

## Sharing Resources, Sharing Responsibility: Archives in the Digital Age

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The theme of this year's IASA conference and the question that it asks – "Towards a New Kind of Archive?" – is especially pertinent to the experience of the Alan Lomax Archive, which we described at last year's IASA conference as a transitional archive, and us, its archivists, as learning to be stewards of a digital-only collection. We straddle the fence between preservation and access, between being sedentary and mobile, with our main commitments and activities lying in the interstices of cultural heritage and cross-cultural collaboration. With another year's experience under our belts, we are able to explore this further, and perhaps explain this better, today.

### I. Towards a new kind of archive

In 2005, the Association for Cultural Equity (or ACE), which oversees and administers the Alan Lomax Archive, began a process of disposition in which the entire physical contents of the Archive were transferred to the American Folklife Center (or AFC) at the Library of Congress. Over the course of two years and three separate deliveries, AFC coordinated pickup of the archive, which includes materials of intangible cultural heritage from the American South, the Caribbean, England, Ireland, Scotland, Spain, Italy, Morocco, USSR, and other locales. Formats in the archive include manuscript materials documenting the extent of Lomax's career post-1942; original field-recordings; photographs and negatives documenting each of these post-1942 collecting field trips; film and video, including 400 hours of raw footage shot from 1978 to 1983 for the production of Lomax's American Patchwork documentaries; an extensive collection of books on folklore, folk song, and world cultural heritage; vintage and legacy recording equipment from many of Lomax's recording trips; as well as awards and other collected ephemera. Upon receipt, AFC processed the materials and began a larger plan to integrate the materials intellectually with the earlier share of Lomax's collected materials already in their purview.

The convergence of these two physical collections at AFC creates an almost complete archival collection of Alan Lomax's life work. Prior to this arrangement between ACE and AFC, the Lomax Archive, with the support of many public and private foundations, completed the digitization of these collections. We not only created digital surrogates of each physical item, but also captured descriptive and technical metadata in order to create associated catalogs. By the time AFC was prepared to acquire the physical collection, we had created a mirroring digital one, which remained under the auspices and control of ACE. The Alan Lomax Archive had become a digital-only archive. Our physical collections were separated from their digital surrogates. In the traditional sense of the term, we became collection-less.

### II. Sharing Resources, Sharing Responsibility

Alan Lomax would not have considered himself an archivist, per se, but instead a scholar, a producer, and a promoter of the primary ethnographic documentation that comprised his collection. He was an archivist only by default, as his collection grew, and as the fragility of the materials in it increased with age – although, Lomax did know how to take care of his collections very well through his experience with many moves, vicissitudes, and the continuous lack of resources for professional-grade archival storage. Thus ironically what we call the Alan Lomax Archive was not fundamentally set up as an archival repository; it was instead just Lomax's office, filled with the tapes, photos, films and videos that he had gathered over the decades. (He jokingly called it "the orifice," because it swallowed so much.) It is important to note that when Lomax retired, his collections, in their original form, became for all intents and purposes closed. And when the American Folklife Center acquired the physical material that comprised those collections, our office – the Archive – was relieved of an enormous curatorial burden. We were then able to focus our efforts and resources away from the management of physical items and towards the documentation, organization, dissemination, and publication of their digital counterparts – that is, to realign ourselves

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with Lomax's mission and his vocation. We became free to make our primary concern the perfection of our digital catalogs and the online interface through which the public would access our digital collections, as well as the pursuit of collaborations with our dissemination partners – site-specific archives that would receive copies of our digital media specific to their regions and their constituents, of which we will say more in a moment. As we have said, the Folklife Center staff were already the stewards of Lomax's earliest collected material, and were pleased to acquire the work he compiled after his departure from the Library in 1942, thus making their Lomax collections complete. They were also happy to be spared the responsibility of the material's digitization, as we had already accomplished such efforts, and shared the results with them after the acquisition, and they could focus their efforts on description and preservation of the physical materials. This relationship is a reciprocal one, however, with regard to research access.

The Lomax Archive was never a preservation repository nor a reading room, so while scholars, writers, and fans would come in to study or peruse our holdings, there was minimal protocol, and none of our staff were designated reference librarians or research overseers. That burden, too, has been relieved by the Folklife Center's acquisition, as now we are able to direct prospective researchers to our online catalogs, and we are able to tell them that if their needs are not met by those catalogs, they can direct their queries to the Folklife Center staff. The Center has also benefited from our intimate knowledge of the collections, acquired over many years. We often receive research queries from our colleagues at AFC asking for details they are not yet able to ascertain on their own, and they often refer to our online catalogs and accompanying references, such as comprehensive indexes of Alan's field trips; bibliographies and discographies; teaching tools; and profiles of his colleagues and collaborators.

### III.A Digital Archive with a Mission

The Association for Cultural Equity is a digital archive with a mission. As any archival organization should be, ACE is guided by its mission – namely, furthering the cause of cultural equity, which Lomax defined as the right of every culture to express and develop its distinctive heritage. The practice of cultural equity – widely known in the U.S. as “public folklore” – takes many forms. ACE's role is a custodial one: through our archiving, repatriating, and helping to revitalize the full range and diversity of the expressive traditions represented in our collection; through diverse educational initiatives, publications, and dissemination projects. Dissemination plays a large part of our mission, and, in today's world, digitization is essential to dissemination, as it increases access exponentially. In many ways we have become an outreach center, able to pursue creative projects to extend the reach of our collections into new and interested communities. We launched our first searchable online interface in 2003, providing free access to Lomax's post-1942 field recordings, including still images, moving images and sound recordings. Its current iteration – featuring radio programs; discussions, lectures, and interviews with Lomax's colleagues and collaborators; video clips, and teaching materials – is available on ACE's website: <http://research.culturalequity.org/index.jsp>.

With the advent of Google Earth, we created a geographically specific interface, with Lomax's field recording locations plotted on the open-source mapping software. We call it the GeoArchive, and it offers another point of entry into, and interaction with, our collections: <http://lomaxgeo.org>.

Maintaining these catalogs and hosting them is time consuming and tedious for a small organization. ACE's flexibility as a collection-less archive allows it the capacity to continue to improve and enlarge this service. Ostensibly, anyone at anytime can access these materials from anywhere. But we understand that serving the cause of cultural equity demands more than web dissemination. High-speed Internet access allowing for streaming audio and video is still a luxury in many locales where Lomax's collections are of interest. So ACE initiated and supports an extensive repatriation program through the dissemination partners we mentioned earlier – establishing partnerships with repositories in many countries where Lomax originally recorded. We provide high quality digital copies of our digital collections

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to those institutions and their constituent communities – the inheritors of the expressive traditions that the materials document. Our repatriation is inspired by the novel approach Alan Lomax first undertook on behalf of the Library of Congress in the late 1930s and early '40s. Seeking out private collections of far-flung scholars, as well as the vernacular-music catalogs of commercial record companies, Lomax encouraged copies to be made, when possible, and deposited at the Library. He later pursued this model in the service of central archives in Scotland and Italy in the 1950s; we are continuing it regionally in Spain and the Caribbean. The digitization of our collections makes this kind of repatriation possible. We do not need to give back the original tapes – in most cases they would be more of a burden than an asset. For instance, in some of our recipient sites in the Caribbean, facilities in which to play tapes do not exist, nor is there a means of keeping the tapes from deteriorating – let alone a method for sharing them with the community. Our model is built specifically on repatriating *digital* copies of originally analog sound recordings and photographs, with supporting metadata and catalogs.

This process is not merely about returning cultural artifacts to their places of origin. It is about building relationships, partnerships, and collaborations.

As we stated in our presentation at IASA last year, ACE has partnered since 2005 with the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College, Chicago, to repatriate digital copies of Alan Lomax's Caribbean sound recordings and photographs to interested repositories in the island countries where they were made. Repatriation sites so far have included:

- Nevis and St. Kitts Historical Society, Nevis
- Folk Research Center, St. Lucia
- La Médiathèque Caraïbe Bettino Lara, Général de Guadeloupe, Basse Terre, Guadeloupe

Future Caribbean sites include repositories in St. Barthélemy, Grenada, and Carriacou; at several Trinidadian universities; and, as has just been announced, in Haiti, with the support of the Green Family Foundation, the Open Society Institute, and the Clinton Global Initiative. We also have deposited high quality digital surrogates and digital catalogs in many other locations where our materials were recorded, including the following repositories:

- Alabama Center for Traditional Culture, Montgomery, Alabama, USA
- Archivio Sonoro della Canzone Napoletana della RAI, Naples, Italy
- Blue Ridge Institute and Museum at Ferrum College, Ferrum, Virginia, USA
- Blues Archive, University of Mississippi Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi, USA
- The English Folk Dance and Song Society, London, England
- Folk Research Center, St. Lucia
- Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, USA
- Irish Traditional Music Archive, Dublin, Ireland
- The Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, Glasgow, Scotland
- The School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, Scotland

Dissemination through digital repatriation is an ongoing project of ACE, and we propose it as a model that potentially could stimulate similar initiatives by other small archives and scholars.

#### **IV.A Digital Archive for Profit?**

For most of his career, Alan Lomax in one capacity or another was a producer: of radio programs, of 78 – and later LP – albums, of documentary films. Even while at the Library of Congress, Lomax argued that performers should be paid for their contributions. Working independently, and for the BBC in the years after that, Lomax made contracts with performers because they expected it – especially in the U.S. – and they wanted to make money from

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their own recordings if possible.

Beginning work as he did in the period where most folklore scholars, ethnomusicologists, and collectors were aficionados without salaried university positions, Lomax had the idea that both the collectors and the performers should benefit from any profit that was to be had from recordings. By force of association, and also to disseminate the material more widely – which he did with his Columbia and Atlantic series, for example – Lomax had to develop an understanding of how the music business worked in order to deal advantageously with publishers and the sharks in the business. As long as his recordings were in print, he made it a lifelong practice to distribute the royalties that came his way, no matter how small, which kept him in communication with numerous friends in the field for decades. Another variation on cultural repatriation.

When the Rounder series began to come out, with newly re-mastered editions of the old recordings, there was an unexpected flurry of requests for licenses to films, which went on for several years. Lomax by then was retired, but his daughter set up a for-profit company called Odyssey Productions (named after Lomax's only grandson Odysseus, who is half Greek) to handle the agreements with artists and heirs and to receive and distribute royalties. While continuing to manage the production of Lomax-related CD and LP releases, Odyssey in the past number of years also has begun to focus its attention on placing Lomax's recordings, photos, and film-work in new film, television, and album productions, tapping into a revenue stream that far outstrips that generated by the sales of albums – especially in this age of declining sales – and that can provide extra financial support both to ACE and to the artists whose material has been licensed.

This has been made infinitely easier by having a digitized archive from which to draw requested sound, image, and moving image clips. We are able to direct the licensees to our online catalogs to do their own research, contacting us only when they know exactly what they need, which reduces the amount of time we spend on a request to a matter of hours, if not minutes.

Thus our digital catalogs are helping our licensing efforts (our for-profit efforts), which in turn have proven beneficial to both ACE and the heirs of the artists Lomax recorded. But what does it mean for the entity called the Alan Lomax Archive? Have we become merely a publishing house? Should an Archive be non-profit, pursuing dissemination, repatriation, and the mission of cultural equity on the one hand, while pursuing commercial use of its material on the other? These questions have a direct bearing on our treatment of the medium wherein the two constituents potentially intersect: namely, our website. Do we allow full, uncompressed versions of Lomax's photos and videos for download, or do we compress them, and watermark them? Do we offer full volumes of our audio media for free streaming, or do we limit the media to song samples to protect the rights-holders? For now, in both these instances, we have chosen the latter although there are very good cases to be made for the former.

A caveat to this discussion is the circumstances in which not-for-profit organizations often exist in the U.S. Many non-governmental, small organizations, such as ACE, depend on public and private donors in order to sustain operations. As we discuss ACE's hybridity, it is necessary to recognize that ACE achieved its current state through the financial generosity and support of a variety of independent for- and not-for-profit organizations and institutions, including government agencies as well as private and public corporations and foundations.

Bearing this in mind, is commerce a reasonable goal for archives undertaking digitization? Our digitization was – no doubt as it was or continues to be for many of you – a matter of necessity, and although we had album releases in mind for some of our material, they in no way ultimately could generate revenue equal to the cost of digitization. What revenue has been generated is only a happy side effect of that digitization. We are lucky in that our collections are the life's work of one of America's foremost folklorists, who recorded across the globe, and who has a name familiar to many music fans, scholars, and producers