

By Judith Cohen

"...A folklorist in Spain finds more than song: he makes life-long friendships and renews his belief in mankind".

— Alan Lomax, "Saga of a Folksong Hunter", Hi-Fi Stereo Review, May 1960, p45 [other page numbers refer to this article].

Following Alan Lomax's Footsteps in Spain

Have you heard about some English professor from the BBC who's issuing a CD with music from our town? Back in 1998, a friend asked me this, sitting at an outdoor cafe in a small town, or large village (about 2500 people) in southern Galicia where I was doing fieldwork. Several questions later, the "English" professor turned out to be not English, but the American Alan Lomax who indeed spent seven months recording traditional music in Spain in 1952, and produced several programmes of his recordings for the BBC, as well as LP's on Westminster and on Columbia Records. At my friends' request, I followed up the Galicia recordings in a sort of vague way over the next while, until a couple of years later, with a few days to spare in New York, I spent a day in the Alan Lomax Archives. And another year after that, in the fall of 2001, here I am, general editor of the Spain Series of Rounder Records' spectacular project, issuing 100 CD's from the Alan Lomax Collection.

When I first looked at Lomax's Spain recordings log, it was with an instant flash of recognition – the Spain he spent seven months travelling through in 1952 was "my" Spain - not the Spain of beaches and bull-fights, but the Spain of unrelenting sun or rain-darkened villages with no heating, of villagers who will drop everything to sing for you – or not sing for you at all; the Spain of endless contradictions... I had even done fieldwork in some of the same villages and in a couple of cases, recognized names of people who had sung for him nearly half a century earlier. A couple of months later, when anthropologist Anna Chairetakis Lomax, Lomax's daughter and director of the collection, invited me to be the editor of the Spain Series it was the beginning of an exciting, absorbing adventure. Besides the recordings, ACE, the Association for Cultural Equity (the name reflects Lomax's long-held philosophy) houses the Lomax Archive, with his sensitive field notes, photographs, detailed records of payments scrupulously made to people he recorded, and copies of scores of letters he somehow found time to write thanking people for their help. And besides the actual Spain material, and the excitement of working with my colleagues in Spain to document it and re-issue it in the best possible way, it is a pleasure and privilege to

work with Anna Chairetakis, Matt Barton and everyone associated with ACE.

Never one for stereotypes, Alan Lomax wrote: *"The Spain that was richest in both music and fine people was not the hotblooded Gypsy south with its flamenco, but the quiet somber plains of the west, the highlands of Northern Castile, and the green tangle of the Pyrenees..."* (45). Comparisons are always debateable, but, in any case, Lomax had not actually intended to spend time in Spain:

"In the summer of 1953 [2], I was informed by Columbia that publication of my series depended on my assembling a record of Spanish folk music, and so, swallowing my distate for El Caudillo and his works, I betook myself to a folklore conference on the island of Mallorca with the aim of finding myself a Spanish editor....the professor who ran the conference [Marius Schneider] ...was a refugee Nazi, who had taken over the Berlin folk song archive after Hitler had removed its Jewish chief...in charge of folk music research at the Institute for Higher Studies [CSIC] in Madrid...he let me know that he personally would see to it that no Spanish musicologist would help me. He also suggested that I leave Spain.

I had not really intended to stay. I had only a few reels of tape with me and I had made no study of Spanish ethnology. This, however, was my first experience with a Nazi, and, as I looked across the luncheon table at this authoritarian idiot, I promised myself that I would record the music of the benighted country if it took me the rest of my life". (43)

It did not take the rest of his life, but it did take much longer than he had planned: Lomax and his assistant Jeannette Bell travelled for seven months: thousands of kilometers over barely passable roads, frequently hounded by the Guardia Civil, setting up the heavy tape recorder in villages with no electricity or running water, often in bone-chillingly damp cold. Recording was a cumbersome and frustrating process: never again will I complain about having to haul around perhaps five or six kilos worth of audio and video recording equipment that fits in a small day-pack! Even when circumstances were favorable, running out of tape was an almost insurmountable problem. This classically difficult fieldwork and Lomax's profound appreciation for the people he met, did not imply a pristine, mythically "authentic" folklore. He evokes the varied, often harsh beauty of the music, and the humanity of the singers, while generally avoiding facile romanticism. The recordings also reflect a wide variety of contexts, from isolated villages, to official folk festivals, local choirs and instrumental groups:

"For a month or so I wandered erratically, sun struck by the grave beauty of the land, faint and sick at the sight of this noble people, ground down by poverty and a police state. I saw that in Spain, folklore was not mere fantasy and entertainment. Each Spanish village was a self-contained cultural system with tradition penetrating every aspect of life; and it was this system of traditional, often pagan mores, that had been the spiritual armor of the Spanish people against the many forms of tyranny imposed upon them through the centuries. It was in their inherited folklore that the peasants, the fishermen, the muleteers and the shepherds I met found their models for that noble behavior and that sense of the beautiful which made them such satisfactory friends." (pp. 43, 45).

It was in Spain that Alan Lomax began to draw the direct correlations between folksong style and culture (Sampler p.29) which eventually led to his Cantometrics. Today, the music scene in Spain celebrates diversity: world music festivals, concerts and recordings abound, and musicians from Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East are collaborating with Spanish musicians, creating new forms and new contexts for regional traditions. Ethnomusicology is gaining acceptance at more universities, and a new generation of ethnomusicologists is active in research, publication and innovative approaches. Regional revival groups, local festivals, and documentation centres are all growing. But in 1952, this was far from the case. As well, economic hardships, poor roads, areas separated by mountain ranges, and ancient agricultural methods made for a difficult life, but, along with firmly entrenched life and calendar cycle events, also maintained musical traditions which might otherwise have disappeared. At the same time, however, an officially promoted nationalism was establishing folklorized versions of traditions. Under Franco's dictatorship, Galician, Catalanian and Basque and their variants were severely repressed, while local traditions were standardized and "cleaned up", often by the *Sección Femenina* of the Falange. Founded in 1937 by the sister of José Antonio Primo de Rivera, the Falange's founder, and dissolved in 1977, the *Sección Femenina* saw music as a crucial means of achieving national unity within a specifically Catholic context, and through education. It sent out mobile units of women educators, whose mission included "rescuing" local music, dance and folklore, for teaching in schools and to local dance groups which were encouraged to participate in regional, national, and international competitions and festivals. Not surprisingly, they arranged—or re-arranged—many songs and dances, and,

especially, song texts—to conform to their ideology. Lomax's notes include an account of one Sección Femenina folklorist offering to “bring her troop in to do their act”, which he turned down “with fifteen minutes of polite explanation”.

Heavy censorship resulted in folklorists being afraid to publish many song texts they collected, and in many people being afraid to sing them when asked to record their repertoires:

“The black-hatted and dreadful Guardia Civil had me on their lists—I will never know why, for they never arrested me. But apparently, they always knew where I was. No matter in what God-forsaken, unlikely spot in the mountains...they would appear like so many black buzzards carrying with them the stink of fear—and then the musicians would lose heart.” (45)

Not all of them, though – while editing the Baleares recordings, our Mallorca researcher was vastly amused by a conversation in the Mallorcan dialect of Catalan, on one of the tapes in which an older man sang Lomax some distinctly bawdy lyrics in dialect; the man's son told his father not to sing that sort of thing, and the father responded that obviously this was the only good time to sing them, for an American professor who didn't understand them!

Over the past year, with the help of friends and colleagues, I've located several people whom Lomax recorded in 1952; some remember him, others don't. Those who do speak of him with affection and respect, and sometimes amusement, remembering his affection for their local wine. Some still sing or play instruments, others have long since stopped. In Ibiza this past July, a colleague took me to visit an old man who played the tiny double-barreled cane oboe, the *reclam de xeremies*, for Lomax in 1952: he made a new instrument just for me, and played several tunes for me to film. On the small island of Formentera, the owner of a grocery store recalled Alan Lomax staying in their inn for several days while his father set up a music evening for him to record. At the back of a different grocery store, in the Basque country, the grand-daughter of a bersolari, a song improviser who impressed Lomax deeply, stood and sang for me a song in Basque which she herself had improvised, in her grandfather's tradition. In Leon, an 80 year-old woman who still sings the same songs she sang for Lomax, and still sings them while she spins and weaves. told us the money he had sent from the BBC for using her songs often meant being able to buy food for her children that month.

“It was never hard to find the best singers in Spain, because everyone in their neighbourhood knew them and understood how and why they were the finest stylists in their particular idiom. ...” (45).

While, as in so many countries, village traditions have disappeared to a large extent, even now, as this is being written in early 2001, it is still possible to carry out village fieldwork, and record songs and other oral traditions, though mostly from elderly people. As an ethnomusicologist, I have been trained to refrain from making judgments about “old and new”, and not to lament the disappearance of traditions but rather to dispassionately examine metamorphoses and hybrids. For several years, I went along with that, but after more years of fieldwork, and of hearing the old people themselves lament the passing of their traditions, I no longer can. Yes, there are exciting new traditions developing, and yes, I enjoy and celebrate many of them. But that does not change the fact that many aspects of traditional musical life ARE disappearing, or already have gone forever, crushed under what Alan Lomax called a “system of cultural super-highways” (46). In 1996 an elderly flute and drum player in a small Salamanca village told me he worried constantly about who would take his place playing for weddings and ritual events when he died. Young people who learn in the provincial folklore center, he said, just don't play the same way: they all live in cities and want to be performers. And few people sing the old ballads and wedding songs. One old village woman told me that on cold winter nights, she lay bundled up in bed, singing all the longest old ballads to herself, one after another, till she finally fell asleep to her own lonely voice in the darkness. With these recordings, Alan Lomax has given many lonely voices in the dark a different life: providing a gentle, steady glow which softens the harsh lights of our new millenium.

Judith R Cohen, Toronto, 2001

Contacts and information, references:

http://www.rounder.com/rounder/artists/lomax_alan/

<http://www.alan-lomax.com>

1995: Michael Parrish, “Alan Lomax: Documenting Folk Music of the World”, *Sing Out!* 40/3:30-5

1960: Alan Lomax, “Saga of a Folk-Song Hunter”, *Hi-Fi Stereo Review*
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Watch for:

Spain: Vol. IV of The Alan Lomax Collection,
World Librray of Folk and Primitive Music
(Columbia), Rounder Records 11661-1744-2 1999
The Alan Lomax Collection Sampler Rounder
Records 1997, CD 1700

Spain: Galicia, fall 2001

Spain: Aragón/Valencia , fall 2001

Spain: Extremadura: spring 2002

Award for Non-Fiction" para 1993.

Scholar/performer Judith Cohen lives in Toronto when she isn't collecting in Spain and Portugal, or performing internationally.

Some books by Alan Lomax:

1946. *Folk Songs: USA* (with John A. Lomax) , New York, Duell, Sloan and Pierce, re-editado: Best Loved American Folk Songs, Grosset and Dunlap

1950 *Mister Jelly Roll*, New York, Duell, Sloan and Pierce; re-editado Pantheon 1993.

1960 *The Folk Songs of North America*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday

1967 *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* (con Woody Guthrie and Peter Seeger), New York, Oak Publications

1968 *Folk Song Style and Culture* (con los colegas del proyecto Cantometrics) Washington D.C., American Association for the Advancement of Science, Publication #88,

1968. Re-edición New Brunswick, N.J., Transaction Books, 1994

1977. *Cantometrics: A Method of Musical Anthropology* (audio-cassettes, manual), Berkeley, University of California Media Extension Center

1993 *The Land Where the Blues Began*, New York, Pantheon Premio "National Book Critics

Did You Know?

The Canadian Folk Music Bulletin exchanges copies with other publications, such as:

This Month at the Rogue Vancouver BC
Sing Out!..... Bethlehem PA
Dance and Music Camps 2001..... Haydenville MA
Country dance & Song Society..... Haydenville MA
International Bluegrass..... Owensboro KY
The Living Tradition Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, Scotland
Bulletin de Liaison de l'AFAS Paris cedex 13
Three Quarter Times Vancouver Folk Song Society
Canadian Musician CM St. Catharines ON
Fiddler Magazine North Sydney NS
and others

All of these eventually end up in the CFMB's archives, lovingly watched over by Bill Sarjeant in Saskatoon.