

# The Man Who Recorded the World: A Biography of Alan Lomax by John Szwed - review | Music

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8-10 minuten

In 1955, "Rock Island Line" was a chart hit in Britain and America for Lonnie Donegan, the biggest star of the short-lived skiffle boom. Donegan was a huge influence on the young John Lennon, who formed his own skiffle group, the Quarrymen, in 1956. On 6 July that same year, the 15-year-old Paul McCartney, another Donegan fan, attended a church fete in Woolton village to hear the Quarrymen play. The rest, as they say, is history.

Both Lennon and McCartney would have assumed that "Rock Island Line" was a Lonnie Donegan original, not least because it was credited to him on the record label and the song's sheet music. Donegan had assumed ownership of the song by simply claiming the British copyright, which was unregistered and considered to be in the public domain. It was written, though, by a black blues singer, Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly.

Back in the 1930s, the American song collectors John Lomax and his son, Alan, had recorded Lead Belly singing the song in Angola prison, Louisiana, where the blues musician was serving time for attempted murder. (Lead Belly sang several other originals for the Lomaxes, including "Goodnight, Irene", which subsequently became a huge hit for the folk group the Weavers.) Many of the songs collected by the Lomaxes were published in book compilations like *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (1936) and *Folk Songs: USA* (1946), which become primers for British skiffle and trad-folk groups, among others.

On a visit to Britain in the late 50s, Alan Lomax discovered that Donegan, as John Szwed puts it, "was copying Lead Belly's songs, along with his performance style and introductory remarks, profiting from both his performances of these songs and his claim to being their composer". He also found out that the publishing rights to "Goodnight, Irene" had been copyrighted "under the name of a British affiliate".

This is the moment, though, when the story of Lead Belly's songs and their appropriation becomes truly tangled. Szwed notes that "a dismayed Alan was persuaded that it would be better to work with the same musical publishing company than against it". Soon afterwards, too, Lomax wrote an essay on the copyrighting of songs that began, as Szwed puts it, "by reminding readers that folk song collecting took place within a 'free enterprise system'" and that, alongside the songwriter, several others, including "the collector, who located the folksinger, recorded the song, sometimes arranged or re-edited it..." could deservedly make a claim on copyright.

Therein lies the root of the problem that some music scholars have with Alan Lomax, perhaps the greatest, and most obsessive, collector of folk and blues songs of the last century. When Lomax died, aged 87, in 2002, the *New York Times* described him as a "legendary collector of folk music who was the first to record towering figures like

Lead Belly, Muddy Waters and Woody Guthrie". But the combative American music critic Dave Marsh was having none of it; he described Lomax as "a dubious figure" who "believed folk culture needed guidance from superior beings like himself".

Marsh also claimed that when representatives of the Ledbetter family approached Lomax regarding the formal copyrighting of "Goodnight, Irene", "he adamantly refused to take his name off the song, or surrender income from it, even though Lead Belly's family was impoverished in the wake of his death two years earlier". More damning still is the more recent discovery that Lomax appropriated research done by the likes of the black scholar John W Work, who was his conduit to pioneering blues artists like Muddy Waters and Son House. "Sometime soon," Marsh concluded, "we need to figure out why it is that, when it comes to cultures like those of Mississippi black people, we celebrate the milkman more than the milk."

*The Man Who Recorded the World*, as its extravagant title suggests, is a book that unashamedly celebrates the milkman. Its strength lies in its painstaking reconstruction of Lomax's life as a kind of obsessive musical missionary who delved deep into overlooked cultures, from Appalachia to Connemara.

Born in Austin, Texas in 1915, Lomax attended Harvard but dropped out after a year. He obtained a degree in philosophy at the University of Texas in 1936, by which time he was already a seasoned song collector, frequently travelling with his father across the American south, often working under difficult conditions in deeply segregated towns and rural areas. The Lomaxes recorded Cajun fiddlers, gospel choirs, blues singers and hillbilly balladeers. Alan also accompanied the writer Zora Neale Hurston while she collected songs and voodoo rituals in Haiti.

After a visit to the notorious Parchman Farm, a Mississippi prison built on the site of a slave plantation, Lomax wrote in his notebook: "The people who sang for us were in stripes and there were guards there with shotguns. They were singing under the red hot sun of Texas, people obviously in enormous trouble. But, when they opened their mouths, out came this flame of beauty. This sound which matched anything I'd heard from Beethoven, Brahms, or Dvorák." He had, as he noted a few lines later, "found my folks... the people that I wanted to represent... that I wanted to be with".

That mixture of identification and patronisation seems to have been characteristic, but for all that, Lomax was a tireless chronicler of songs and oral testimony that would have otherwise gone unrecorded. The estimated 3,000 songs he and his father contributed to the Library of Congress recordings archive have influenced several generations of songwriters, including Johnny Cash, [Bob Dylan](#) and Tom Waits, who described Lead Belly's music as "the Rosetta stone for much of what was to follow".

In 1960, Lomax compiled *The Folk Songs of North America*, which helped fuel the burgeoning folk revival, and also earned him a place on the organising committee of the Newport folk festival. It was there, in 1965, that he helped try to sabotage Bob Dylan's sound system, and had his semi-legendary altercation with Dylan's manager, Albert Grossman. According to Marsh, this was further proof that Lomax "hated rock'n'roll because it had no need of mediation by experts like himself".

Like many pioneers, Lomax was, at heart, a purist, someone who believed in the unquestionable importance of his calling, and whose self-belief was unleavened by either tact or self-doubt. For all that, he was an important figure, a catalyst not just for the 1960s folk and blues revivals that posthumously acknowledged the importance of

pioneers like of Lead Belly, [Woody Guthrie](#) and Son House, but for contemporary American roots music and for what is now known as world music. Szwed's exhaustive biography illustrates in some detail the reasons for Lomax's importance while sometimes sidestepping the problematic nature of his great undertaking, and the often-compromising ways in which he pursued it.

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