

The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress

presents

the Benjamin Botkin Folklife Lecture Series

**AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT**

# **NOT THE SAME OLD (FOLK) SONG AND DANCE:**

**FIELD RECORDINGS IN THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES OF THE UNITED STATES**

**RE BY MATTHEW BARTON**



**BARTON WILL PROVIDE AN OVERVIEW OF  
THE ARCHIVE OF FOLK CULTURE'S  
FIELDWORK IN NON-ENGLISH-LANGUAGE  
EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES, ILLUSTRATING  
HIS TALK WITH EXAMPLES FROM THESE  
REMARKABLE COLLECTIONS.**

**FREE AND OPEN  
TO THE PUBLIC**

**Thursday**

**July 27, 2006**

**12 NOON - 1:00 PM**

**Pickford Theater, LM 30 I**

**3rd Floor of the Madison Building**

**Library of Congress**

**101 Independence Ave., SE**

**Washington, DC**



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# NOT THE SAME OLD (FOLK) SONG AND DANCE: FIELD RECORDINGS IN THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES OF THE UNITED STATES

In the 1930s, Library of Congress fieldworkers recorded the folk music of non-English-speaking communities throughout the United States. They captured songs and styles that had died out in the lands of their birth, as well as emerging fusions of the ancient and modern. From the songs of a sacred Spanish mystery play performed in Texas to wild Polish wedding music played in Wisconsin, they preserved rare and beautiful music as much a part of American heritage as any from English-speaking communities.

The Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk Song (AAFS) was founded by Robert Winslow Gordon in 1928. Then, as now, scholars and pundits argued over the definition of a "folksong," and people everywhere argued about how to define an "American." In the early days of the AAFS, Gordon concentrated on English-language traditions with deep roots in American soil, but there were other Americans whose roots reached back to the earliest days of exploration, settlement and colonization, and their music began to reach the Library of Congress in the 1930s.

From their arrival at the Library in 1933, John and Alan Lomax were committed to an inclusive view of American folk music, one that they expanded considerably over the years. In addition to Huddie Ledbetter, AKA "Leadbelly" and other English language artists, the Lomaxes recorded French and Spanish music extensively in Louisiana and Texas on their early field trips. In the largely isolated Cajun and Creole communities of Louisiana they gathered traditional songs from France and also documented the roots of modern Cajun and Zydeco music when they were just beginning to emerge from the older styles. In Texas, they made numerous Spanish field recordings often in and around San Antonio, where they documented sacred music traditions as well as recent topical songs. One of the most memorable singers in any language encountered by the Lomaxes on these trips was "a Mexican share-cropper who carried in his head the text, tunes, and stage directions for a Miracle play requiring four hours and twenty actors to perform."

In 1937, Alan Lomax was appointed assistant in charge of the Archive of Folk Song. Years later he recalled a pivotal meeting with his new boss, Music Division head Harold Spivacke: "He pulled me back away from my absolute fascination with the South. He said, 'Alan you've got to get to the rest of the country.'" In April 1938, Lomax and his wife Elizabeth made a short trip to the Midwest, where they collected the songs of Vincennes, Indiana's "last" French-speaking citizen and also documented Amish hymn leaders in Goshen, Indiana.

In August 1938, Lomax traveled to Michigan for what would prove to be the most ethnically and linguistically varied field trip of his career. He began with a few contacts provided

by Sidney Robertson Cowell, who had recorded in the Midwest the previous year, and followed every lead as far as he could. At the end of ten weeks of recording in Lower Michigan, the Upper Peninsula and Beaver Island, he had filled over two hundred recording blanks with Irish, Serbian, Romanian, Polish, French-Canadian, Finnish, Hungarian, Italian, Norwegian and German music. In some cases, the music was being played by recent immigrants and was basically unassimilated. In other cases, the process of assimilation was just beginning, and in others remarkable hybrids of different folk and commercial musics were starting to emerge. One of Lomax's most striking finds was a Serbian factory worker who played traditional dances on a duduk (a double-reed pipe of Armenian origin) he had fashioned from a discarded steel rod.

Spivacke's request also led to important multi-ethnic fieldwork by Sidney Robertson Cowell, Alton Morris, Stetson Kennedy, Juan Rael, Helene Stratman-Thomas and others, which lasted until World War II curtailed most field recording activity. Much of the Cowell, Morris, Kennedy and Rael fieldwork in Florida, California, New Mexico and Colorado can be sampled online at [www.loc.gov/folklife](http://www.loc.gov/folklife). Helene Stratman Thomas's Wisconsin work covers three field trips documenting the European, Anglo, African and Native American tradition of Wisconsin, and can be heard in the Folklife reading room.

Matthew Barton

In this lecture, Matthew Barton will provide an overview of the Archive of Folk Culture's fieldwork in non-English-language European communities, illustrating his talk with examples from these remarkable collections.

Matthew Barton worked as an assistant to Alan Lomax in the 1980s, and later as production coordinator of the Alan Lomax Collection album series on Rounder Records. More recently, he has worked with original Library of Congress field recordings for the American Folklife Center. He currently works in the Library's MBRS Sound Lab. He contributed essays to Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997 (NY: Routledge, 2003).

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Check out our web site [www.loc.gov/folklife](http://www.loc.gov/folklife)

