

1939 Southern Recording Trip Report

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Report of J. A. Lomax 1939 So. Rec. Trip Spring

From February 8, 1939 until June 14, 1939, I made a ballad-collecting criss-cross trip of 6502 miles through Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and Virginia and on into Washington, D. C. During this three and a half months, with the assistance of Mrs. Ruby Terrill Lomax, I recorded on one hundred and forty-two discs the music of more than six hundred folk tunes. Some were new to us, though in many instances we re-recorded folk songs sung in a different manner, or slightly different musically from already known material. In visiting the homes, schools and churches of the Southern folk and recording their singing in their own locale, where the singers felt at home, we carried out the theory of the Folk Song Archive of the Library of Congress, namely, that folk singers render their music more naturally in the easy sociability of their own homes, churches and schools. own people.

In field recording of folk songs much time is saved and work is made easier and pleasanter, both for performers and operators, if two people work together. Mrs. Lomax looked after the grouping and arranging of the singers and wrote down as much of the text as she could catch from the singing, while I operated the machine.

In Texas among the people of Spanish origin, living in and around Houston, Kingsville and Brownsville on the Rio Grande River, we recorded several corridos, narrative Spanish ballads recounting the virtues of local desperadoes. Other interesting songs of this type which we recorded tell of the raid of United States Colored Negro Army troops on the city of Brownsville during a riot, the first train robbery in Southwest Texas by Mexican bandits, the experiences of migratory Mexican cotton pickers. In addition, we made records of

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a group of tuneful Mexican lullabies, the music of some running back to songs current in Spain four hundred years ago.

At Falfurrias in Southwest Texas we found Frank Goodwyn who for many years roamed the mesquite covered region of the King Ranch country. He sang cowboy songs in the true ranch manner, among the tunes a famous Mexican cowboy song of the range and trail entitled, in English translation, The Purple Bull. The music of another of the same type, The Wet Buzzard, we were unable to secure. As in the case of other sections of the country, we found a blind ballad-singer and guitarist in Brownsville the most valuable single source of song material. Folk songs and folk singing throughout the ages have been the refuge, the solace, the support of musical blind persons.

In the Bandera Mountains, northwest of San Antonio, Texas, descendants of early Texans, yet living shut-in lives, increased the Archive's store of cowboy songs and of frontier fiddle tunes with singing accompaniments. Included also are several square dance breakdowns where the fiddler, as he plays, chants the directions for the dance in vivid and sometimes humorous rhymed couplets:

"Swing one, swing all eight, Swing 'em on the corner like you swinging on the gate Like you swinging on the gate."

"Swing 'em in summer, and swing 'em in the fall; Take a chaw terbaccer and balance all."

Sister Joan of Arc, a member of the faculty of Our Lady of the Lake College in San Antonio, introduced us to a Mexican tenant family near Sugarland, Texas. In this home one Sunday morning we recorded the singing interludes of a 3 religious Mexican folk play, The Good Thief, as well as some family songs preserved by the musically gifted group, consisting of the father, the mother and ten children.

From a Negro, Henry Truvillion, who lives in the Sabine River swamps between Texas and Louisiana, a former river rou s tabout, section hand and migratory worker, now the leader

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of a work gang that alternately lays down and tears up a railroad for timber cutters, we secured a store of valuable work songs. These are the chanted directions that Truvillion, as leader of the gang, intones, guiding the men into rhythmic efforts, and at the same time entertaining them with the play of his fancy as he constantly rephrases the words of his chants. Among his songs we at last found and recorded a descriptive ballad of the loading of a Mississippi River steamboat.

At Livingston, Alabama, Mrs. Ruby Pickens Tartt again made available to us her Negro friends, Doc Reed and Vera Hall, and many other singers who live near the provincial churches in that section of the state.

In making the long journey we repeated our visits to Negro convict road gangs and penitentiaries in Texas, Mississippi, Florida and South Carolina. The constantly shifting penitentiary population makes new folk song material available among such groups. In the solitude and loneliness of confinement the Negro recalls the songs that he learned as a child, and readily learns others from his prison associates as they work together.

We also stopped for the third or fourth time at Murrell's Inlet, South Carolina, where Mrs. Genevieve Chandler made possible the recording of additional songs of the unique South Carolina Coast Negro's. Here also Mrs. Emma Floyd sang for us more of the songs that she had learned as a child in the mountains of North Carolina. The trip yielded, moreover, an enlarged group of Negro play party tunes, and Negro nursery tunes, some examples of jazz now becoming current in the religious services among both the whites and the Negroes. In Toccoa Falls, Georgia, through the offices of Ben Robertson of Clemson, South Carolina, we attended and made records at a tri-state convention of white religious singers. Twenty thousand people were reported to be present. The jazz motif was prominent in all the songs that seemed most popular.