use' in drama productions.⁴⁴ Slade had initially involved himself with the BBC's sound work, frustrated by the corporation's representation of sea shanties in broadcasts.⁴⁵

41 ALC 07.03.04, England etc. 1951 – Field Notes Diary.

42 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 1–73.

43 Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut, 'Deadness: Technologies of the Intermundane', *The Drama Review* 54/1 (2010), 19.

44 Marie Slocombe, BBC report on 'Stock Recording: Folk Music', 1956. BBC WAC R46/658/1, Rec Gen, 'Folk Music' 1952–59.

45 Peter Kennedy interview for the British Library. May 1985, Gloucester. British Library Sounds website: <<https://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Oral-history-of-recorded-sound/021M-C0090X0073XX-0200V0>>.

Several years later, the BBC sent Peter Kennedy to Bristol in 1949, in part to produce more recordings of Slade, who was increasingly intransigent with the conditions of recording for the corporation. Kennedy had the idea of replacing the BBC chorus with people hauled in off the street, ‘to get voices that weren’t necessarily trained and some musical, some very un-musical, sounds; but very much natural work-song sound, because we were trying to capture that authentic effect’.⁴⁶ He made further recordings of Slade, and even arranged a studio session to record a 78 for HMV’s Education Department in early 1950, only for the singer to die a week before it was scheduled to take place. Kennedy remained keen to make use of the existing recordings, and wrote to Marie Slocombe at the BBC in January 1951 in an attempt to ‘instigate a campaign’ for the BBC ‘to sell Folk Music records of such typical English amateur talent as Stanley Slade, Harry Cox, Village Choirs etc.’.⁴⁷

When Lomax enlisted Kennedy to compile and co-produce the England LP for the *World Library*, Slade was therefore high on the list of suggestions, and while Lomax shared Kennedy’s enthusiasm, he preferred the 1942 BBC recordings to those made by Kennedy, and dubbed a handful onto tape.⁴⁸ In particular, he had no problem identifying ‘Haul on the Bowlin’ as aligning with his musical aesthetics, as he had already recorded a performance of the same song in America, by Richard Maitland in 1939 at Sailors’ Snug Harbor, a retirement home for seamen in Staten Island, New York.⁴⁹

He consulted the BBC in July about rights ownership, but contractual negotiations were ongoing between the BBC and Columbia – with Lomax as mediator – at the time of his writing. A sticking point was Lomax’s initial desire for exclusive rights being assigned to Columbia upon the *World Library*’s release. And although Lomax had backed down by mid-July, his initial demand triggered a response from the BBC that would shape the England LP’s contents. Slocombe, with one ear turned towards music history and the other towards future broadcasts, sent an internal memo on 27 July, offering a compromise on the request for recordings of Slade:

The singer is now dead and with him, so far as I know, dies the genuine tradition of shanty singing going back to the clipper ships themselves. I therefore think we would have reasonable grounds for saying that we would only be willing to release one (or at the very most two) of the seven or eight items we have from this particular singer.⁵⁰

Slocombe as gatekeeper here exerts her institutional authority, itself in turn impacting on which bits of Slade’s voice drifted from the archive to the record rack. But further questions

46 Peter Kennedy interview for the British Library, May 1985.

47 Peter Kennedy letter to Marie Slocombe, 12 January 1951. BBC WAC R46/691/1, Rec. Gen. Peter Kennedy.

48 These recordings have consequently become part of the Lomax materials and are available online. Stanley Slade’s ‘Haul on the Bowlin’ can be heard at: <<http://research.culturalequity.org/rc-b2/get-audio-detailed-recording.do?recordingId=12556>>.

49 <www.loc.gov/folklife/LP/SeaShantiesL26_L27_opt.pdf>.

50 Marie Slocombe memo to HCPOps, 27 July 1951. BBC WAC R21/37, Gram Corres Columbia Records Inc. World Folk Music, 1951–54.

remain, not least concerning the implications of including a professional BBC chorus in a library of folk and primitive music, and of including a song that was well travelled and long since transnational in a collection attempting to define and render a nation audible.

Lomax set up his own binaries as to what was and was not folk music around musical literacy and training. He asked for 'real country singers' in his letters to archivists in England.⁵¹ In Scotland, this binary becomes clearer and serves as the basis of selection and rejection. Lomax set himself up for a day of listening at Glasgow Permanent Records Library, scrawling down notes as he listened, choosing not to make copies of recordings of various performers: Robert Watson was dismissed as a 'trained' singer; Ramsay Sinclair a 'horrible singer'; Dan Williams as having a 'horrible vaudeville style'; and, worst of all, Sidney McEwan as a 'sentimental crap singer'.⁵² The 'trained' and the 'crap' were, for Lomax, not unconnected. Elsewhere, an album of Norwegian music never made it past the production stage, for reasons explained by Lomax to Fredrik Wulfsberg of the Norwegian Embassy in London:

The music is excellent, but apparently Dr Sandvik [who had collated recordings at Lomax's request] did not understand that I wished to use largely documentary recordings in the series. Therefore his records, made by singers trained in the conventional European sense, will not conform to the standards of the rest of the series and the contribution of Norway will seem rather strange.⁵³

The combination of the BBC moderating access to recordings, the exigencies of the audio-exoteric in working for Columbia, and Lomax's own aesthetic frameworks coalesce to produce a limit to this sonic labour, to give shape to the *World Library*, and to create an outside in which certain sounds and traditions and their modern instantiations are absented and repressed.⁵⁴ This can be heard as an example of grouping, taken from Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), which presents a challenge to definitions of groups – like folk music, or tradition – as stable entities, flipping concepts on their head, and asking how they were constructed in the first place. To borrow more ANT parlance, Lomax becomes the recruiting officer, gathering the sounds to constitute the folk and the primitive in his project. He also becomes the spokesperson for the grouping – a role he gave himself ('we, who speak for the folk in the marketplace') – while trained singers become the anti-group against which various musics are assembled and accorded a new logic.⁵⁵

Yet there is slippage. The boundaries are permeable and leaky. The inclusion of Stanley Slade and the BBC chorus suggests that the audio-exoteric trumps the aversion to musical training, and Lomax and Kennedy had to work hard to conceal these inconsistencies and

51 Alan Lomax letter to Valentine Britten, 12 October 1950. BBC WAC R46/309/2, Rec. Gen. Alan Lomax, File 2: 1947–51.

52 ALC 07.03.03, Scotland Notebook.

53 Alan Lomax letter to Fredrik Wulfsberg, 4 October 1951. ALC 22.02.10, Misc. Articles.

54 Georgina Born, 'The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production', *Cultural Sociology* 4/2 (2010), 193–4.

55 Lomax, 'Making Folklore Available (1950)', in *Selected Writings*, 116; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27–42.

sonically translate such anomalies: in a 1956 BBC radio broadcast, as part of the series *A Ballad Hunter Looks at Britain* in which the two men strengthened the group they had formed, Lomax passed the microphone to Kennedy, who enthused on how Slade:

took command of the astonished BBC choir like a first mate tackling a green ship's crew. Stanley was a perfectionist and often before he permitted a recording, he drove the poor choristers through a two or three-hour rehearsal, *until he had them hoarse-voiced and shouting like seamen at the ropes*. But old Stanley was always in the lead, yanking them along with his rough old shantyman's voice.⁵⁶

The traces of cultural production are found elsewhere. The BBC's mismanagement of metadata caused its own problems: in struggling to trace information on recordings, Brian George wrote to the BBC's assistant head of programme contracts to admit that 'in some cases we have invented titles for material recorded by us as folk singers are apt to be rather vague about these things'.⁵⁷ Later, Kennedy wrote to Lomax that he was getting creative with his sleeve notes: 'The BBC, unfortunately, have no texts. One must either guess or hope that that the singers themselves [not all of whom were still alive] will supply the rest.'⁵⁸ His problems were not only to do with written information, either. They were also to do with sound – 'I have been trying to get on with the texts but find it very difficult to hear what the singers are saying in many cases'; 'one has to simply guess a lot of the songs owing to bad quality'⁵⁹ – and the sound of recordings emerges as an important force in the cultural production of the *World Library*.

There was no volume of Welsh music. Kennedy had asked about it: 'What are you going to do about Wales, by the way, you left it rather vague?' Lomax maintained that five minutes of Welsh music on the England album would suffice: 'that will mean a close approximation of what we'd eventually like to have as the Album of Folk Music from England and Wales. They belong together as complementary musical ideas.'⁶⁰ The issue reappeared in a letter from Esme Lewis of Barry, Glamorgan. Lewis commends Lomax on his work for radio and television, but goes on to offer a mild reproach: 'one thing only has puzzled me Mr Lomax! i.e. your exclusion of Wales. You will find many beautiful folk songs here – dealing with different subjects and containing ample variety of mood in the music.' Lewis even offers to sing for Lomax, having previously recorded an album of Welsh folk songs for HMV.⁶¹ But a Welsh album never appeared.

Lomax did, however, travel to Wales, making recordings in Treorchy in December 1953 (a month after Lewis's letter). He also sent letters to potential collaborators at Welsh institutions, seemingly in an effort to gather material for a Welsh album. Dora Herbert Jones

56 BBC radio script, ALC 04.01.11 (3/4), *A Ballad Hunter Looks at Britain*, programmes 3–4, 1956. My emphasis.

57 Brian George memo to AHPC, 10 September 1951. BBC WAC R21/37, Gram Corres Columbia Records Inc. World Folk Music, 1951–54.

58 Peter Kennedy letter to Alan Lomax, undated c. July 1951. BL PK Box 12 – Alan Lomax Letters.

59 Peter Kennedy letter to Alan Lomax, 27 July 1951. BL PK Box 12 – Alan Lomax Letters.

60 Peter Kennedy letter to Alan Lomax, 20 August 1951; Alan Lomax letter to Peter Kennedy, 24 August 1951. Both BL PK Box 12 – Alan Lomax Letters.

61 Esme Lewis letter to Alan Lomax, 22 November 1953. ALC 04.02.23 (1/2), Field Work – British Isles – Correspondence, Transcripts, Musical Notation.

of University College, Swansea wrote back: ‘the large number of records made while I was collecting these in Wales are now too faint for much use to be made of them. Only a fortnight ago the BBC . . . tried to use some of these early records and found that they were useless.’⁶² As well as aspects of musical performance and adherence to abstract notions of authenticity, then, issues of format, technology, and preservation – in other words, contributing factors to the sound of music – impacted on the *World Library*’s contents. Jones continued: ‘of course, they were made on phonographs and have had no attention paid to them since they were done some 30 years ago’.

Degradation – of human voice, of recorded sound, of some imbrication of the two – reappears as a limiting factor when Argentine ethnomusicologist Isabel Aretz supplied Lomax with an LP’s worth of music, only to have them rejected on sonic grounds:

As a collection for a Museum it is excellent. However, I am desolated to say that it is not ready for publication in my series. In general the difficulties are two: 1. So many of the singers are old with badly broken voices; 2. A number of the best records are rather badly distorted or have a bad surface noise . . . I say that as musical folklore the material is of very high order but I am certain that many of your old men are not for the general public.⁶³

In this instance, the recordedness of the recordings, the degree to which technology intrudes on the listening experience, prevents a nation’s admission to the *World Library*. Lomax, presumably with Bing and Béla still in mind, was concerned with sourcing recordings of a particular audio quality for representation in the marketplace, for communication to a large audience.

Further probing of institutional limit and the absented outsides of the *World Library* reveal still more agencies and shaping factors. Lomax leant on the BBC to obtain recordings from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, on the understanding that they were to be used in radio broadcasts. After making copies to send to Marius Barbeau, with whom he was collaborating on a Canada LP, and sparking a row between the two institutions, the BBC head of copyright finally had to write to Lomax, drawing his attention ‘to the section 4.3 of the Canadian Copyright Act of 1921’.⁶⁴ Lomax replied from the Hotel Nueva York in Madrid:

For the first time students of music and culture will have a good idea of how men have sung in every quarter of the globe, and most important, ordinary listeners everywhere will get acquainted with the peoples of the world in terms of the most understandable of the arts. Folk music can thus help to build for peace. Perhaps you will feel this explanation is unnecessary, but actually this is what is involved in the matter under discussion rather than section 4.3 of the Canadian copyright act of 1921.⁶⁵

62 Dora Herbert Jones letter to Alan Lomax, 21 May 1951. ALC 04.02.26 (2/4) (1/2), British Isles – Correspondence.

63 Alan Lomax letter to Isabel Aretz, 20 June 1952. ALC 35.01.04 – T0032–0041.

64 M. Candler letter to Alan Lomax, 12 August 1952. BBC WAC R46/309/3, Rec. Gen. Alan Lomax, File 3A – 1952.

65 Alan Lomax letter to M. Candler, 15 August 1952. BBC WAC R46/309/3, Rec. Gen. Alan Lomax, File 3A – 1952.

Ultimately, Lomax was forced to back down, and the CBC recordings were removed from the Canada album. This clash between what Myers terms regimes of value – in this instance between a utopian vision of the dissemination of the world’s musics and the legal protection of cultures, voices, and identities; more broadly of the contestations over culture as it takes on new forms of materiality – has become an increasingly prevalent aspect of world music production and politics.⁶⁶ It also reveals two further properties of the *World Library*: first, that in addition to aesthetics and technology, the heterogeneous networks through which the *World Library* came to be are also legal, with national copyright law enacting an agency of its own in international cultural production; second, that the singers and performers – whose voices and bodies are the source of such cultural struggles – so easily slip through the network, are represented but not consulted, are adopted and adapted through complex collector–institution arrangements, and become part of the transnational traffic in culture, with the slightest leakiness in copyright protection leading to entirely unpredictable re-organizations and recontextualizations.⁶⁷

At the same time, there is a risk of underplaying the agency of the performers; many of those whom Lomax recorded in Scotland seemed happy with the prospect of dissemination and recognition. Elizabeth Barclay of Shetland wrote to Lomax to say ‘it gives me great pleasure to think that I was able to contribute to your album and so help make Scottish folksongs better known’; Rachel MacLeod of Barra wrote that her friends Mary Gillies and Mary Johnston were ‘delighted that they are about “to come into their own at long last”’. Many a song they have given to song gleaners, now they are about to get honourable mention – thanks to you Mr Lomax’; Calum Johnston expressed his good wishes, writing ‘if, by these songs which I learnt in my youth, I can contribute a little towards giving pleasure to others then I am quite happy’; and Kate Nicolson of South Uist replied to a Lomax letter, ‘I am glad you enjoyed your trip to the Highlands so well. I must say we were only too pleased to be of any use to your recording.’⁶⁸

Not much of the labour that was built into the *World Library*’s production was factored into reviews upon its release. Instead it was heralded as a faithful document of traditional musics, with reviewer Howard LaFay fashioning his own model of cultural entropy, asserting that ‘this monumental project was undertaken in the nick of time . . . fortunately for us and for succeeding generations, the *World Library* reflects the full, mellow beauty of the

66 Fred Myers, ‘Some Properties of Art and Culture: Ontologies of the Image and Economies of Exchange’, in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 89; Stokes, ‘On Musical Cosmopolitanism’, 1–3.

67 An excellent example of these processes is given in Steven Feld and Annette Kirkegaard, ‘Entangled Complicities in the Prehistory of “World Music”’: Poul Rovsing Olsen and Jean Jenkins Encounter Brian Eno and David Byrne in the Bush of Ghosts’, *Popular Musicology Online* 4 (2010) <www.popular-musicology-online.com/issues/04/feld.html>.

68 Elizabeth Barclay letter to Alan Lomax, 20 November 1951. ALC 04.02.12 (2/3), British Isles – Research Notes – Correspondence. Rachel MacLeod letter to Alan Lomax, 21 August 1951. ALC 04.02.12 (3/3), British Isles – Transcripts, Research Notes, Correspondence. Calum Johnston letter to Alan Lomax, 10 October 1951. ALC 04.02.18, Field Work – British Isles – Receipts. Kate Nicolson letter to Alan Lomax, undated c. late 1951. ALC 04.02.18, Field Work – British Isles – Receipts.

sunset of this musical tradition'.⁶⁹ The grouping that Lomax and his collaborators performed is re-performed, and strengthened in the process. The *World Library* as entextualization of mid-century cultural concern is contextualized back into public discourse, with reviews helping to supervise its reception. Folk and primitive musics are mapped against a familiar anti-group: pop. And the sound of the recordings, in particular, is championed; Alan Merriam and Charles Haywood, reviewing the *World Library*, praised it as a 'major contribution to the study of folk music':

This, in large measure, is due to the fact that *all* the material was recorded 'in the field'. There is no impression of the recording studio here, no contrivances with mikes, or setting up of proper balances. There is a pervading feeling of truth – this is how the folk sings, dances, or plays.⁷⁰

Sound scholars have done a good job of problematizing, if not debunking altogether, such affirmations of truth and the notion of fidelity in sound reproduction.⁷¹ Nevertheless, this argument – that field recordings are the truthful counterpart to the artifice of the studio – has proven to be quite persistent, challenging a pair of (false) dichotomies, highlighted by Frith and Lastra, that have dominated perceptions of sound recording: first, that live music equates to natural communication and truthfulness, while recorded music is artificial, to be treated with suspicion; second, that recorded sound is either 'phonographic' – sonically faithful in its reproduction of reality – or 'telephonic' – privileging intelligibility and particular aspects of sound at the expense of others.⁷² What must be considered in the case of the *World Library*, of field recording, and of folk music, is how technologies are wilfully made to vanish in the maintenance of a discourse of sonic transparency.

Listening Across Sound

Mitch Miller misread the script a little. Miller would ordinarily be positioned outside the network of folk music history: contributing significantly to music production techniques, crafting an echo chamber out of a toilet and claiming to make the first multitrack recording in 1949; something of a giant of the music industry in the twentieth century. Speaking as head of A&R at Columbia, he credited Lomax, rather than the music he had gathered, as being 'an authentic' in an interview for a *World Library* review in *Newsweek*. He continued: 'for Lomax, feeling and emotional delivery are more important than rough edges on the voice. In fact, the rough edges are part of the attractiveness of the style.'⁷³ In some respects,

69 Howard Lafay, 'To the Fourteen Corners of the World with Alan Lomax', *High Fidelity* (March 1955).

70 Charles Haywood and Alan Merriam, 'Folk and Primitive Music', *Journal of American Folklore* 71/279 (1958), 86.

71 Jonathan Sterne: 'Recording is a form of exteriority: it does not preserve a pre-existing sonic event as it happens so much as it creates and organises sonic events for the possibility of preservation and repetition'. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 332.

72 Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 25–6; Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 19–21; James Lastra, *Sound Technology and American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 138.

73 Mitch Miller, *Newsweek* 51 (14 April 1958), 15; Marmorstein, *The Label*, 183–4; Timothy Taylor, *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 111.

Miller's assertion is a pre-echo of Barthes's concept of the grain of the voice: the materiality of the body, history and tradition and memory and language, swelling out through the corporeal pulp of the human form.⁷⁴ The point that neither Miller nor Barthes make, which has been corrected since, is that for the grain of the voice to be audible beyond a finite space and time, a host of technologies are required.⁷⁵

For Paul Theberge, writing on the sound of music, the grain of the voice is revealed with uncommon closeness thanks to the microphone. Moreover, it was privileged and made voluptuous as a result of sound entering a new stage of rationalization in the 1950s, with the advent of recording studio practices of isolation, selective emphasis (reverb, equalization, compression, etc.), and spatial placement in the mix.⁷⁶ Haywood and Merriam's review of the *World Library*, which credits field recordings as being truthful on the grounds that they were made outside of studios, must therefore be considered against what else was happening in music – specifically music production – at the time. The *World Library* was released in 1955. 'Rock Around the Clock' had just stormed to the top of the UK charts.

The implications of thinking synchronically across music worlds – or cultural pluralism, as discussed by David Clarke – should thus be extended to thinking across discourses and aesthetics of music production and, ultimately, across sound; what is being endorsed – by Lomax, by Mitch Miller, by Haywood and Merriam – is broadly sonic. Lomax himself asked Columbia of their plans for 'advertising this first attempt to document the *sound of mankind*'.⁷⁷ And his Magnecorder can be slotted in alongside Elvis and Darmstadt in Clarke's formulation of significant mid-1950s musical phenomena that occurred concurrently but are usually kept apart in historiography, 'normally kept in their safely separate historical containers, now rearticulated in a potentially volatile chain of meaning'.⁷⁸ Richard Peterson's question, 'Why 1955?' – directed towards the advent of rock music – can also be asked of the *World Library*: why then, and with what consequences?⁷⁹

A complex and variegated network of institutional labour and limit, recording technology, aesthetics of sound, copyright law, competition, archival preservation and cooperation; contingent and conditional processes of grouping and translation; mediality – for the field

74 Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1979), 179–89.

75 Frith, *Performing Rites*, 187–8; Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music*, 2nd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 44.

76 Paul Theberge, 'The "Sound" of Music: Technological Rationalization and the Production of Popular Music', *new formations* 8 (1989), 103; Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock & Roll* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 164. It is worth noting that sound production and the grain of the voice did not bypass folk music discourse in the 1950s: a 1953 review of Esme Lewis's (who wrote to Lomax about Welsh music) HMV album *Welsh Folk Songs* stated 'she has the gift of projecting her whole self into her songs, and the recording engineers would have obtained a far more intimate quality, had Miss Lewis been nearer to the microphone'. *English Dance and Song* XVII/4 (1953), 130–1.

77 Alan Lomax letter to Columbia Records, 29 August 1953. ALC 24.15.29 (1/2), Bills, Financial Material, 1953. My emphasis.

78 David Clarke, 'Elvis and Darmstadt, or: Twentieth-Century Music and the Politics of Cultural Pluralism', *Twentieth-Century Music* 4/1 (2007), 8.

79 Richard Peterson, 'Why 1955? Explaining the Advent of Rock Music', *Popular Music* 9/1 (1990), 97–116.

recordings housed in the *World Library* to make the cut, each of these phenomena had first to be compressed into their audible exteriors. Lomax and his fellow moderns and anthologists worked to convert the oral into the aural, to shift the storage of music from bodies to tape, sounding some nations, but not others, on the basis of their abilities to perform this compression and conversion.⁸⁰

And were the voices on the *World Library* not voluptuous? Not only did Lomax stress 'good acoustic quality' in his approach letters to archivists, he also later revealed to Kennedy that he employed the same production techniques and rationalized sonic approach as developed by those crafting sound in studios: 'in all my albums I have helped the records a lot with the filter bank, the echo chamber, and I've also had a good engineer, who knew about making master tapes for records, socking up all the gain that he could, but careful not to sock on too much. It's a specialised job.'⁸¹ (Kennedy, meanwhile, was conscious of the sonic space of recording locations, using gym mats 'to deaden the echo' in halls, while working for the BBC in 1952.⁸²) Lomax's embrace of the latest technologies here was characteristic of his career, but these methods and production practices also serve to complicate the idea of a clean dichotomy of studio and field production. Not that all recordings are the same; but they may be more alike than we think. Both recordist and recording technology must be considered together – neither solely determines the form of a recording – and placed into the complex webs of relationships that created the recording scenario in the first place. The ontology of field recordings is thrown open to question by such practices: a question that can only be answered by tracing the specificities of field recording projects, and probing the institutions that commission them.⁸³ In any case, Haywood and Merriam's triumphalism – 'this is how the folk sings, dances, or plays' – serves to elide materiality, to make technology, mediality, and production technique disappear, and seems more like an exercise in performativity, an investment in the grouping, than an accurate description of the cultural production etched into the grooves of the discs.

Magnetic tape – patented in 1898; developed in Nazi Germany and, to a lesser degree, by the US military in the Second World War; used in radio from 1947; available to field recordists shortly thereafter – was a boon: 'gone the needle rasp of the aluminium disc; gone the worry with the chip and delicate surface of the acetates. Here was a quiet sound track with better fidelity than I had imagined ever possible; and a machine that virtually ran itself, so that I could give my full attention to the musicians.'⁸⁴ Lomax frequently

80 On the storage of music, see Frith, *Performing Rites*, 226–7; and Shuhei Hosokawa, *The Aesthetics of Recorded Sound* (Tokyo: Keisō Shobō, 1990), 9.

81 Alan Lomax letter to Valentine Britten, 12 October 1950. BBC WAC R46/309/2, Rec. Gen. Alan Lomax, File 2: 1947–51; Alan Lomax letter to Peter Kennedy, undated c. late 1958–early 1959. BL PK Box 12, Alan Lomax Letters.

82 Peter Kennedy report to Marie Slocombe, 13 October 1952. BL PK Box 16, BBC Reports.

83 On institutions, see Born, 'The Social and the Aesthetic', 190. A proper ontology of field recordings is beyond my scope here, but my point is that field recordings shared time, technology, technique, sonic space with patterns in sound recording generally, rather than existing as a separate history. This is not to say that the application of post-production techniques renders a Lomax recording indistinct from an Elvis recording; uses of technology are never predetermined and can be put to any number of aesthetic (or political) purposes.

84 Gordon Mumma, et al., 'Recording', *Oxford Music Online*; Lomax, 'Saga of a Folksong Hunter (1960), in *Selected Writings*, 178.

emphasized the agency of machines in his writing, folding recordist and recording device into one.⁸⁵ He also had a tendency to posit himself and his technologies as being ‘primitive’, in an effort to align himself with those whose music he sought and to gloss over the division of sonic labour involved in his work.⁸⁶ This holds for the *World Library*: Lomax wrote of cutting and editing tape as ‘a job like weaving’, linking new technologies with traditional arts in a direct material genealogy.⁸⁷

But magnetic tape also afforded increased possibilities for the recombination and suture of sounds, undermining temporal continuity in the process.⁸⁸ It was, in other words, modern. Lomax’s tape weaving was hemmed in, however, by another new technology: the long-playing record, developed by Columbia and introduced to the market in 1948. And when he writes in the same diary entry, ‘I’m almost done – about three or four minutes over and about to make final decisions’, the determining agency of format looms over the *World Library*.

This was a project not merely made possible by but indeed made *for* the LP. Lomax wrote of the format as ‘a near perfect means for publishing a folk song collection ... one LP encompasses as much folk music as a normal printed monograph and presents the vital reality of an exotic song style as written notation never can’.⁸⁹ Format governs the dimensions of the collection, however, and exactly how much ‘vital reality’ can fit onto a release is pre-determined, again undermining the very notion of reality on record.⁹⁰ To be more specific, in attempting to write a nation onto two sides of a microgroove disc, Lomax chose to whittle down tracks of different styles and times and cultures to often little more than thirty seconds of sound. JoAnne Mancini terms this use of the LP format ‘anthological modernism’, in which technology was used to ‘convert dozens of songs into a visionary whole that did not itself resemble a commercial product but rather a collection of sacred texts’.⁹¹ And I run with the idea of anthological modernism here: the *World Library*, with its complex relationships with mass media, definition of nation states through international cultural production, and its splitting and reordering of time by assembling supposed survivals of pre-modernity on modern materials can be heard precisely this way.

Presenting music in fragments has its own implications. The LP has been interpreted as a pedagogical format, affording listeners more time to become familiar with new musics, and

85 In an article on Lomax’s evolving relations with communication technologies, Henry Adam Svec presents a quartet of quotes in which Lomax does exactly this, highlighting it as a habit. Svec, ‘Folk Media: Alan Lomax’s Deep Digitality’, *Canadian Journal of Communication* 38 (2013), 232–3.

86 Svec, ‘Folk Media’, 234.

87 ALC 07.03.22, Diary, 1951.

88 Theberge, ‘The “Sound” of Music’, 105; Stanyek and Piekut, ‘Deadness’, 19.

89 Lomax, ‘Saga of a Folksong Hunter’ (1960), in *Selected Writings*, 178.

90 Jonathan Sterne has recently and usefully devised a format theory, which informs my writing here. Sterne, *MP3*, 1–31.

91 J. M. Mancini, ‘“Messin’ with the Furniture Man”: Early Country Music, Regional Culture, and the Search for an Anthological Modernism’, *American Literary History* 16/2 (2004), 223. Reference to anthologies when discussing this music and this period brings to mind Harry Smith, and Mancini’s analysis is indeed focused equally on Lomax, Smith, and Ruth Crawford Seeger. Despite the many overlaps between Lomax and Smith’s work, I found no correspondence between the two, or even any mention of Smith in the Alan Lomax Collection during my time there.

to allow ‘performer identities to assume coherence across a significant body of vocal performances’.⁹² Fragmentation, by contrast, limits the coherence of performer identity, even stylistic identity, and the most coherent identity to emerge is that of the anthologist. The *World Library* is not Lomax *presenting* the musics he and others collated, not even *representing*, but *becoming* the musics, in an act of what Bourdieu has written of as transubstantiation. Here, ‘the representative receives from the group the power of creating the group ... he raises those whom he represents out of their existence as separate individuals, enabling them to act and speak through him as a single person ... [and] acts upon the group through the magic of the slogan’, in this case *Folk and Primitive Music*, and the nation or region in question.⁹³ Redolent of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, then, nations emerge and are constructed from fragments, energetically and rhizophonically, by anthologists in temporary, yet monumental, aural configurations.⁹⁴

Transubstantiation is linked to terminology. Lomax and many others referred to themselves as collectors – Lomax even called himself a ‘ballad hunter’ – with profound implications for the thingness of the music they recorded and for questions of ownership also. It follows that the *World Library* is a collection, which appears not so much as a library but more like a museum. Museums – characterized by Myers as playing fields of power struggles – are connected at root to culture collecting, and, by extension, cultural politics.⁹⁵ And anthropologists have led the way in revealing the ways in which these connections are concealed by new logics of exhibition: for Myers, ‘it requires denying or repressing the actual history of power, relationships, and commerce that resulted in collecting the objects in the first place’; while for James Clifford, drawing on Susan Stewart, museums ‘create the illusion of adequate representation of a world by first cutting objects out of specific contexts and making them “stand for” abstract wholes’; finally, ‘historical relations of power in the work of acquisition are occulted’, and ‘the time and order of the collection erase the concrete social labour of its making’.⁹⁶ These politics are arguably shot through the entire history of ethnographic field recording, but seem particularly pertinent to a project such as the *World Library*: with its repression, or compression, of history; its abstract wholes in the form of nations; its erased social (and material and sonic) labour.

What are the politics of magnetic tape? Of cutting, fragmenting, splicing, pasting, recombining, suturing, sequencing, representing?⁹⁷ It may seem on first listen that hearing the

92 Will Straw, ‘Music and Material Culture’, in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd edn, ed. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 233–4. See also Marmorstein, *The Label*, 231.

93 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 248. I was led to Bourdieu’s take on transubstantiation from Sterne, *MP3*, 289.

94 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006); Stanyek and Piekut, ‘Deadness’, 19.

95 Myers, “‘Primitivism’”, 269.

96 Myers, “‘Primitivism’”, 273; James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 219–20.

97 These questions are fairly straightforward extensions of Wiebe Bijker’s still-relevant proposition: ‘how do power relations materialize in artefacts?’ Bijker, *Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs: Toward a Theory of Sociotechnical Change* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 4.

sounds of recorded voices is hearing people speak for themselves, but what of the communication that remains on the cutting room floor? What happens to communication when the listener presses *stop*? What does it mean that we can now listen to Stanley Slade on vinyl, CD, and online, but only in a recording scenario he disliked and agitated against at the end of his life? His deadness is potent, but his agency is ultimately tethered to the logic of the collection, leaving Slade with little control over which bits of his voice are enrolled in sonic presents and futures.⁹⁸

The *World Library*, heralded by Lomax on the sleeve of each record as a pure reflection of a techno-cultural utopia – ‘in a thin stack of records one may carry about in two hands, the profoundest and most communicative of the arts will be documented. Vox humana!’⁹⁹ – is more accurately the work of the sonic bricoleur. Developing Lévi-Strauss’s concept, revisiting Lomax as sonic bricoleur adds nuance to the notion of ‘the man who recorded the world’, in specific consideration of his work in Britain. The *bricoleur*, for Lévi-Strauss, is one who creates from whatever is at hand, taking from the world’s finite and heterogeneous material culture, repurposing and recontextualizing it for their specific project.¹⁰⁰ In retracing the *World Library*, Lomax’s labour and Lévi-Strauss’ design bear uncanny similarity:

Consider him at work and excited by his project. His first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider and reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a dialogue with it and, before choosing between them, to index the possible answers which the whole set can offer to his problem.¹⁰¹

Lomax as sonic bricoleur, with his Magnecorder as audio suction pump, took precisely these actions, dubbing whatever extant recordings were available to him – even some that strictly were not available to him – engaging in dialogue with them, and spooling out tape to embody nations, entextualizing cultural politics onto vinyl, rendering his take on tradition exoteric, carving out sonic space in Europe’s post-war aural public sphere.

Hearing Anew

Listening in to the musical present, and the widespread digitization and online dissemination of field recordings, reveals a pair of contradictory patterns. On the one hand, recordings are protean, slippery, and continue to drift, accruing new meanings and becoming enrolled

98 Stanyek and Piekut, ‘Deadness’, 18.

99 It is interesting to note the similarities between Lomax’s statement and the original marketing for the LP: Marmorstein reveals how Columbia had a photograph of Peter Goldmark – who took most of the credit for the format’s creation – published in *Life* magazine, cradling an armful of LPs, ‘the musical equivalent of the eight-foot tower of 78s stacked next to him’. Marmorstein, *The Label*, 166. Clearly, portability was already part of the techno-cultural ideal of music that has since found its manifestation in the Walkman, Minidisc, MP3 player, and mobile phone.

100 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. Weidenfeld and Nicolson (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 17. Lomax described Lévi-Strauss as ‘stuffed and intelligent’, and ‘the coldest fellow in the world’ when they met in Paris in 1951 (ALC 07.03.21, 1950 – Paris, etc.).

101 Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 18.

in unpredictable and uncontrollable configurations.¹⁰² Despite their intended monumental status, the field recordings selected for the *World Library* have proved elusive.¹⁰³ The circulation of the *World Library* has largely been the movement of limited material objects between listeners, unhooked from the forces that brought it to the market in the first place.

On the other hand, the new digital environments in which field recordings now circulate are bound to the logic of the collector and the initial collection, and – by housing recordings in bespoke online archives, rather than, say, Spotify – in some regards re-perform, even strengthen, past groupings in new listening forums. Sterne writes: ‘once granted, legitimacy can be treated as natural or inherent, and legitimate institutions can themselves become tools of endorsement or marginalisation’.¹⁰⁴ In the case of the *World Library*, these decisions were made long ago, based on the kinds of material and institutional labour I have discussed; the past, which enacted agency when the *World Library* was being assembled, enacts agency again in the present.

At the time of the *World Library*, in ‘the age of the golden ear’, these recordings were considered the best available – best according to any number of the agencies that have appeared in this article – and they were selected for preservation and dissemination on the criteria of the audio-exoteric. So thinking across sound becomes more complicated when it is also performed across time and format.¹⁰⁵ In any case, Lomax – just like Lévi-Strauss’ bricoleur, who ‘may not ever complete his purpose but he always puts something of himself into it’¹⁰⁶ – continues to be heard through the music he gathered. And the various other agencies compressed into the *World Library* remain obscured, but nevertheless remain.

102 Katz, *Capturing Sound*, 18; Stanyek and Piekut, ‘Deadness’, 18.

103 Lomax wrote to Goddard Lieberman in 1976 expressing his disgruntlement that the *World Library* had fallen out of print, claiming it as ‘the standard text in most ethnomusicology courses’, and that it had ‘never been improved upon, and each album is priceless and permanent’ (Alan Lomax letter to Goddard Lieberman, 30 March 1976. ALC 13.01.11 (4/15), CBS Records). Another clash between regimes of value emerges: Lomax’s affirmations rub up against the logics of the recording industry which dictate that products are not supposed to be, are even designed not to be, permanent; and that everything has a price and is for sale. Eventually, in 1998, Rounder Records began to re-release the *World Library* on CD, but these have quickly become unavailable again; this despite Philip Bohlman’s inclusion of the *World Library* reissue in *World Music: A Very Short Introduction* – described as a collection ‘projected to last long into the future’. Bohlman, *World Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 83.

104 Sterne, *MP3*, 289. Most institutional sound archives now have recordings online (a few prominent examples: Association for Cultural Equity <www.culturalequity.org>; British Library Sounds <<http://sounds.bl.uk>>; Library of Congress – <www.loc.gov/rr/record/onlinecollections.html>; Musée d’ethnographie de Genève <www.ville-ge.ch/meg/phonothèque.php>; Tobar an Dualchais <www.tobarandualchais.co.uk>). Of course, simply lumping all archival recordings onto a platform such as Spotify is not a realistic solution to this problem, nor is my point any effort to discredit the work of digitizers and archivists who are grappling with complex copyright and intellectual property issues (a subject that cannot be adequately addressed in this conclusion).

105 The *World Library* bears resemblance to what Christopher Pinney terms the ‘recursive archive’: a jumble of materials from various times is gathered together to form a new pastiche. The *World Library* is at once contemporaneous with its 1955 release date, but also untemporaneous, ‘caught up in recursive trajectories of repetition and pastiche whose dense complexity makes them resistant to any particular moment’. Pinney, ‘Things Happen: Or, From Which Moment Does That Object Come?’ in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham and London, 2005), 265–6.

106 Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 21.

Archival Sources

ALC – Alan Lomax Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, USA

BBC WAC – BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham, Reading, UK

BL PK – Peter Kennedy Collection, World and Traditional Music, British Library, London, UK

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