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# BALLAD HUNTING IN THE BLACK REPUBLIC: ALAN LOMAX IN HAITI, 1936-37

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*Gage Averill*

## *ABSTRACT*

The recordings made by Alan Lomax in Haiti in 1936-37 (over 1,500 in total), although little known, constitute a priceless repository of Haitian expressive culture, recorded soon after the departure of the American Marines and while Haiti was in the throes of a nationalist and afri-centric movement. This article examines the complex motivations of Alan Lomax (and the various American ethnographers working concurrently in Haiti, including Melville and Frances Herskovits, George E. Simpson, Harold Courlander, Katherine Dunham and Zora Neale Hurston) in relation to the ideological struggles over race and African diasporic identity in both the U.S. and Haiti. The article demonstrates how Lomax's preconceptions, difficulties in fieldwork, interactions with local culture brokers, and health and funding problems all impacted this legacy.

**Keywords:** Haiti, folklore, ethnography, race, music, audio recordings

## *RESUMEN*

Las grabaciones realizadas por Alan Lomax en Haití en 1936-37 (más de 1,500 en total), aunque poco conocidas, constituyen una incalculable fuente de la expresión cultural haitiana, registrada poco después del fin de la ocupación norteamericana, mientras que Haití estaba en medio de un movimiento nacionalista y afrocentrista. Este artículo examina las complejas motivaciones de Alan Lomax (y los varios etnógrafos que trabajaron simultáneamente en Haití, incluyendo a Melville y Frances Herskovits, George E. Simpson, Harold Courlander, Katherine Dunham y Zora Neale Hurston) en relación con las luchas ideológicas sobre la raza y la identidad de la diáspora africana en EE.UU. y Haití. El artículo demuestra cómo los prejuicios de Lomax, las dificultades en el trabajo de campo, las interacciones con los agentes de la cultura local y los problemas de salud y financiamiento impactaron en su legado.

**Palabras clave:** Haití, folklore, etnografía, raza, música, grabaciones de audio

## RÉSUMÉ

Les enregistrements réalisés par Alan Lomax en Haïti entre 1936 et 1937 (plus de 1500 au total), quoique peu connus, constituent un véritable trésor de l'expression culturelle haïtienne; ceux-ci ont été enregistrés peu après le départ des Marines américains et alors qu'Haïti était en voie d'un mouvement nationaliste et afro-centrique. Cet article présente une analyse de la complexité des motivations d'Alan Lomax (et les différents ethnographes américains travaillant simultanément en Haïti, y compris Melville et Frances Herskovits, George E. Simpson, Harold Courlander, Katherine Dunham et Zora Neale Hurston) en relation avec les luttes idéologiques de race et de l'identité de la diaspora africaine aux États-Unis et en Haïti. L'article explique comment les préjugés de Lomax, les difficultés de terrain, les interactions avec les agents de la culture locale et les problèmes de santé et de financement ont affecté cet héritage.

**Mots-clés:** Haïti, folklore, ethnographie, race, musique, enregistrements audio

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For the Haitian peasant, singing and dancing are integral parts of everyday existence. He calls his voodoo gods, wheedles favors from them and dismisses them with ceremonial drumming, dancing and singing. To find a group of men in the field with their hoes is to discover a gay festival of music and, when a Haitian tells a folk tale, the crux of the plot is likely to be a little song learned from his grandfather" (Alan Lomax, Report on the "Library of Congress Expedition to Haiti," 1936-37).<sup>1</sup>

In 1936, scarcely more than two years after the U. S. Marines left Haiti, Alan Lomax arrived. He was part of a wave of ethnographers, artists, and folklorists whose work helped to introduce Haitian 'traditional' culture and society to audiences abroad and also profoundly influenced local Haitian perspectives on folklore, cultural patrimony, and national identity. Over the course of a four-month 'expedition' to Haiti, Lomax, his fiancée, Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, and his assistant Revolie Polinice, recorded over 1,500 or so recordings along with six moving pictures, creating the most significant archive of Haitian culture in the early century.

My involvement with this collection was initiated by Dr. Anna Lomax Wood, Director of the Association for Cultural Equity (the Alan Lomax Archives), who asked me to curate the collection and to issue a set of CDs culled from the material, while also readying the archival database for

internet access. But this assignment turned into far more than an archival exercise, and I found myself returning repeatedly to the details of Alan Lomax's voyage, his motivations and hopes for the trip, the interactions that produced the recordings, and the encounter he had with Haitian music and culture which in turn produced the collection.

Alan Lomax was—and still is—both a towering and a controversial figure. As a collector of folk and traditional music and stories, as a popularizer, activist and revivalist, he played an important role in American music circles for over six decades. Lomax (b. Austin, Texas, 1915) began his career alongside his father, John Avery Lomax, who taught at the University of Texas, but who also—initially as a hobby—recorded old songs. By 1933, father and son began to collect materials to build the Archive of Folksong at the Library of Congress (est. 1928). They produced thousands of field recordings of folk musicians throughout the American South, Southwest, Midwest, and Northeast and published a collection of American folk songs, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (Macmillan 1934). They were also responsible for the first serious study of a folk musician in American literature, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (1937).

In 1936, Harold Spivacke at the Library of Congress introduced the elder Lomax to Charles Seeger, the noted musicologist, and his equally noted composer wife, Ruth Crawford Seeger, suggesting that Charles Seeger provide the musical transcriptions to the Lomaxes' next book, eventually titled *Our Singing Country*. With Charles busy on other projects, the task devolved onto Ruth Crawford Seeger, who worked closely with Alan Lomax for three years on the project starting in 1937 (Tick 1997:246). Their collaboration involved a close review of the thousands of recordings the Lomaxes had already made and donated to the Archive of American Folk Song in hopes of finding just the right combination of songs that could spark a revival of interest in America's homegrown traditions.

High among Alan Lomax's goals was to salvage the collective memory of oral cultures, encoded in performance, from loss or disappearance under the impact of global modernity. His fascination with music of the folk emerged from a passionate egalitarianism: he believed that the expressions of the poor, working class, minorities and ethnic groups—and those of peoples living around the globe without access to power or wealth—deserved to be heard and preserved. He wanted to produce an alternative recorded oral history of humanity and saw himself as an advocate for what he came to call “cultural equity” for marginalized peoples by providing them (mediated) access to the means of cultural reproduction, especially broadcast and recording technology.

In 1936, Lomax threw himself passionately into the re-election

campaign for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a patron of America's burgeoning folklore movement. In the midst of all this activity, just one month after Election Day, and shortly after completing a philosophy degree at the University of Texas in 1936, Lomax (soon to be joined by his fiancée, Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold) left to spend four months in Haiti. The timing of this journey to Haiti forms, in itself, an interesting puzzle.

I argue that we are able to fully comprehend the impact of a project such as this only if we take into account the personalities, perspectives, and passions of the individuals responsible for it. This short article is, then, a meditation on that voyage to Haiti and the legacy it has left. Of deep and abiding interest for me have been Alan's interactions and connections to other ethnographers and ethnographic projects, the role that Haiti played in the racial imagination of progressive North Americans of the 1930s, the timely window into Haitian culture Lomax and others provided in the difficult transition from the American military occupation back to civilian rule, and the role of these collections and representations of Haiti (what Haitians of the era would have called "folklore") in the project of shaping and reshaping a Haitian national consciousness.

### **Haiti and its interpreters, 1934-37**

Haiti, while under American Occupation from 1915-1934, attracted the attention of an African American intellectual and cultural elite, including prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance who traveled there such as James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, delegations of the NAACP, and other interested parties, who saw an independent Black Republic as a crucial buttress of the aspirations of Blacks in the United States for dignity and equality. Although some had initially supported the American invasion as an effort to stabilize and modernize Haiti, Black American intellectuals and artists eventually came to be among its most ardent critics and advocated noisily for Haitian self-governance. In the latter years of the Occupation, Haiti was increasingly a focus of attention for politically progressive scholars and activists, both white and black, who viewed it through the lens of the so-called "Negro Question" in North America. With debates raging on African retentions, African American acculturation, equality, and black civil rights, activist intellectuals proposed to better understand new world African cultures through studies of the "Black Republic," where former slaves had been independent and self-governing for over a century.

In Haiti, the neocolonial status of Haiti while under direct American control (1915-1934) engendered a simmering resistance to American hegemony and a growing resentment of the Haitian elite for their failures

to govern. Jean Price-Mars's *indigéniste* manifesto of 1920, *Ainsi parle l'oncle* (Thus Spoke the Uncle), a collection of essays, called for an appreciation of African traditions and a renewed emphasis on Haiti's cultural difference from Euro-American states. Price-Mars placed responsibility for the American Occupation squarely at the feet of those who shunned Haiti's distinctive character and engaged in a national "Boavaryisme." Under the impact of the *indigéniste* movement in the fervent period of the late 1930s and 1940s, Creole and Vodou influences flowed into the popular and even the elite arts of urban Haiti, an early generation of Haitian ethnologists pursued the study of peasant culture (and of "African retentions"), a Bureau d'Ethnologie (1938) was formed, and the first Haitian folkloric dance troupes were organized. Between the publication of *Ainsi Parle L'Oncle* in 1928, and the election of *indigéniste* leader Dumarsais Estimé (who was, parenthetically, a paramour of Katherine Dunham's during her stay in Haiti) after World War II, the new ideology had emerged to contest the entrenched views of elite Haitians that those of the lighter-skinned traditional ruling class were best fit to rule. The emergence of a political ideology of *noirisme* encouraged the black middle class to imagine a nation more inclusive of its disenfranchised black peasantry and urban underclass, one that should be ruled by more racially "authentic" Haitians. An early generation of Haitian poets and ethnologists—Jean-Claude Dorsainvil, Lorimer Denis, Jacques Roumain, and Dr. François Duvalier (yes, that Duvalier, Haiti's future President-for-life)—encouraged, and often took part in, the collecting of stories, songs, and beliefs from rural Haitians.<sup>2</sup> Thus the emergence of a new politics of cultural inclusion in Haiti was a process pushed forward primarily by Haitian scholars and activists in Haiti, but that also took shape and encouragement from a densely layered transnational dialogue over race and politics.

There was a peculiar relationship between the Haitian ethnographic project in this period (both local and foreign) and the lurid accounts of Haitian Vodou/Voodoo and zombies produced by occupation-era authors, accounts that were often deeply complicit in the justification for occupation. William B. Seabrook, who might be described travel writer with a persistent interest in the occult, produced the touchstone work of the period, *The Magic Island* (1929). Parenthetically, Seabrook's assistant for a period later in the 1930s was a young Trotskyist artist and filmmaker from Greenwich Village named Maya Deren, and her exposure to Haiti through Seabrook's writings fueled a passionate interest in Haiti on her part, which she next indulged by becoming the volunteer personal secretary to Katherine Dunham. Deren's book on Haiti, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953) and her still shots and film footage, produced while in Haiti on a Guggenheim Fellowship, have become some

of the most durable and compelling ethnographic works on Haiti.

Seabrook's *The Magic Island*, former Marine Captain John H. Craige's *Black Baghdad* (1933), Marine Sergeant Faustin Wirkus's *The White King of La Gonave*, and perhaps most notoriously, Richard A. Loederer's *Voodoo Fire in Haiti* (1935) fueled an appetite among Americans and Europeans for works based on a kind of literary and cinematic trope: an island of African primitivism, superstition, magic, and irrational power in the heart of civilized Western world. The Hollywood zombie genre that grew out of these works also invoked a deep-seated anxiety over sexual contact (usually between foreign white women and black Haitian men).

Beginning only months before the Marines decamped in 1934, a generation of ethnographers began to arrive in Haiti. Although ethnographers took it on as their sacred duty to counteract the lurid and racist images of Haiti propagated in the travel literature, it is clear that many of them, as well as members of the Black American literary and cultural circles, were also intrigued with the Haiti portrayed in these accounts. This literature created a challenge to potential ethnographers, and certainly to Haiti's modernizing elite, members of which often expressed embarrassment by the foreign attention to something they would have preferred to ascribe to Haiti's past, not its "modernizing" present or future. Still, the ethnographers were drawn to Vodou just as assiduously as the travel writers, however much they hoped to write in a more scientific and informed vein so as not to not fall prey to sensationalism.

In the opening words to *Life in a Haitian Valley*, the *paterfamilias* of Haitian foreign anthropologists, Melville Herskovits, wrote succinctly, "Haiti has fared badly at the hands of its literary interpreters." Herskovits had arrived in summer of 1934 with his wife and intellectual partner Frances, and they spent a little over three months researching rural Haitian culture in the area around Mirebalais for their 1936 book. His post-graduate assistant, George Simpson, arrived in Haiti in mid-February 1937 for his ethnographic fieldwork in Plaisance. Lay scholar, music collector, and novelist Harold Courlander first visited Haiti in 1932 but spent three and a half months in 1936 writing a novel and collecting folksongs. He subsequently came back to Haiti in January 1937, following Lomax by a month, and went about the systematic documentation of Haitian rituals and songs for his book *Haiti Singing*, published in 1939. His transcriptions, originally prepared by himself and a Haitian classical violinist, Arthur Lyncée Duroseau, were edited by the Anthropologist George Herzog (transcriptions for his follow-up book, *The Drum and the Hoe: The Life and Lore of the Haitian People* [1960] were prepared by ethnomusicologist Mieczyslaw Kolinski). In *Haiti Singing*, Courlander mentions and thanks anthropologists Franz Boas, George Herzog, and

Frances and Melville Herskovits, but never mentions Alan Lomax, nor does Lomax mention him. It is difficult to imagine that Herskovits would not have told the two investigators about their concurrent residence and study in Haiti, and it is highly likely that they would have crossed paths at the Hotel Bellvue or the Hotel Oloffson or some other regular haunt of foreigners in Haiti. But strangely enough, even though Herskovits introduced Lomax to George Simpson in a letter of January 21, 1937 and encouraged them to meet in Port-au-Prince and later in Plaisance, where Simpson conducted a community study (and where Lomax joined him for a considerable time), Lomax never mentioned Simpson in his field journal. It is possible that this reticence to acknowledge the presence of other ethnographers and lay folklorists arose from a desire to heighten one's own unique ethnographic authority.

Often seen as an epochal transition due to the end of the Occupation, the years between 1934-37 thus featured the remarkable juxtaposition of fieldwork by the Herskovitses, the Lomaxes, George E. Simpson, Harold Courlander, Katherine Dunham and Zora Neale Hurston. Of this group of ethnographers, it can be argued that Lomax has had by far the least impact on subsequent Haitian studies, in part because he wrote only a single article about his travels in Haiti and in part because the recordings (unlike those recorded by Courlander, for example) *weren't* systematically distributed—instead, they sat in a stack in the Library of Congress for over six decades.

Zora Neale Hurston provided the initial inspiration and encouragement for Alan to visit Haiti. Hurston was the leading black author of her generation, and she was also a trained ethnographer and a formidable intellectual presence in the struggle for equality, at least until the post-war period when her political views were more decidedly conservative and her personal circumstances declined. Zora's interest in Haiti stretched back at least to the winter of 1932 when she wrote to her funding patroness of her interest in contacting Marine Sergeant Faustin Wirkus (who had written a book on his experiences on the Haitian island of La Gonave during the Occupation called *The White King of La Gonave* [1931]) (Kaplan 2002:252). After Hurston and Wirkus met, they discussed carrying out a comparative study of "conjure" in the West Indies. Hurston subsequently mentioned to Anthropologist Ruth Benedict her goal of obtaining a Guggenheim grant to study in the West Indies and the Bahamas, with a "month or two in Hayti" (Kaplan 2002:252). She first applied, unsuccessfully, for a Guggenheim in 1933. Following this she returned to Columbia University in 1934 (where she had received her B.A.) to obtain her doctorate in Anthropology with Anthropologist Franz Boas with funding from the Rosenwald Foundation, which had sought her out for this purpose. In the following winter, as Hurston



prepared to work on Haiti, Boas suggested she take a semester at Northwestern University with Melville Herskovits (who had recently returned from Haiti), but these plans didn't materialize, and Hurston instead ran into persistent funding trouble with the Foundation.

Losing interest in the doctorate, she joined Alan Lomax and NYU English Professor and folklorist Mary Elizabeth Barnicle in a folksong collecting field trip through the Georgia Sea Islands and the Everglades in the summer of 1935, a trip that deepened the bond between Lomax and Hurston. Hurston wrote at the time, "Both of us feel we belong together as workers" (Kaplan 2002:355). Hurston subsequently wrote to Alan Lomax's father John to express her grave concerns about the influence of Professor Barnicle on Alan, accusing the 50-year-old professor of being attracted to the younger Lomax, of using him to advance her career, of trying to persuade him to forsake his doctorate (Philosophy, University of Texas) to remain in New York, and of being the kind of Communist who "make a play of being the friend of the Negro ..." (Kaplan 2002:359).

Zora finally received a Guggenheim in 1936 and left for Jamaica and Haiti. While in Jamaica, Melville Herskovits attempted to convince her to give up work in Jamaica and Haiti and instead concentrate on the Bahamas. After discovering that Katherine Dunham has preceded her to Akompong, Jamaica on a Rosenwald Foundation grant and that Dunham had already left for Haiti—and knowing that Dunham had recently studied with Professor Herskovits—Hurston became deeply suspicious of Herskovits's motivations as well as those of the Rosenwald Foundation, believing both to be attempting to repress her own work to enhance the success of Katherine Dunham. The proximity of their projects to each other's, their overlapping funding sources, the similarity of their subject position as two African American female artists hoping to engage artistically and ethnographically with Haiti, and the fact that they both had worked or had prolonged contact with Melville Herskovits, led them into a heated rivalry. In July of 1937, Zora accused Katherine Dunham of making her ill, presumably through sorcery: "It seems that some of my destinations and some of my accessions have been whispered into the ears that heard [Dunham]. In consequence, just as mysteriously as the information traveled, I HAVE HAD A VIOLENT GASTRIC DISTURBANCE" (Kaplan 2002:403; emphasis by Hurston).

Hurston spent seven of her weeks in Haiti writing her acclaimed novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and then began laying the groundwork for the Haitian component of her comparative study of Jamaica and Haiti, which was eventually called *Tell My Horse* (1938). Hurston was instrumental in convincing both Lomax and the Library of Congress of the need for Lomax's Haitian expedition. Alan Lomax

proposed his Haitian expedition to Harold Spivacke, Chief of the Music Division at the Library of Congress, in 1936, with a letter of recommendation from Hurston in which she briefly outlined the kinds of music that might be recorded. After the proposal was accepted, Hurston wrote to Lomax: "I found your letter this A.M. in the box and it was swell! Am I glad you are coming!" As for Creole, she encouraged him to "bring what French you know along and scuffle around the best way you can, old boy, old boy." After noting that, "The Haitians say that Seabrook is an awful liar," she admonished Lomax not to mention "the general term folk-lore or magic practices in [his] letters of introduction. Seabrook and those who have followed him have disgusted the Haitian government with voodoo hunters," pencilling in that, "If the letters are not specific enough they may think you are another sensation seeker" (letter to Alan Lomax, Nov. 25, 1936, Library of Congress).

Before embarking, Lomax traveled to Stamford, CT, to examine and then purchase an imposing recording device (a "turntable-cutting unit"), manufactured by Lincoln Thompson's Sound Specialties Company. In addition to the turntable itself, the unit contained a disk cutter, pickup (reproducing head), battery and vacuum tubes, and which recorded on 10" and 12" uncoated aluminum disks. Lomax had a new amplifier installed along with a new cutting head better for recording drums. The recordings were to be "the best from the point of view of quality and low surface noise I have ever made..." (letter to Dr. Herbert Putnam, Library of Congress).

### **"The Haitian Expedition"**

Alan Lomax left New York on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1936, at noon on the SS Pastores, a Columbian Line ship bound for Port-au-Prince, Haiti, lugging 155 lbs. of overweight baggage, which included his turntable cutting unit and blank aluminum 10" and 12" disks. After landing in Haiti, Lomax began to work with contacts he met through Zora Neale Hurston and through letters of introduction from the States. He spent a considerable amount of time with Hurston in the first couple of weeks in the country, writing to his father, "Zora has been splendid. She has advised me constantly, introduced me as a friend to all the people I needed to know, has fed me and made me feel at home in her house, and at the same time has let me know in no uncertain terms that she wants to interfere only so far as I want her and no farther..." (Letter to John Lomax, December 21, 1936, Library of Congress). While at Hurston's house in Petion-Ville, Lomax recorded her singing three African American girls' game songs: "Bluebird", "Bama Bama," and "There Stands a Bluebird," which now offer a rare opportunity to hear Zora Neale Hurston singing.

Lomax was quickly introduced to members of Haiti's *boujwazi*, the often-lighter-skinned urban elite who formed the backbone of the governmental and land-owning class. He met Dr. Roulx Léon, Director General of the National Public Health Service and a dedicated music lover. Of Léon, Zora Neale Hurston wrote that he is "definitely one of these thinking men who hold the future of Haiti in their hands" (1938:78). Lomax expressed a deep disdain for members of the lighter-skinned elite, and for most of their music. He noted that "...I seem to go to sleep inside when one of them is near and I no more know what makes their wheels go round than if I were in the presence of some head hunter of the upper Salween" (Lomax fieldnotes December 20, 1936). On hearing the *Musique du Palais*, the leading military band in Haiti attached to the Presidential Palace, Lomax described how the "proper, well-directed band [would] blare and flaunt its dazzling uniforms for almost fifteen minutes, which was almost more than we could stand..." (Lomax fieldnotes December 20, 1936:2).

Dr. Léon was keen to introduce Lomax to Haiti's preeminent pianist and composer, Ludovic Lamothe. Although Lamothe performed *mizik savant* (elite or "cultivated" music), he did so with a clear indigéniste influence, blending Vodou themes and imagery into his Chopinesque miniatures. Lomax wrote,

... [On December 20<sup>th</sup>] we all went to visit [Ludovic] Lamothe, Haiti's foremost musician. His house is old and rotting, with the pleasant smell of decaying boards, a long porch on one side with shaky planks and withered chairs facing on a garden. The usual Haitian lower middle class parlor with the violent flower pattern on the wallpaper. big flowers, bright flowers, comfortable chairs with twisted legs. There was a picture of the great Pole [Chopin] with his head on his hand and Beethoven's ninth symphony on the piano. (Lomax fieldnotes, December 20, 1936)

Lomax recorded two original, instrumental *méringues* in Lamothe's parlour, both of which had Vodou themes and were based on carnival rhythms. Both, in fact, were written for carnival competitions, and Nibo won the award for best carnival *méringue* in 1934, the year the Americans Marines left Haiti. Lomax was disappointed with the audio quality of the recordings, and of course with their classical sensibilities, but they are a rare document of one of Haiti's best-known classical musicians of the first half of the century.

Lomax fretted that he was slow to start his real work. In a letter to Charles Seeger, he confessed that he had "encountered the first real difficulties and [his] first real problems as a collector," including obtaining permission to record, the language and cultural shock and difficulties, and the quantity of the material. During his stay in Haiti, Lomax

expressed his frustration many times in his field notes over problems such as the lack of a ready supply of aluminum disks from Thompson's Sound Specialties Company, late payments from the Library of Congress, and having to fill out detailed expense reports for payments of as little as a few cents. As he wrote to Seeger, "I am just beginning to struggle out from beneath its cloud and do some intelligent work. [This] was the sensual and significant impact of a completely new world where ... several cosmoses [sic] of folk-material whirled about my head until my poor brain whirled again." (letter to Charles Seeger, January 16, 1937).

During his first week in Haiti, while waiting for the President and ministers to return from a trip to the south to obtain a permit to record, Lomax secretly recorded his first Vodou ceremonial dance, which was performed for the *lwa* (deity) Agasu. In fact, even while Lomax was collecting so much music of Vodou ceremonies, including this initial ceremony, Vodou per se was outlawed by a set of laws banning "les pratiques superstitieuses." Passed under President Sténio Vincent in September of 1935, soon after the end of the Occupation, these laws clarified and toughened existing sanctions against the practice of Vodou at the same time that Vodou was being studied by ethnologists, extolled as national heritage, performed as "folklore", and integrated into music, art, and literature.

Yet the new laws also carved out, as Kate Ramsey has noted, a legitimate space for public "dances" that did not include sacrifice. Ramsey argues that, "Through their conversion to 'national folklore,' popular cultures long figured in the West as evidence of Haiti's primitivism could be constructed as official indices of national identity, but only, it seemed, on the condition that they were figured as 'revivals' of a transcended cultural past" (Ramsey 2002:7). During Lomax's stay in Haiti, one could obtain a permit to hold a "dans," i.e. a secular get-together, which might feature Vodou songs and dance, and many Vodou ceremonies were held surreptitiously under this rubric, but playing for the *lwa*, making sacrifices to the *lwa*, and falling under possession were strictly forbidden. Lomax provided his own interpretation of how watertight these anti-superstition laws were in his account of his trip to Les Cayes. Although sacrifice was officially prohibited, Lomax found that the local authorities were taxing animals slaughtered at a *dans*, and the police would seldom concern themselves with an event for which they had received their full allowance of taxes!

Soon after his arrival, Lomax engaged Revolie Polinice as his guide for what he playfully called the "scandalously high wage of \$10 a month" (Lomax fieldnotes, December 20, 1936). Polinice translated, carried equipment and baggage, negotiated with singers and musicians, cooked, cleaned, and assisted in the recording process. According to Lomax,

"Polinice is my servant and interpreter, my brother and friend and, although he does not know it, poor fellow, is acting at present as special assistant to the folk-song archive [sic] of the Library of Congress" (letter to Charles Seeger, Library of Congress, January 16, 1937). Polinice's understanding of Haitian culture and his many contacts were central to the entire endeavor.

In contrast to his feelings about elite music, Lomax instantly fell in love with the rough-hewn genre of music called *méringue* played by small ensembles known as *manouba* or *malinouba* ensembles. Polinice brought Lomax to a *banbòch* or party held by some of his friends and relatives featuring a manouba ensemble with guitar, banjo, tcha-tcha, drum, claves, and manouba box, a large boxlike so-called thumb piano on which the player sits and plucks metal strips suspended over a sound hole. Lomax's recordings and descriptions of this (at the time) relatively recent phenomenon in Haiti, which was descended from Cuban *son agrupaciones* and transculturated from Cuba via returning Haitian cane cutters, are simply the best documents we have of these early groups. Lomax described his first encounter late at night down an alleyway: "I wish I could tell how beautiful this scene was, how melancholy, how restrained and graceful. The music was click, chatter, tinkle, and deep throbbing thump-thump... The whole was gentle and sedate and seductive... Here in the orange light of the bicycle tire, in the shadows of the frizzly cactus fence, the upper crust gently stroked the breasts of love" (Lomax fieldnotes, December 20, 1936).

During the Christmas season, Polinice brought Lomax to the Cul-de-Sac town called Pont Beaudet, a short ride from the capitol, in the midst of a fertile region for the performance of a wide range of traditional genres and ensemble forms. One attraction was the proximity of many of Polinice's relatives, some of whom led or performed in musical ensembles, but another was the presence of a "recognized authority on Haitian folklore, Dr. S.H. Rieser." Rieser<sup>3</sup> was not a doctor, but a former Marine pharmacist who had been hired to direct the hospital for the insane on the outskirts of Pont Beaudet. Forsaking for many years his family in the U.S., Rieser lived with his Haitian *plasaj* (mistress), Cecile Esperance, and took a deep interest in Vodou, becoming a self-styled *ougan* (priest) and a sought-after culture broker and Vodou "expert" to foreign visitors. Rieser (variously spelled Reeser) was, in short, a memorable character and local attraction in his own right.

It was in Pont Beaudet (only six months or so before Lomax arrived) that Katherine Dunham became close friends with Cecile, Madame Dégrasse and with Manbo Téoline Marseille and where she was initiated into Vodou through a *lave-tèt* (head-washing) ceremony. Dunham recorded her friends singing with the Victrola that Herskovits had used

in Mirebalais and which he then loaned to her. Some months after Dunham's departure from Pont Beaudet, Zora Neale Hurston began dropping by the Rieser household, lying in the hammock and listening to Rieser's stories. The account of Rieser by Hurston occupies a chapter of her book and is also the focus of a section of Mary Renda's book in which Renda reinterprets Hurston's interest in both Rieser and in Faustin Wirkus (2001:288-300).

Alan recorded Rieser and Cecile singing Vodou songs and also captured some novelty songs from Rieser. Lomax set about recording various bands run by Revolie's cousin, drummer Saul Polinice, as well as a "cake-breaking ceremony" at the Le Roux Habitation, where the Le Roux Charyoppe Band also originated. A charyoppe ("foot-stomping") is an ensemble most associated with Rara, the Lenten season festivities that involve processional bands often with roots in Vodou societies. And so while hardly moving out of the town of Pont Beaudet, Alan encountered Vodou drummers and singers, Catholic litany, méringue string bands, and Vodou ceremonies.

In a letter to Charles Seeger, Alan described at length his first real experience of a Rara band, this one organized by Revolie's cousin Saul. In the passage below he describes the roles of the various drums in the Rara ensemble.

The drummer was stretching the head taut with the ropes that pull at the crown of soft, light wood that holds down the goat-skin head of the [baka] drum, and Saul, master of the Rara band, was knocking home the crown with deft blows delivered with a great stone on a baton of mahogany. Ta-ta and Bass stood by waiting for Baka to begin. Ta-ta is a tiny drum, not a foot high and scarcely a hand across that hangs about the neck, close to the heart and is beaten with two little sticks. It has two faces. But Bass is like a tambourine, a great tambourine and has only one head; this is sprinkled with powdered beeswax and rubbed with a thumb. Bass growls or roars or groans deeply, have it the way you like. Bon, Baka is taut and begins to bark. The general of the Rara bands holds his little oil lamp high in the air and begins to sing: "Moin c'est pitite papa-yoyo, / Ouvri porte-la, pou' moin entrer" ("I am the child of a big prick, open the door and let me come in").

The men all about, who have been arguing, shouting, cutting a few preliminary capers, join in, then Ta-ta, then Bass, then Baka. The rhythm is a march rhythm, the song is gay and light-hearted and the whole crowd begins to shuffle and revolve its hips. The words of this Rara song as of all I have heard are what we call "dirty." The tunes are all merry. And the dancing is masculine in its emphasis. The singers are men." (Letter to Charles Seeger, January 16, 1936)

Lomax's eagerness to record the entirety of the Seremoni Graze

Gato (cake breaking ceremony) in Pont Beaudet meant that he ran out of blank disks and had to order more from Thompson on credit, and as a result Lomax spent three weeks without being able to record. During this fallow period, Lomax and Polinice made a week-long trip out to the far southwestern city of Les Cayes. Perhaps to compensate for the lack of recording gear, Lomax wrote of this trip-within-his-trip for the journal *Southwest Review*, and described his bus ride to Les Cayes with great metaphorical flourish:

It was like a great, square-cut, tropical fowl, a fantastic bird with an olive green beak and a black toupee, and it was named Fleur d'Innocence.... When Faine had crammed his camion full, the great awkward bird took flight. The sun stretched taught the great palm and banana groves and cane fields. It scorched the stony hills brown and made the little dull-faced plants try to crawl back into their holes. It baked the white road until the blazing track coughed up huge clouds of choking dust, and focused on little towns with such clarity and ruthlessness that you closed your eyes, trembling. It puffed great blasts of the perfume of coffee blossoms into your face, and followed the coffee blossoms with the stink of pigsties. It plunged into the deep shade of the coffee groves and flashed across the hills, smiling wickedly at the goats. Then it hurtled over the last hill and smote the Caribbean with a brassy roar, and the blue sea resounded like ten thousand cymbals. Thereafter, as it fell westward, it grew calmer and was satisfied with making soft waves break into fierce smiles. Castles should have towered among the hills, and the narrow valleys along the sea-edge should have shone with armies. But there were only mud houses and poverty. (1938:126-128)

Lomax's impressionistic description of this bus ride will sound familiar enough to contemporary Haitian readers, but by any measure, the Haiti of 1936-37 looked startlingly different from the Haiti of today. Forests covered what are now near-deserts in many areas of the country, and tall palm trees lined the few paved roads. Haiti's provincial cities (such as Les Cayes) had lost their luster and their power under the American occupation, but still possessed a graceful elegance and a remarkable heritage of French colonial architecture (the so-called "gingerbread" houses).

Authentic for Alan Lomax didn't require that music be somehow "pure," as he was an advocate for many creolized musics of African Americans such as blues and jazz. Rather, authentic music meant music derived from popular and poor social strata and not from the elite. Lomax was fascinated by the physicality of manual labor, reflected in work songs in the various cultures he studies, and in Haiti, this fascination was manifest in a description of the vigorous musical performance by stevedores in Les Cayes. In the following passage, Lomax employs a vivid rhetorical and metaphorical flourish that might discomfort many



contemporary readers:

...two stevedores leap into a corner where one picks up a little iron pipe or vaxine and the other a pair of rocks. The first man blows his pipe and the other cracks his flints together, and presently ten men are capering together on the floor of the warehouse... The men roar at each other like demons, and their backs creak under the awkward sacks. They dance and fling about like monkeys for an hour with never a pause, and suddenly you look up and the great stack of coffee has moved to the other side of the warehouse... When this gang of bullocks has shed its burdens, it gathers at the end of the pier... and the porters dance down the quay toward the warehouse, their flat square feet stamping up the dust, their great throats roaring out one of their lewd songs:

*Koko m pa lave, woy woy (x2) / M anraje*

(My vagina isn't clean, woy, woy, I'm turned on!)

... their long arms outstretched to catch the air in a gorilla clutch, huddled together, shambling, great black laborers shout their defiance of heavy coffee sacks and their love of the sun, shake their splendid loins and shoulders. Slap, slap, the great feet strike the dust." (1938:132-133)

This extraordinary passage reflects many of the contradictions inherent in Alan's work, in part because it juxtaposes his admiration for working people (and his interest in empowerment for peoples of African descent) with what might be viewed today as an essentialist discourse of race, physicality, and sexuality, enlivened by a prose in which we can now locate racial stereotypes. In a few of his descriptions, Lomax provided insight into the complex interactions with participants in cultural events. In the following description, written while in Les Cayes, Lomax discussed dancing at a *dans* and honestly reflects on the unenthusiastic reception by those attending:

These gods of Guinea danced up and saluted each of us after their fashion. A jolting right handshake and another with the left hands joined. Then three wet kisses on the mouth. The last of the gods was a slight yellow woman with cold gray demonic eyes who darted her little pointed tongue over her rotted teeth and rocked back on her heels shaking her belly before each kiss. The gods then invited us to dance and we all accepted. For my part, I danced badly. Everyone snickered, and I soon sat down to watch. It was intense, gay—yes, lovely. (1938:145)

After the Les Cayes trip and before the arrival of Lomax's fiancée, Elizabeth, he and Polinice celebrated the arrival of blank aluminum disks by recording at a furious pace in Pont Beaudet and in nearby Kenskoff and (further away along the northern edge of the southern peninsula) in Léogane, capturing Mardi Gras bands as well as Vodou drumming, a



*konbit* or work brigade, stories and story-songs (*kont*, *kont-chante*), and hundreds more Vodou songs.

## Marriage and the trip north

Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold arrived in Port-au-Prince on February 11, and she and Lomax had planned to marry quickly so as not to have to be chaperoned nor to cause a scandal. However, they were not aware that Haiti required those under 25 years of age to wait at least two weeks before marrying to determine if reasons existed to not sanction the marriage. To circumvent this delay, Lomax appealed straight to the President. Following their marriage on the 13<sup>th</sup>, Alan and Elizabeth Lomax returned for two weeks to Pont Beaudet for a final round of recordings of rara bands, children's songs, and the ubiquitous Vodou songs and rhythms.

But by any account, the Lomax "honeymoon" was not a pleasant one. Near the end of February, they traveled with Polinice to Plaisance<sup>4</sup> in the north central region, where they promptly came down with intestinal malaria *and* ran out of money. When he ran out of money, Lomax wrote the American Consul and asked to borrow \$20, but was turned down and told to buy things on credit. No portion of Lomax's fieldnotes are as full of pathos as the comments he penned while in the Plaisance. He wrote:

The intestinal malaria ... decided that Plaisance was the proper place to put me completely at its mercy ... In Haiti it is not a good policy to grow weak and helpless and to be broke. My formerly effective arguments could bring no singers before the microphone. I had just enough money to buy a little rum for the crowds that gathered each night at the house to listen to records being made, but not enough to make them respectful or considerate. Invited into my house, they took possession of it. They camped on all the chairs and refused to be quiet. They laughed and talked while the records were being made and threats or wheedling reasons could [not] stop their mouths [or] clear the room. Occasionally the gendarmes would descend from the bouque and pretend to clear the house, but it was only to occupy the chairs themselves and add more undiscipline to the already boisterous audience. And Revolie grew disaffected, too. Neither he nor they could understand Elizabeth or myself ... [or] could see much to sympathize over in the contemplation of a spectral and irritable pair of blancs who spoke laughable Creole and tried to give thunderous orders in voices that now bore no trace of authority. Plaisance was a miserable town and the recordings we made there are sickly. (Lomax fieldnotes, n.d. section titled "Pantheon of Vaudou [Plaisance]")

In fact, this description was the last substantive personal entry in

Lomax's log and the last he typed. Following this section, which covers late February, all notes are in Lomax's hand and they describe rituals and provide the context for recording, but give little clue about daily life, his impressions, or his feelings. To put it crudely, Alan Lomax seems to have burned out, an impression substantiated by other communications to family members and friends.

During their recovery in Plaisance, the Lomaxes awaited the arrival of a movie camera, which, once it arrived, provided them with a new project on which to focus. Stopping in Port-au-Prince to accept delivery, they continued west from the capitol to the town of Carrefour Deux Forts, just west of Léogane. Elizabeth served as camera operator for the six movies they shot, some in color and some in black-and-white: a simulated rara parade, a singer named Francelia that Lomax recorded frequently, a Seremoni Zandò with a *manje lwa* (feast for the deities), a *contredanse* with *matinik* drumming, and a staged Vodou dance with drums outside a *peristil* (including a section in slow motion, anticipating Maya Deren's frequent use of slow-motion techniques to capture the subtle and sensational aspects of Vodou performance in the late 1940s).

With some of their strength returning, Alan and Elizabeth Lomax returned to a more vigorous recording schedule, and they found a staggering level of diversity in musical type to record. They recorded a group of elderly men who sang ancient French *romances* with late Medieval themes and archaic French vocabulary. They discovered an ensemble that featured the Haitian fiddle. Most importantly, they were healthy enough to encounter the rara bands on the street just in time for their peak perambulations in the week before Easter. And before they packed up and returned to the U.S., they convinced a number of sacred societies (*sosyete*) to be recorded, and what resulted was a rare set of recordings of djouba, matinik, and music of the Sosyete Boumba and others.

## Conclusion

During his four months in Haiti, Alan Lomax, along with Elizabeth Lomax and Revolie Polinice, recorded more than 1,500 audio recordings, equivalent to some 50 hours of recorded sound, and 350 feet of 8-mm motion picture film, all of which were deposited in the Library of Congress. Given the near constant parade of legal, interpersonal, technical, financial, transportation, and health problems with which the Lomaxes had to deal, this constitutes an extraordinary feat by any measure.

The Lomax "expedition" was shaped by the ideological ferment taking part in Haiti. Lomax's approach to black music had been deeply conditioned by his experiences of the African American struggle for dignity, equality and human rights, and this struggle, waged within the

U.S., likewise deeply inspired the *indigéniste* movement in Haiti. The Lomax audio recordings illustrate a pivotal moment in Haitian cultural history as Haiti transitioned back to self-rule after the American occupation, when so much seminal ethnography on Haiti was taking place, and in which attitudes about Haitian traditional culture held by the urban middle class and elite were rapidly evolving. The presence of foreign ethnographers certainly gave comfort and support to those who would remake Haiti in the image of folklore and peasant culture, although the ethnographers would, as Lomax does, go further to embrace Vodou as an authentic religion.

Some of the genres of music recorded by Lomax, such as *rara* processions or Vodou ceremonial drumming of the Rada (Ewe-Fon) tradition are still widely practiced in Haiti, and so his 1936-37 recordings serve as a baseline for understanding how they have changed in the intervening years. Others, such as late Medieval French romances have largely disappeared, rendering Alan Lomax's recordings especially significant as traces of Haiti's diverse and historic cultural resources. In listening to (and watching) the entirety of the corpus of the Lomax recordings in Haiti, I find myself hoping that others will have the experience of a powerful encounter with these voices.

In the final analysis, I find myself grateful to Alan Lomax for not only the voices of ancestors that he has preserved and for bequeathing a prolific legacy of recordings and fieldnotes, but for the puzzles, the paradoxes, the contrasts and the contradictions, and even the foul moods and the failings. These have the power to engage us over sixty years later and to remind us of the human element that shapes the ways in which we know the world through ethnography. Along with the discovery of so much richly rewarding music, we experience a re-discovery of a character of depth and complexity and of impressive commitment.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I cite many of the documents included by Alan Lomax in the deposition made to the Library of Congress that accompanies his field recordings. A copy of this collection also resides with the Association for Cultural Equity in New York.
- <sup>2</sup> My first article on Haitian music documented the ideological role of the *indigénisme*, *noirisme*, and the folkloric movement on the popular music of Haiti, focusing on the 'construction' of Africanisms

in Haiti, their relationship to contested notions of race, class, and authenticity, and the political importance of “resistant traditionalism” (Averill 1989; some of this was reprised in Averill 1997). The importance of these movements in Haitian intellectual, cultural and political life have been described in greater detail in Kate Ramsey’s superb rendering of the folkloric movement (2002) and in Michael Largey’s impressive work on the politics of musical ethnography in *Vodou Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism* (2006).

- <sup>3</sup> Doc Rieser’s name can also be found spelled as Reeser (Dunham) and Reser (Hurstons). I have adopted the most likely original spelling, but given that his life is surrounded by mythologies, many of them self-spun, it is not entirely clear which spelling is correct.
- <sup>4</sup> Herskovits had encouraged Lomax to travel to Plaisance where he would have the advantage of working with George E. Simpson, who was then completing a post-doctoral fellowship with Herskovits at Northwestern.

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