

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Man Who Recorded the World

John Szwed

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About the Author

John Szwed is Professor of Music, African-American Studies and Anthropology at Yale University. He is the author of the acclaimed biographies *Space is the Place: The Life and Times of Sun Ra* and *So What: The Life of Miles Davis*

ALSO BY JOHN SZWED

Space Is the Place: The Life and Times of Sun Ra

So What: The Life of Miles Davis

Jazz 101

Crossovers: Essays on Race, Music, and American Culture

THE MAN WHO RECORDED THE WORLD

A Biography of Alan Lomax

JOHN SZWED



arrow books

*To
Roger D. Abrahams
and
The Department of Folklore and Folklife,
University of Pennsylvania
1962-1999*



INTRODUCTION



THE FIRST TIME I saw Alan Lomax was in November 1961 at a meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, an academic group then too new to have developed its own orthodoxies. They were still debating the definition of music, the meaning of dance, the function of song, all with a sense of wonder and urgency. The founders of the discipline were all there—Charles Seeger, Mantle Hood, Alan Merriam—but the doors were still wide open.

I was a graduate student new to the world of folklorists and ethnomusicologists and eager to connect with them somehow. The big event that night was a concert of African music by the Nigerian drummer Olatunji, who had added to his group some of the members of the Sun Ra Arkestra, and the mixture of the two musics had the scholars puzzled. As the audience filed out, I saw Lomax talking with two men who I later learned were Colin Turnbull and Weston La Barre, not your everyday anthropologists. I knew it was Lomax despite never having seen a picture of him, because his slightly genteel Texas accent drifted to the back of the room. He was big, though I suppose not as big as he looked, in an ill-fitting blue suit, with his collar and tie askew. *Well-dressed enough to be a Bible salesman in Alabama*, I thought, *but missing the mark of a successful academic*. Later, in the high sixties, when I knew him better, it was he who chastised me for my choice of clothing—he told me that government-grants people and highly placed folks of color would not take me seriously. (My one effort at dressing up for something or other amused him,

and he said my tan suede jacket and bright tie made me look like a southwestern TV station manager.)

I must have been staring at him that day in the theater, for as he passed me, stepping over rows of seats, he declared as if it were the day's headline, "Pygmies are a baseline culture," and went on his way. He sounded like some nineteenth-century grand theorist speaking from a higher plane, with a scarcely concealed moral program and no sense whatever of then-trendy cultural relativity. Once I had heard him speak at length, I began to wonder what kind of folklorist was this, if that's what he was, with no particular interest in the text of a song or a tale. It turned out that he was speaking comparatively of other levels of art, of humanity—preverbal levels, where bodies interact in front of a cross-cultural tableau, and where art emerges from deeply encoded but virtually nonconscious behavior.

Later, I worked for Alan on occasion, though never for money, as it was understood that he was always short, and I had a day job. He was infinitely patient with the novice, answering questions more fully than was required, with tales of this or that epiphany on the shores or in the swamps of this or that community, of sheriffs with bowie knives who threatened to cut his throat if he ever came back to their county. His stories of working with Zora Neale Hurston were rich and full of his admiration for her fearlessness while doing fieldwork among hoodoo practitioners. When I asked him for advice about graduate study, he suggested I drop out and instead do as he had done: seek the company of the very best people in the fields that interested me.

Whenever Alan asked me to join him for lunch or dinner, it was always someplace with well-etched character, though sometimes with marginal food. It might be a bar where the bartender was also waiter, cook, and cashier—"like it used to be." Or a tiny Chinese restaurant where he felt free to order something not on the menu. In conversation, Alan

could shift instantly from deadly serious or highly focused to mock folksy or laughing at the absurd, his eyes always a clue as to what was coming. When he called me, usually late at night, it was never just to talk, but because he wanted something—a reaction to a new research project, maybe a suggestion of a name of someone who might work with him on it. Though the request was unspoken, I always knew he was asking me if I would do it. And I wondered how many he had called before me.

Sometimes what he had dreamed up could cost great sums of money, or simply be impossible at the moment. One idea was a plan to sell the television networks on a half-hour prime-time program that featured old people being old people—talking about their lives, maybe sharing secrets, making connections to tradition, performing wisdom and maturity, he said, something like that. He spelled out the details of what would be a kind of homespun reality show. When I cautiously suggested that this would be impossible to sell in the high-profit atmosphere of the media, he pointed to a little vase on the table with a few tired daisies in it and said, “This is not much of a vase, and the flowers aren’t much. But if you knew that you could count on finding this vase and those flowers on the table every night for years to come, wouldn’t that be something?” He could be hard to argue with.

His enthusiasm was boundless and seemed to grow with age. His drive to celebrate life in all its diversity and to see, taste, and hear everything was astonishing. If you mentioned the blues, he could tell you that Son House was the greatest folk musician in the Western world. Tell him that you were on the way to Trinidad, and he’d say that a man named Nassus Moses who played a one-string fiddle and lived in a hut in the suburbs of Port of Spain was the greatest folk musician in the Western world. And in one sense or another, they always *were* the greatest at something or other.

One night he suggested that several of us go to the Village Gate in New York to see Professor Longhair. It was a bit surprising to hear him praising the brilliance of New Orleans's sainted rhythm and blues pianist, since we weren't aware that he kept up with that sort of thing, but we happily followed him to the club. Since we were late, we squeezed our way in and found seats wherever we could. When 'Fess opened his first set with "Jambalaya," Longhair's rolling, "blues rumba"-flavored revision of Hank Williams's revision of Cajun music, backed by a Crescent City band of beboppers and funksters, I expected a post-gig lecture from Alan about taking creolization too far. But then I felt something brush by my leg, and when I looked down there was Alan crawling on the floor toward the bandstand so as to stay out of people's vision. When he reached the stage he knelt there, his hands on the edge of the stage like a supplicant Kilroy, until the set was over. As he came back to our table, he cried out over the crowd, "Greatest folk musician in the Western world," then followed it up with a letter to the *Village Voice* spelling out the New Orleans piano lineage, how Longhair was the roots of Fats Domino's style, and thus basic to the history of rock and roll, if not the world.

To those who knew Alan's work only from his songbooks he seemed to be the pied piper of the folk, a kindly guide for a nostalgic return trip to simpler times. But he might have thought of himself as spokesperson for the Other America, the common people, the forgotten and excluded, the ethnic, those who always come to life in troubled times—in the Great Depression, in the rising tide toward World War II, during the postwar anti-Communist hysteria, and inside the chaos of the era of civil rights and counterculturalism—those who could evoke deep fears of their resentment and unpredictability. At such times folk songs seemed not so much charming souvenirs as ominous and threatening portents.

Despite having spent most of his life in New York, he never quite seemed to fit the city. He took up too much space, assumed too much, and laughed too easily for a New Yorker. But neither did he seem to fit Texas either. We once shared chili and beer in an El Paso dive, where his beard and sideburns were the event of the evening. Yet he never seemed uncomfortable, for he moved with an absolute assuredness of who he was and where he was at the moment. In that, he was a true bohemian, not a New Yorker or a Texan. But it seems odd to call Lomax a bohemian. His father had aspired to being a hobo, wandering the countryside, but bohemian was something else; it meant belonging nowhere or everywhere. Much of Alan's life in the city was spent in Greenwich Village, among its artists and his dissident neighbors. Most Village residents, after all, came from somewhere else, some small town in the hinterlands, and most of them were happy to say that they had come from nowhere, never mentioning their family and their life before the city. But Alan never denied that he was from Texas or tried to disguise his accent. In his youth he often lived in a state of resistance to his father, but he never rejected him publicly, and in fact often quoted him and identified with his goals. To many in New York, especially in the 1930s and 1940s, a Texan was all the bad things they had left behind somewhere on the other side of the Hudson River—insularity, bigotry, churlishness, and various hatreds and philistinisms. But Lomax would not let them get away with it, and insisted that he be seen as an individual.

I once asked him why he stayed in New York, and he said he could get done in the city in one day what it would take a month to do somewhere else. And before the age of the computer and cell phone, who could deny it? But that was not the whole story—bohemian or not, he had lived in New York longer than anywhere else.

Alan was intense, passionate, in and out of love, dependent on others, but often resistant to them when they got too close. He could get by on little money, live an unsettled life, drift out of his times at one moment, but then come back again, deeply involved. He worked like a dog, driving himself until he fell asleep—in the middle of a recording session, in the waiting room of an office—but only for moments, as life to him was too long not to fill the time with curiosity. He took on more than was humanly possible, and paid for it in frustration over his own incomplete projects. His was a life not easy to live.

CHAPTER 1



From Chisholm Trail to Harvard Yard

IT BEGINS LIKE so many other stories—a sensitive, intelligent, and sickly child, kept at home under his parents’ close watch, overcomes obstacles to achieve great success. It could be written as an American romantic narrative—but it was tougher and earthier than that, and lingers in some of the lost and forgotten backwaters of America. It might be a western, but it travels to the rarefied air of Harvard Yard, into the heart of the United States government, and across the ocean. It plumbs the depths of the homegrown American character by examining the soul of Haiti, the north of England, and in a near-parody of the Grand Tour, wanders into Franco’s Spain and the hard land of the Italian *paisan*.

It begins, then, with a boy in Texas in the first part of the twentieth century, and the boy’s father is John Avery Lomax.

Two years after the end of the Civil War¹, John Lomax was born in Goodman, a tiny Mississippi farming village in Holmes County. By the time John was two, his parents, James and Susan Frances Lomax, had left the chaos of postwar Mississippi and traveled by covered wagon to Texas. There, on the Bosque River, just up the hill from the Chisholm Trail, they settled in Meridian, a small frontier

community southeast of Fort Worth, made up of fellow southerners, recently freed slaves, and a few Norwegian immigrants. Like many southerners, the Lomaxes claimed well-to-do ancestors who had come from England and had fallen on hard times. “The upper crust of the po’ white trash” is the way that John described his family’s place in Texas society—a family of ten surviving by hard work and discipline.

At age six John was already clearing brush and beginning to chop cotton. Soon he was cutting wood and tending the cattle and horses. Though he was never quite a cowboy because their livestock was never that numerous, he nonetheless grew up in the world of working cowhands, since the cattle drives brought them down the Chisholm Trail. Huddled in the brush near their campfires, watching and listening, John was fascinated by their talk, even more so by their songs, and he absorbed their style and manner from an early age. Still, his father and mother were eager to have their children educated, both at home and at school. They subscribed to several newspapers from as far away as New York City, and there were always books in the house—Shakespeare, the English poets, works in Latin. Poetry was taken very seriously, and they all memorized poems and songs, reciting and singing on special occasions. This mix of poetry from the printed page and the poetry of folk songs was never a contradiction to John, since he viewed both as oral forms, and both of them imbued his life and shaped his character. Later, when it occurred to him to turn the cowboy songs he grew up with into books, it made perfect sense.

John’s parents tried to have their children take a year of college by the time they were twenty-one, and in 1887 it was John’s turn. To pay his way, he sold his horse, borrowed money from his father and a cousin, took a part-time job, and left home to enroll at nearby Granbury College, a tiny country school. By the end of the year he

qualified for a teaching license, which he used to get a job as principal and the only teacher in the Preparatory Department of minuscule Weatherford College in Clifton, near Meridian. At the end of the first year, the school paid his way to study bookkeeping at summer school in Eastman Business College in Poughkeepsie, New York, so that he could return to head up Weatherford's newly created Business Department (where, once again, he was the sole teacher). For six years John stayed at Weatherford, teaching twelve to fifteen classes, six days a week, and was paid so little that he was continually in debt, especially as he helped support several of his brothers and sisters. His only real personal expense was a trip he took every summer alone to Chautauqua, New York, where one of America's grandest efforts at mass education was under way. It was a series of performances and lectures, held out of doors in the main, and attended by folks eager to escape the heat and go to the country, where the Chautauqua tents were set up by the lake. There they would see William Jennings Bryan preach, Maud Ballington Booth ("the Little Mother of the Prisons") decry the horrors of the penal system, and Jacob A. Riis describe life in the slums, or they would learn higher mathematics or listen to poetry readings and concerts. Some thought Chautauqua was a godsend (Woodrow Wilson described it as "an integral part of the national defense"), while others saw it as an early sign of the decline of a great country (Sinclair Lewis said it was "nothing but wind and chaff and ... the laughter of yokels"). For John it was the quickest and cheapest way to get an education, even though he was all too aware that it was not the real thing.

But in the fall of 1895, at age twenty-eight, John arrived in Austin to begin working toward a bachelor's degree at the University of Texas with the financial help of a cousin. At enrollment, he signed up as being several years younger than he was, then took double the number of required

courses in an effort to make up for lost time. He did so well in his classes that he was classified as a sophomore even before he ended the first semester. At the same time he was editor of the *Texas University* magazine, writing articles and poetry, and joined the staffs of the student newspaper and the yearbook. By his graduation in 1897—four years of college compressed into two—he had majored in English literature, become deeply involved in campus politics, been acknowledged as a student leader, and moved easily among the faculty and administration. It therefore came as a shock when he was unable to get a teaching job after graduation. Just when he was beginning to lose hope, he was equally shocked to be offered the job of registrar at his alma mater. He accepted the offer, though it was not at all what he had wanted, since he assumed it concerned little more than recordkeeping. But once in the job, he was also asked to handle some of the university's correspondence, to serve as the president's secretary, and to manage the men's dormitory. What's more, to assume this job he was required to continue being a student and had to enroll for a two-year M.A. program. It was a poorly paid, overworked position, but one that would give him more education and immediate respect, so it was hard for him to resist. By age thirty he had become the sole support of his mother, and his siblings regularly sought loans from him. To the world at large, he would soon seem successful, dignified, and scholarly. With his long coats and his Stetson hat and cigar, he was called "Professor" by students and many of those outside the university. It may have been a functionary's job, but he made something of it, and over the years he managed to survive the resignation of an unpopular president who had backed him, and also learned to steer his way through the arcane and fickle politics of Texas. Because he had the role of guiding young students' entry into the university, he became a well-known and popular figure all across the state, one who played a significant role in the lives of most

of its future business, educational, and governmental leaders.

At his age, he might have been thought of as settling into the life of an academic bachelor, but his interest in women was pronounced, if well controlled. Most of the women he knew were much younger than him, and were understood to be under his protection at the university. In fact, for five years John had been carrying on an intense if largely long-distance relationship with a young woman of culture and intelligence from the Texas town of Palestine. Shirley Green was John's first love, but a doomed one, as she was dying of tuberculosis, a fact that she revealed to him only when he began to press her about their future. Just before she passed away, she told him that she was encouraging several of her women friends to correspond with him. One of them, Bess Baumann Brown, a kindergarten teacher in Dallas, visited Austin with plans to enter college, and to his amazement showed a strong interest in him. After Shirley died, he and Bess became close and began to talk of marriage.

The University of Texas had from its beginnings been embroiled in state politics, yet John had found ways to handle the shifts and turns that came with it. But when the university's president, George Taylor Winston, whom he had served so faithfully, clashed too many times with the Legislature, he resigned, and John began to feel his future threatened. Once again he began thinking of teaching, and asked for time off to study educational administration at Harvard, the university that provided most of the senior faculty at Texas. When his request was turned down by the administration, John applied again, but Texas would still not grant him leave. Then, in the summer of 1903, at thirty-six years of age, he made an uncharacteristically sudden move, quitting the university to become an instructor in English at its archrival, Texas A&M, where one of his

Austin friends had just become president. It meant a cut in pay and a loss of prestige moving down from Austin, but he hoped now at least to have more time for his interest in folk songs and to be free of academic politics.

After nine months of teaching and traveling back and forth on weekends from College Station, the home of Texas A&M, to see Bess in Austin where she was studying, they were married in early June 1904 and then traveled up the East Coast to Harvard, where John attended summer school. When they returned to A&M, they chose a small faculty house as far away from the campus as they could find and stocked it with chickens, two pigs, two milk cows, and a dog. It was not unusual to see a family with a few chickens in the South at the time, but the Lomaxes were supplying much of their own food, as well as selling milk and eggs to the neighborhood.

Suddenly everything seemed to be breaking John's way. When their first child arrived in August 1905, they named her Shirley, after Bess's former girlfriend. When he boldly asked to have the whole year of 1906-1907 off to study at Harvard, the administration agreed, giving him an unprecedented one-third of his salary. Harvard accepted his application and, more surprisingly, awarded him a top teaching fellowship that paid \$500.

Harvard meant validation to John, perhaps even revenge on the teachers who had taken his ability, his passion for folk song, and his aspiration to be a first-rate scholar lightly. Now he was in the premier department of English in America, in a group of students that included Van Wyck Brooks, Charles Seeger, and T. S. Eliot, another fugitive from the provinces. From his first days on campus John became a favorite among some of the faculty, who were unusually receptive to nontraditional students. The dean of Harvard College, Le Baron Russell Briggs, for example, who taught John's English composition class, made him comfortable writing about things he knew, and welcomed

essays on subjects that were far from the norm: lynchings, cattle roping, and all things southwestern. Barrett Wendell, who taught “Literary History of America,” encouraged his students to write about the regions of the United States from which they came, and became so excited when John proposed to write about cowboy ballads that he immediately introduced him to George Lyman Kittredge, the preeminent scholar of English literature of his time, a specialist on Chaucer and Shakespeare, and the foremost student of the ballad in the country. Kittredge and Wendell were delighted by the idea that there were distinctively American ballads in existence and that they might still be being created somewhere, and the two professors encouraged John to begin systematic collection of western ballads. They even allowed him to use their names in sending letters across the country in search of song texts, and promised to look for a foundation that might underwrite his research.

John revealed to his mentors that he had earlier assembled a collection of cowboy songs in a “roll of dingy manuscript written out in lead pencil and tied together with string” and taken it to show to one of Texas’s English professors. He was told that his songs were “tawdry, cheap and unworthy²,” and that he should instead devote himself to the best that English literature had to offer. In anger and shame, John said, he waited until night, went behind the dormitory where he lived, built a small fire, and burned up every scrap of his song collection.

John spent days writing hundreds of letters in search of cowboy songs, and still kept up with his classes. By spring 1907, the letters began to pay off and songs started coming in. By then, however, Bess was pregnant again and he needed to go back to work, though he had no luck with his job search. As his final examinations approached he began to suffer from eyestrain and stomach problems and ended up in the infirmary. His professors agreed—against all rules

—to grant him his master's degree without completing his exams for what they termed "a nervous collapse³."

Back in Texas, he continued to work on his collection, and when a research grant failed to materialize, Professor Wendell helped modestly finance John's work out of his own money. On June 14 the Lomaxes' first son, John Jr., was born. The lack of money was now becoming a problem: both children were sick with various illnesses, John Jr. quite seriously, and Bess was suffering from what she called "a general breakdown⁴." Harvard then offered him a postgraduate fellowship on the condition that Texas A&M would give him a year off at half salary. When the A&M administration refused, Harvard offered him three successive yearly grants for his use during vacations.

In 1909 John convinced some friends in Austin that they should form some sort of organization to gather and preserve local folklore, and he was elected the first secretary of the Texas Folklore Society. At the request of Professor Kittredge, he addressed the meeting of the Modern Language Association at Cornell on the topic of "Cowboy Songs of the Mexican Border." It was a paper written to be read, as was the academic practice, but he delighted the gathering of professors when he began to sprinkle Texas stories throughout his talk. And when he yelled cattle cries across the room, sang songs, and asked the austere audience to join in, he created a sensation that would eventually bring hundreds of invitations for him to speak from all across the country. Now in his forties, balding, paunchy, and wearing a suit, he looked like anything but a cowboy and often drew giggles when he first walked onstage. But he knew how to draw in an audience, recalling his elocution courses, reciting as much as he sang, and booming out southwestern country poetry and ranch songs as if he were an old hand himself.

Then, again to his surprise, he was asked to become the secretary of the University Faculties at Austin. It was still

not the teaching position he wanted, but when he asked for time off in the summers to travel in search of songs, the administration agreed. He now had time to finish the book he called *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, which was published in 1910, with an introduction by President Theodore Roosevelt, appearing just in time to feed a rising interest in American folk songs. It sold steadily and stayed in print for years, helped in part by Bess and John, who promoted and sold copies from their home and at lectures.

When John Lomax began to gather cowboy ballads he joined a tradition that stretched back well over a hundred years. The story of folk song collecting in the English-speaking world begins in the eighteenth century with accusations of a forgery that had international consequences. James Macpherson, a teacher in the Highlands of Scotland, created a sensation in 1790 by publishing a collection of very old poems that suggested Scotland might possess a body of classical literature equal to that of the Homeric poetry of Greece. A few years later, however, suspicions arose that in his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland and Translated from the Gallic or Erse Language*, Macpherson was inventing “translations” of nonexistent poems, that there were very few genuine pieces in Macpherson’s epics, and that even those were heavily altered by him.

He was not alone in trying his hand at this form of authorship, especially in Scotland, where some writers were driven by the desire to prove that theirs was a much older and more literate culture than that of the British who had defeated the Scots and then annexed them. Right behind Macpherson came Thomas Percy, the son of a grocer in Northumberland, across the border in England, who created a collection of ballads based on an old manuscript collection of poetry, which he claimed to have rescued from the hands of a housemaid, who was about to

light the fire with it. He published this collection as *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765. Percy, like Macpherson, thought ballads were records of earlier ways of life, but unlike the Scotsman, he found them not particularly valuable as poetry, and so he felt free to alter or improve his ballad texts in order to make them more readable. The book sold well anyway, like Macpherson's, especially among the German Romantics—Goethe, Schiller, and even Beethoven, who was inspired by it to transform a number of Scots folk songs into *lieder*.

Years later, Sir Walter Scott was drawn into the debate over origins and whether ballads were pure Scottish products. Having Percy's book as a child, he began heading into the countryside along the Scottish border to collect ballads as early as 1792, relishing the stories of outlaws, murderers, adultery, and abduction. He too sometimes constructed more "complete" versions than existed, aiming for a higher level of literature than what was already there. The ballads in his 1802 *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders* were "restorations."

Whether forged or genuine, ballads required some kind of authentication, and the two standards of the times were that there be enough of them to matter and that they be very old. They had to be presented as proper collections, not as random findings. Demonstrating their antiquity required the skills of a philologist or an antiquarian to date the manuscripts on which the ballads had been discovered. To help the dating process along, some collectors "aged" the songs, treating them as fragments that had been found and reassembled by an editor/archaeologist, and made the story of their discovery part of the proof. A manuscript rescued from the fire, found hidden in a wall, or lying on the floor—they were all part of the tale, the romance of the collector-antiquarian. These found ballads were presented to their eighteenth-century audience as sung by bards, not folksingers or poets, for "bard" was a Celtic word,

identified with Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, and so were connected to a history that preceded the Acts of Union of 1707 and 1801 that attempted to erase the boundaries between England and these other countries.

The Scots collectors were not acting solely out of nationalistic interest, however. They also sought personal betterment by attracting the attention and the imprimatur of an aristocrat, often an antiquarian himself, to whom the book was then dedicated. Most of the collectors who chose this route had already failed at some earlier occupation, and were using collecting as the vehicle for a second chance. There was little wealth to be gained from ballads, but there was a kind of fame.

In the United States, interest in ballad collecting began in the Northeast, especially in Cambridge, Massachusetts, among those connected to Harvard. In 1855, a thirty-six-year-old James Russell Lowell announced that he would be giving a series of twelve public lectures, the fourth of which was titled "The Ballad," and the audience was pleased to see him rise in defense of America as a literary nation, and of the ballad as an important part of its literature. "The ballads are the only true folk songs that we have in English," he said. "There is no other poetry in the language that addresses us so simply as mere men and women." Then he took aim at the British. "English writers demand of us a national literature. But where, for thirteen centuries, was their own?" His stunning answer was that what the English call their literature was borrowed from the Celts, from the romances that were written about King Arthur and his court. Not only was he disputing the right of the British to lay exclusive claim to ballads when they were Celtic in origin, but he was also extending his argument westward and announcing his own declaration of cultural independence for Americans. (Lowell's mother, incidentally, was a Scot, who read Sir Walter Scott to him as a child and sang him to sleep with Scottish ballads.)

Seated at Lowell's lectures was the young scholar Francis James Child, who would later become a colleague of Lowell's at Harvard as its first professor of English, and between 1882 and 1898 would publish a series of ten books called *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Child started by gathering together ballads in manuscript and published form like other collectors before him, and then set about categorizing them and putting them in order. The three-hundred-plus ballads in his ten-volume collection were the result of this ordering, and they became the standard for what could be called a folk song from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. For Child, the age of balladry was over, and nothing as fine or as noble could ever be found again in live performance.

When Child retired, his student George Lyman Kittredge replaced him. As with the other academics of his time and before him, it was the words of the folk songs that counted, and the roots of high poetry they saw in them. He had little interest in the actual music of the songs, the instruments that accompanied them, the way they were performed, or even in what they meant to the people who sang them. Collectors from the northeastern United States seldom went out among the people to gather songs, and when they did, they followed the British practice of contacting local gentry or community officials and asking them to locate the singers for them.

In England there was one collector who was interested in ballads as songs, not poems. Cecil Sharp was a musician, not a literary scholar, and for years he collected both the words and the music of songs live from singers in the field, first in England, where he had started the English Folk Dance Society in 1911, and then later in the United States. He spent twelve months in Kentucky between 1916 and 1918, and his collection, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, was published after his death in 1932.

Whether it was the influence of Sharp, or something deeper that Kittredge saw in John Lomax and his cowboy ballads when he came to Harvard as a student, the professor's encouragement of Lomax's recording of music and text was sincere, and gave John the courage to go forward. For Kittredge to accept cowboy songs as ballads was no small thing, for they were not taken seriously at the time. Sharp, for one, had ignored cowboy ballads, remarking that the cowboy had been "despoiled of his inheritance of traditional song."

The history of the early song collectors resonated in John Lomax's life, and he sometimes found himself reliving it. When John asked former president Theodore Roosevelt, a Harvard graduate himself, to write "an endorsement" of his book, he was repeating Percy's and Scott's experiences with ballads in a democratic way. Because he was forced to sell their work to the public to survive outside of university life, John was condemned by scholars, who argued that the composite texts he published were corrupt—the same claims made against Macpherson, Percy, and Scott, even though they were eventually well received by the public. As a folklorist who collected in the field, John also found himself roughing it like big game hunters and bringing back the evidence that he had somehow managed to work his way into one or another of these groups of rural and tough people.

It was all this that led John to take these songs with him when he went to Harvard to study. That roll of cowboy songs he had burned up as a young man back in Texas, and that he had reconstructed to take with him, was part of the romance. The South was suffused with the spirit of Walter Scott, and when Lomax considered giving his ballad book the title of *Cowboy Songs of the Mexican Border*, he was bringing notice to the parallels between the culture of the *vaqueros* and the life of the Scots reivers who robbed and stole on the Scottish border.

When the Lomaxes moved back to Austin, they lived closer to campus, but still kept chickens, turkeys, cows, and a pony, and raised a full garden of vegetables, with Bess cooking on a woodstove. John worked as hard as always, developing an alumni magazine, expanding the involvement of ex-students in the affairs of the school, attending and taking notes at every departmental and university meeting, and fund-raising for scholarships. Still, he made time for lectures, and in 1911 he launched the biggest tour yet, across the country to the East Coast and then up as far as Vermont, speaking at important schools and professional organizations and picking up songs from the libraries and the audiences as he went along. In 1912 he repeated the tour, this time focusing on black music, and even engaging a theatrical agent to coordinate his appearances. In a time before motion pictures with sound, before sound recordings were available in every home, even before serious radio programming, John was taking the lives of cowboys, blacks, and workers of all types into American universities and spreading the message of folklore. Though he was becoming well known on these tours, he fretted that they were often not as good as they should be, and feared that he was becoming a cheap theatrical hustler. Yet he persevered, eventually himself becoming part of the many Chautauquas that were springing up across the country.

The Lomaxes' second son, Alan James, was born on January 31, 1915, at home in Austin. Shirley was now ten and John Jr. eight, and both were handsome, increasingly healthy children and a source of pride. Alan's health, however, was a constant concern, as he was afflicted with asthma and then sinus infections and earaches. He developed slowly and remained underweight for many years. Alan recalled his childhood in that house, where his father attempted to re-create his own childhood home:

Our house was a two-story building⁵ made of soft sandstone that weathered into all kinds of colors. A beautiful red river runs through the town. There are hills with wild wolves, occasional rattlesnakes, and mountain lions. Way back in the hills are sure enough mountain people whom I didn't get to know until later. Right back of our house was a creek with water moccasins and catfish. It was a tremendous place for a boy to venture in with swimming, fishing and camping a hundred yards away. My father always built on the edge of town so there was always plenty of country to run in.

In 1917, two years after Alan was born, the new governor of Texas, James Ferguson, became locked in combat with the university, demanding the resignation of its new president, R. E. Vinson; when that attempt failed, he insisted that Vinson fire seven faculty members whom the governor viewed as disloyal—John Lomax among them. (In his public talks, Ferguson had occasionally singled out Lomax's cowboy song collecting as a symptom of the university's wasteful and frivolous ways.) Then, after threatening to veto the budget of the entire school, Ferguson fired the regents of the university and appointed a new board that was willing to dismiss the president and the marked faculty members who still remained on campus. Throughout this affair, Lomax spent part of what had become his annual lecture tour looking for a job elsewhere. Professor Wendell at Harvard put him in touch with his son, a Boston banker, who managed to have Lomax offered a job as a bond salesman in the Illinois office of his banking firm. John, though he knew almost nothing about banking and was unhappy to be forced into it, moved his family to a house in Highland Park, along the North Shore of Chicago, and got to work.

He turned out to be a good salesman, and with his statewide contacts in Texas and the improving economy at the start of the First World War he was an immediate success. Amid his many sales trips to Texas he found time to do a bit of folk song collecting, even among businessmen he met. Though he was not especially happy in Chicago, it did offer him the opportunity to meet new people, and he found his way into the local journalists' world, where he met a number of writers, including Carl Sandburg, who had just published his first poems and was collecting folk songs for his own book. The two men were on opposite sides of the political divide—Sandburg being sympathetic to various socialist causes, and Lomax a social conservative—but they were brought together by their common populist and literary passions and became lifelong friends.

Governor Ferguson was eventually impeached for financial irregularities, and in 1919 the Texas Exes—the alumni group John Lomax had spearheaded—asked him to return to Austin to become the secretary of the Ex-Students Association and to help recruit new students to the university. He accepted the post and the family returned to Austin, settling back into their old life of urban mini-farming, John continuing to work for the Chicago firm “on the side” with Bess as his business partner, editor, and financial adviser. “In addition to being a talent scout for the university⁶,” Alan recalled, “my father was also a really great teacher. He felt English literature to be more important than folklore, and for years, he read Kipling, Tennyson, Mark Twain and O. Henry to the kids out of the backwoods. He’d often visit his ex-students on his rides around the country, and they all seemed delighted to have him. They’d take him into their libraries and say, ‘Look, John, this is what you did for me.’ Soon he was behind a big cigar and a glass of whiskey, telling stories.”

On January 21, 1922, Bess gave birth to her fourth child, a girl, whom they named Bess, and often called Bess Brown