CATHERINE A. STEWART

Long Past Slavery
Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project

The University of North Carolina Press  Chapel Hill
CHAPTER FOUR

Adventures of a Ballad Hunter

John Lomax and the Pursuit of Black Folk Culture

Well the world is round and the usa is wrighting to be found[.] there’s a lot of Jimcrow in the movie pitchers shows, why it the rich man got the best go. . . .

There was a man sent from the Holliday magazine to take my picture[,] well he said he was Huties friend, well so much for nothing. They will sell the magazine and get money and i get nothing. Well that is the world makes it go round and round.

—Huddie Ledbetter, New York City, May 22, 1947

In 1937, Life magazine published a brief piece on the African American folk singer Huddie Ledbetter entitled “Lead Belly: Bad Nigger Makes Good Minstrel.” The article included a photo of Ledbetter accompanying himself on his twelve-string Stella guitar, dressed in overalls and a neckerchief, with his bare feet resting on some fertilizer sacks. This image, which hearkened back to the stereotype of the happy plantation slave, was juxtaposed with a close-up of Ledbetter’s hands on the guitar strings with the underlying caption: “These hands once killed a man.” This double image of Leadbelly—the docile black minstrel superimposed over the bloodthirsty black savage—is representative of a dominant strain in public discourse on the “Negro problem” that suggested African Americans could never be fully assimilated into the “white mainstream” of American society.

The sensationalistic image of Leadbelly as a songster who was also a “double-murderer” was the creation of the folklorist John Lomax, who discovered the talented musician serving time in a southern penitentiary and transformed the unknown ex-convict into a celebrity folksinger. Despite Ledbetter’s later objections, this image would be circulated as an integral part of his commercial persona for the rest of his career. Lomax’s inventive marketing strategies presented Ledbetter as a dangerous ex-convict and as a bandanna-wearing happy southern “darky” by alternately dressing him up in his former prison uniform and in the outfit he wore in the Life photo. Time magazine, in a 1935 article entitled “Murderous Minstrel,” also emphasized the singer’s savage nature and Lomax’s role in controlling the “wild-eyed” “black buck,” whose “knife bulged in his pocket.” Lomax, the article explained, “kept
his hell-raising minstrel locked up in a coat room" until it was time for the performance.4

Lomax is still lauded today for the folk music recordings, collected by him and his son Alan, that make up the foundation of the priceless collection held by the Library of Congress. But it is important to consider the dynamics involved in his discovery and promotion of Ledbetter, as well as his approach to other black folk musicians, for they are a vital part of the story of Lomax's impact on the Federal Writers' Project's (FWP) Ex-Slave Project. While Ledbetter's contribution to and complicity with Lomax's construction of the Leadbelly mythology should not be overlooked, the success of the Leadbelly phenomenon relied in large part on Lomax's promotion of himself as Ledbetter's white benefactor and "Big Boss." In media interviews as well as his own writings, Lomax depicted Ledbetter as a black man of uncontrolled primitive impulses whose talent was harnessed only through his pledged loyalty to Lomax and his son Alan, whom Leadbelly referred to as "Big Boss" and "Little Boss." In a *New York Herald Tribune* interview, "Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here to Do a Few Tunes between Homicides," Lomax recounted the story, which quickly became legend, of how they became partners:

I told him that as a matter of fact I did need a driver for my car and might be able to use him, but I added, "If some day you decide on some lonely road that you want my money and my car, don't use your knife on me. Just tell me and I'll give them to you. I have a wife and children back home and they'd miss me." Well, at that tears came to his eyes and he said, "Don' talk that way, Boss. Don' talk that way to me. I came here to be your man. You needn' ever tie your shoes again if you'll let me tie them. Boss if you ever get in trouble and some man tries to shoot you I'll jump in front of you and take the bullet before I let you get hurt."5

Lomax's creation of Ledbetter's image as a "natural" primitive whose homicidal (and also libidinous) instincts were barely controlled by his white keepers enabled him to present an increasingly savvy and commercial performer in the guise of an artless folksinger.6 For Ledbetter, in his training and influences, was about as far as one could get from the untutored and isolated folk musicians Lomax built a career out of finding and recording. As his own biographers note, Ledbetter had apprenticed as a twelve-string guitar player under the famous Blind Lemon Jefferson and was an avid consumer of commercial blues records, songs that "became an important part of his repertoire."7
The construction of Leadbelly’s folk persona, whose raw and natural talent was inseparable from his racial identity, was essential for legitimizing Lomax’s own role as the interlocutor for black folk culture. Far from acting as a behind-the-scenes manager for Leadbelly’s performances, Lomax himself took central stage interpreting Ledbetter’s speech as well as the meaning of his songs. Lomax capitalized on the fact that much of southern black culture was completely foreign to northern white urban audiences, even as he shaped Ledbetter’s image to conform to certain audience expectations regarding black “racial” identity. He positioned himself as better equipped to interpret black folk culture than African Americans themselves. And, critically, Lomax also copyrighted the songs he “found,” creating a significant financial stake in African American folk culture.

A master of self-invention and presenting himself to the public, Lomax would do more in this era to popularize the role of the folklorist than any other member of that profession. Although Lomax would collect folk music from many ethnic cultures, it was primarily in his descriptions of black folk culture and African American informants that he would construct his own public persona as a great white hunter, modeled on the conventions of the white protagonists of colonial travel writings. Lomax would come to epitomize the image of the folk collector as a hero-adventurer, whose success in tracking down and recording folk cultures was due in large part to his demonstrations of machismo in the field. Eager to dispel notions of folklorists as drier-than-dust, bookish academics, Lomax would adopt many of the tropes of the travel narrative genre in rendering his own career as a self-described “ballad hunter.” Journeying into the American equivalent of the dark continent, into the furthermore, isolated regions of the South, penetrating deeply into black communities, risking life and limb, and overcoming tremendous obstacles, Lomax “captured” rare and endangered species of folk culture to preserve them but also market them to white audiences.

In doing so, he would help to legitimize the role of the white folklorist in the collection of black folk culture, at the expense of African American authority. His obsession with this role, along with his theories regarding what constituted “authentic” black folk culture, shaped his direction of the Federal Writers’ Ex-Slave Project, and significantly affected how the ex-slaves and their narratives would be represented. Lomax’s construction of “authentic” African American folk culture as the vestige of a primitive African past that was in danger of disappearing was directly at odds with long-standing African American vernacular traditions and did not support the project of African American assimilation.
Notes from the Field

The numerous field notes Lomax kept during his recording trips reveal much about his relationship with African American informants and his attitude toward black folk culture; many of these anecdotes appeared with only slight alteration in Lomax’s memoir, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, published in 1947, and were also incorporated into a serialized radio program as part of the Library of Congress’s wartime Radio Research Project.8 Traveling through the south with a recording machine and his second wife, Ruby Terrill Lomax, in the winter of 1937, the spring of 1939, and the fall of 1940 (dates that partly overlapped with his appointment as the FWP’s national advisor on folklore and folkways), Lomax collected African American folk songs and spirituals for the Library of Congress’s Archive of American Folk Song.9 He also copyrighted many of these songs so that, on publication, he received royalties. Their field notes were rough drafts of material Lomax was clearly hoping to use in his autobiography; written in an engaging narrative style, they included descriptions of the physical appearance and mannerisms of black Americans with whom they interacted. Ruby also wrote letters to her family during the trip that reiterated the most interesting or amusing anecdotes. The correspondence and field notes, along with the autobiography, reveal Lomax’s approach to folk collection as an enterprise involving the techniques of stealth, coercion, and domination.

Referring to his peripatetic travel itinerary in a letter to FWP associate director George Cronyn, Lomax explained, “Song Catchers necessarily are uncertain in their movements.”10 Naturalist metaphors were often invoked by folklorists to suggest the collection of raw material in its pristine state, found in its natural environment. It is likely that his mentor, the folklorist Dorothy Scarborough, influenced his approach, pioneering the use of early recording technology in the field to capture live folk renditions.11 She used the title “song catcher” for her book of folklore from Appalachia.12 In her introduction to *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs*, Scarborough spoke of the difficulties faced by folklorists in the field.13 Significantly, she referred to the folk songs in zoomorphic terms, which heightened the representation of collecting as an act of entrapment: “Folk-songs are shy, elusive things. If you wish to capture them, you have to steal up behind them, unbeknownst, and sprinkle salt on their tails. Even so, as often as not, they fly off saucily from under your nose... Folk-songs have to be wooed and coaxed and wheedled with all manner of blandishments and flatteries.”14 A proud Texan, Lomax expanded the metaphor from birds to cattle in references to the collection of
ex-slave narratives. To Texas’s state director, J. Frank Davis, Lomax included this encouraging remark: “I hope you will be able to corral a large number.” Such imagery personified the material as separate and in some ways distinct from informants themselves; folklorists spoke primarily about the song or the tale, instead of the singer or the storyteller. As often as not, when they did talk about those who were giving them the material, it was to describe their informants as impediments to be overcome, raising the question of ownership and authorship of black folk culture.

In Lomax’s interactions with black informants, their reluctance and uncooperative attitude was a recurring theme. These problematic encounters, which the Lomaxes described as the result of African Americans’ defiance, drunkenness, or unreliable nature, provide the dramatic tension for their tales from the field, while underscoring Lomax’s ultimate success in capturing valuable material. One of these anecdotes centered on Mike Stephens, whom the Lomaxes had employed in Dallas for help around the house and yard. They also recorded him singing various folk songs. Mike had proved very obliging; he not only recalled the songs his father had sung, but he found other singers for the Lomaxes to record and provided contacts for places they planned to visit. For a trip through Texas and Louisiana, Stephens gave them his brother’s address and promised to send ahead word of their project to record local singers. When the Lomaxes arrived, however, they were greeted with wariness and evasion by Mike’s sister-in-law, who feared her husband was in trouble with the law. After a circular game of questioning, Mike’s brother was finally produced, but for every question about folk songs the reply “was ‘No Sir,’ with or without amplification.”

Stymied, the Lomaxes departed for the next town: “We were amused but also, I suppose, piqued that we found our name unknown to Mike’s family.” A week later the Lomaxes received a copy of a letter Mike’s sister-in-law had written expressing deep concern that Mike was in trouble because of all the questions the Lomaxes had fired at them: “Listen dear what have Mike did in Dallas the man what he is working for. . . . He was at my home yestday he was asking me lots of questions about Mike what is the matter out there plese rite back at once and tell us something . . . please tell me what is the matter. . . . Please rite back at once and tell me something I will look for a letter at once don’t delay.” This letter is a poignant reminder of the social context that was fraught with fear for many African Americans in the South, into which the Lomaxes were somewhat cavalierly trespassing. It also demonstrates some of the obstacles white folklorists like the Lomaxes regularly encountered.
The racial barrier for white collectors who sought to document and interpret black folk culture was frequently discussed by folklorists such as Dorothy Scarborough, Lomax's mentor, and Lydia Parrish, who were fond of recounting the difficulties they had encountered but usually in ways that highlighted their own skills at getting "inside" African American communities. Yet their own writings reveal, at times, their ignorance of black oral traditions and their informants' strategies for disingenuous compliance with questioners' demands. Scarborough recalled a conversation she had during her visit to a black church, where she had invited the congregation to provide her with some folk songs. Her hosts "expressed the hope that [she] might stay in the South long enough to get to know the colored folk, and maybe to understand them and love them a little." But Scarborough quickly denied that there was any need for further acquaintance in that regard, explaining that she was "a Southerner born and bred, and . . . had been loving the southern Negroes ever since I could remember anything." The black preacher's diplomatic response to Scarborough's queries was given in the form of a tale and, in keeping with the signifying tradition, masked the fear of interracial contact under a veil of southern hospitality. Scarborough recorded his remarks, although she failed to fully grasp them:

Lady, we feel so kind toward you. I feel about you like a colored man I once heard of. He and his pardner were working on top of a high, tall building, when he got too close to the edge and he fell off. His pardner called out to him, "Stop, Jim, you're falling." But he sang out, "I can't stop. I've done fell." His pardner leaned over the edge an' call out to him an' say, "You, Jim! You're gwine to fall on a white lady!" An' Jim stopped and come right on back up. That's the way we feel toward you.

The preacher was clearly making the point, in a humorous manner, that an African American man would find a way to transcend the laws of physics rather than risk physical contact with a white woman (almost guaranteed to lead to violent reprisal in the South), to suggest that his congregation might be reluctant to speak with Scarborough. But she missed the full import of the tale, describing the preacher's remarks as "the most chivalrous compliment that anyone ever paid me."

Lomax would also mistake a black preacher's condemnation for praise. In an anecdote about a visit to a black church in Alabama, Lomax included the reverend's introduction of the visitors to the congregation: "We are glad to have with us today these friends of the superior race with their instruments in their hands. We owe them much. They have learned us everything we
know—everything. They taught us how to steal; and they taught us how to lie and cuss. Yes sir, but thank God, they taught us the way back to Jesus! When I see them sitting here I feel happy.”24 By these means, the reverend slyly managed to belittle Lomax and his wife. Such failures by white folklorists to comprehend their informants’ full meaning, and the evasiveness of African Americans in the presence of white questioners, were used by black scholars as an argument for the necessity of black collectors. White folklorists remained unable to see through black subterfuge; as Harold Preece observed, “Negro songs often satirize the white man without the latter’s being aware of any mockery.”25 Yet white southerners engaged in collecting black folk culture, like Scarborough, believed that their long acquaintance with “Negroes” meant they were well positioned to understand as well as gather it. Southern paternalism led white collectors to comfortably assume they were in charge of these exchanges.

In keeping with this tradition, the Lomaxes also regarded many of their informants as hopelessly childish. Bemoaning Leadbelly’s lack of business sense, he commented, “If I understood the nature of a Negro, I could perhaps do something with him to the end that I could sell his product. But he is too much of a child to wait.”26 It is evident that Lomax began to view his interactions with black folk informants, in addition to the material he was collecting, as a means of interpreting black Americans’ racial character, providing sociological insights into their mentality and behaviorisms. Such experiences and interpretive framework shaped the FWP’s ex-slave narratives under Lomax’s direction. Anecdotal information, based on the firsthand observation of the informants’ appearance, dress, speech, and behavior, became central to framing the folk material in order to imbue it with its proper significance. Lomax instructed state directors and FWP interviewers to include visual descriptions of ex-slave informants in their ex-slave narratives, including physique, dress, and mannerisms. This would lead a number of field workers to place equal or greater emphasis on the character of the ex-slave (as she or he appeared in the 1930s), sometimes at the expense of the narrative’s information about the institution of slavery. In this way, field workers’ portrayals of black informants worked to authenticate the folk material they provided.

The Lomaxes had an eye and an ear for anything that might serve as colorful copy. Many of their field notes contain representations of African Americans that reinforce minstrel-like stereotypes about black culture and identity. They emphasized the comical nature of their black informants, their tendency toward drunkenness and dishonesty, their malapropisms, their sexuality and superstitions. In a letter to her family, Ruby Lomax reported that one of their
informants, Shack, had been firmly instructed by John that "he musn't have liquor on his breath when he came to our room to record. 'Shack' came in reeking with perfume!"27 One frequently recounted anecdote that appeared in the field notes and in letters to family told of an ex-slave informant, 117 years old, whose remedy "for restoring lost manhood" turned out to be half whiskey: "Two doses a week keeps me potent," he claimed. The Lomaxes also interpreted a tendency to exaggerate as a proclivity for dissembling. From an interview with "Uncle Bob" Ledbetter, Ruby recalled his loose relationship with the truth: "I aint gonna lie to you 'bout dat. I says I don't ever lie 'cep'n when I se by myself or wid somebody."28

Incidents like this that were first recorded in the field notes and then recounted in Ruby's letters to family members often included more dialect. Her insertions of a phonetically rendered "Negro dialect" are indicative of one of the central ways the Lomaxes would create a textual distinction in their writings between themselves and their informants and reflect the same rules for representing black folk speech that Lomax was circulating in the Ex-Slave Project. For example, Uncle Bob Ledbetter was represented by the Lomaxes as a fine, old, dignified "Negro" who expressed proper sentiments of gratitude to the Lomaxes for taking him to Oil City, Louisiana, so he could record songs with his grandson Noah. As Ruby notated it in her field notes: "One of the first things [Uncle Bob] said when he returned home was: 'They sure showed me a good time; that was the first time I ever ate at a white people's hotel in my life.' "29 But as Ruby described the incident to her family: "When we took him home he told his granddaughter ... 'I sho' has been treated like a king. This is de fust time I ever et in a white folks' hotel!"30

This distinction through speech, between white interlocutors like the Lomaxes and their black informants, also appears in Lomax's depictions of the latter's inability to fully master the English language. Much of the humor in the anecdotes from the field notes derives from the Lomaxes' application of the black minstrel tradition, where "pathetically comic brutes ... speak nonsense syllables."31 This reinforced Lomax's case for the vital role of white folklorists in salvaging and interpreting black folk culture as black folk were not capable of speaking for themselves. Telling of his adventures on the road with the former convict Iron Head (James Baker), who had been paroled into Lomax's custody, he recounted how Iron Head, who was "proud of his ability to read, shouted out the words on billboards" as they drove past: "'Ambassado' Hotel, Grill in Connection.' The word 'Ambassador' floored him. After I prompted, he repeated, 'Ambassador Hotel, Girls in Connection!' Then: 'Dey furnishes girls in dat hotel. Is dat whar we's gwine to stop tonight, Boss?'"32
In this instance of black misspeak and misunderstanding, Lomax also managed to humorously highlight his informant’s lascivious nature.

The need for white interpreters of black speech, culture, and history was also underscored by the Lomaxes’ references to black informants’ tendency to get it “wrong.” Lomax believed this was even true when it came to informants interpreting their own material. After listening to informant “Uncle Rich,” Lomax commented, “At first hearing, Uncle Rich’s spirituals sound like jargon. He probably does not know himself what the words all mean.”
There was a long-standing belief among whites that blacks’ intellectual inferiority caused them to frequently misunderstand English words and the teachings of the Bible, resulting in amusing misinterpretations. Ruby emphasized the critical role her husband played as an interlocutor for the folk, noting that one of their black informants, Alice Richardson, known as “Judge,” could perform spirituals but did not understand what they meant: “For two hours Judge sang spirituals and prayed and talked and ‘moaned’... One of her songs is ‘Roll, Jordan, Roll.’ John Avery asked her what that meant. She hesitated and finally replied: ‘Well -ll, ef I has to tell you ’zactly today what dat means, I—o’ course dat Jurdan, dat means de River Jurdan, yassir, but now dat “roll,” dat’s what got me stopped. Now I wuz baptized in de River Jurdan, but I didn’t see no roll den.’ She was stumped.” Here, the literal turn of Alice Richardson’s mind is made fun of and the point is made: African Americans often do not understand the meaning and significance of their own folk culture; therefore, white collectors must provide correct interpretations of black folk culture.

In a story about his attempts to get Vera, a female black informant, to sing some “sinful” songs, Lomax recounted how he was finally successful in getting her to sing one into the microphone. It began: “When I wo’ my apron low, Couldn’t keep you from my do’, Fare-you-well, Oh honey, fare-you-well.” Lomax claimed his informant was unaware of the song’s sexual innuendo: “On inquiry I found that Vera Hall had never understood their real significance. She had been carried away by the lyrical beauty of the lines and by the mournful sweetness of the music.” It seems much more likely that Vera was aware of the song’s real meaning; Lomax had noted earlier that she could be persuaded to sing “sinful” songs only when she was not in the company of her male cousin, and he was not present when she sang this one, which would indicate her understanding of the song’s text.

Lomax’s self-professed interest in “sinful songs” emanated from his definition of what constituted authentic African American music. Because Negro spirituals “abound in idioms and phrases drawn directly from the Bible and from the older white spirituals,” they were comparatively recent expressions of the black experience. In contrast, the newer “sinful songs” took as their subject the secular experiences of black life, “situations as old as the Negro race.” Moreover, the content of such songs revealed much about African American attitudes and beliefs: “subjects vital to the Negro’s life, every day of the week—his hates, his loves, his earthly trials and privations... his physical well-being, his elementary reactions.”
However, these types of songs, Lomax noted, had become "taboo, emphatically taboo, to all Negro ministers, all Negro teachers, and to practically all Negroes of any educational attainments whatever." Lomax attributed such restraints to the desire of middle-class blacks to disassociate themselves from their primitive past: these songs, he argued, "definitely connect them with their former barbaric life." But what Lomax refused to acknowledge was that the taboo imposed by educated blacks on "sinful songs" was, in part, a taboo against performing them for white outsiders who might use them as an intellectual weapon against the black community. This taboo was partly an attempt by members of the black bourgeoisie to retain some control over how black culture would be represented and interpreted by white outsiders like Lomax.

Lomax's anecdotes often highlighted the low regard in which black intellectuals and scholars held folk culture in need of preservation and collection. "We have grown beyond such crude songs," said an educated Alabama Negro to me when I asked for help in collecting Negro folk songs." In one particularly telling instance, Lomax asked an African American first-grade teacher if any of the children knew any traditional ring games: "[The teacher] told me that her children knew no ring games except those she was teaching them from a text book. 'Let me ask them,' I insisted. Every little hand went up eagerly when I asked for the songs they sang when they skipped on the playground out of hearing. We recorded five of them." Lomax noted the teacher's lack of enthusiasm: she "languidly expressed surprise at what we discovered among her pupils, though I fear she wasn't really very much interested. Like so many of her race she was not proud of their own creations in the field of folk song." Without white folk enthusiasts like him to collect and record, Lomax believed that black folk culture would eventually disappear.

In fact, while his view of black informants was paternalistic but warm, Lomax saw educated African Americans as a menace to their people. In a successful proposal he wrote to receive funding for his expeditions from the Carnegie Corporation, Lomax clearly identified the major threats to the survival of African American folk culture. Significantly, all of them emanated from within the black population itself. Black educational and religious leaders, Lomax charged, were "making [the Negro] ashamed or self-conscious of his own art." Meanwhile, the more "prosperous members of the community, bolstered by the church and the schools," were "sneering at the naiveté of the folk songs and unconsciously throwing the weight of their influence in the balance against anything not patterned after white bourgeois culture."
He was not alone in this view. Other scholars also accused members of the black bourgeoisie of failing to value and preserve genuine African American folk culture in their rush to assimilate into American society. Professor of English and collector of black folk songs Newman White maintained that “most of the literate and semi-literate members of the Negro race were desirous of forgetting [the spiritual].” There was some truth to these concerns; the emphasis on socioeconomic mobility and the desire to cast off the ignominious legacies of slavery made many members of the emerging black bourgeoisie intent on eradicating folk beliefs and traditions irrevocably associated with the history of oppression and illiteracy. The paradox is profound. Collectors, such as Lomax, were instrumental in preserving black folk culture for the historical record, yet many of them viewed blacks as racially inferior and treated their informants poorly. They spent much of their lives collecting this material and often wrote of the profound and mystical beauty of black folk culture, even as they failed to understand it and fully value the intricate complexities and sophistication of black cultural expressiveness.

Folklorist Lydia Parrish, in her introduction to her collection *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (1942), would draw attention to the “real menace in the scornful attitude of those Negro school-teachers who do their utmost to discredit and uproot every trace of it. Instead of being inordinately proud of their race’s contribution to the music of the world, as they have every right to be, too many of them treat it like a family skeleton.” Parrish charged that these teachers tried to replace African American musical traditions with English game songs. But she noted that certain African American scholars were also upset about this process: “Carter Woodson, the Negro historian, frankly said that . . . his people are becoming a race of imitators; that not until they study their African background, react to it, and interpret it, can they hope to come into their own.”

Other black intellectuals, such as the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, Zora Neale Hurston, and poet Langston Hughes, would also give voice to this perspective, although their protestations were only rarely recognized by Lomax; he graciously excepted from his critique “great Negro artists [like] . . . Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, and Paul Robeson,” along with “many other intelligent Negroes who are beginning to appreciate the richness of their own racial heritage.”

But educated African Americans remained a frequent target; Lomax often made critical references to their ignorance when it came to understanding the value of black folk culture and railed against the willful blindness of the black intelligentsia. “Advanced Negroes,” he charged, would only permit
Representations of black identity that were in keeping with their own ideological vision. Such attempts at revisionist history, he told Alan in an ironic twist that ignored his own creative portrayals of black identity, would never succeed.48 This attitude would also set him at variance with his FWP colleague, Sterling Brown, national editor of Negro Affairs. Lomax was incensed when, in 1937, Brown claimed publicly that the death of "Empress of the Blues" Bessie Smith could be laid at the door of southern white racism, which had caused a white hospital in Mississippi to refuse the critically injured singer admittance. Lomax went to some lengths to invalidate this theory.49 But the incident only reminded him that "Brown was an idealist whose notions of blacks focused not on what they were but what Brown wanted them to be."50 Lomax would continue to warn his son Alan against the influence of educated African Americans and those affiliated with Fisk University, Tuskegee, and "other Negro colleges [that] politely refused to allow me to talk to their students."51

Defining Authentic Folk Culture

Lomax saw his work as principally an effort to salvage cultural elements vanishing as a result of the forces of modernization, in the form of mass media such as radio, phonograph recordings, newspapers, and even the telephone.52 "All these things," he explained, "are killing the best and most genuine Negro folk songs."53 His main interest was in collecting black folk songs that "in musical phrasing and in poetic content, are most unlike those of the white race, the least contaminated by white influence or modern Negro jazz."54 Lomax's theories about what constituted "authentic" black folk culture made him particularly interested in gathering material in places where the people were culturally isolated—either by geographical happenstance or by imposed societal codes.55 He actively searched out communities where the population was entirely African American or plantations in the Mississippi Delta "where in number the Negroes greatly exceeded the whites," as well as lumber camps that employed only black laborers. Recording these songs on location was especially important, Lomax claimed, because it was "nearly impossible to transport Negro folk-singers from the South and keep them untainted by white musical conventions."56 The greater the contact with white culture, Lomax felt, the quicker genuine African American cultural expression would disintegrate.

Venturing into remote places, Lomax would come across those who remained unacquainted with sound recording equipment. To authenticate the
folk music he gathered, Lomax liked to relate incidents where his provincial informants, unfamiliar with modern technology and carried away by their own emotionalism, ruined the recordings he was attempting to make. In a session with Uncle Billy Macree, who "claimed to be 117 years old," which took place over the space of two evenings in Lomax's hotel room, Macree sang "some 'play tunes' from slavery days. He spoiled a record by jumping to his feet and beginning to dance in the most dramatic moment of the song.... He was a bit timid of the microphone and talked and sang most freely when we were seated under the shade in front of his cabin."57 In a letter to his son Alan, Lomax reported: "Your blind Negro preacher, whose jazzing of the spirituals you admired, shot the works for us, though his impossible vociferousness in voice and on the piano made good recording impossible."58

The Presto recorder, supplied by the Library of Congress, used a needle to cut a shallow groove directly into an aluminum disc coated with acetate, and while it could easily be disrupted by vibration or even the accumulation of the "rind" extruded by the needle, which had to be carefully blown or brushed away during recording, it had the advantage of immediate playback.59 Ruby Lomax related a tale about an informant's reaction to the recording machine. Although Harriet McClintock had never seen one before and "was not sure what was happening... [she] offered no objection when she saw that there was some relation between her singing in the microphone which John Avery held in his hand as he talked to her, and what I was doing at the machine. She soon caught on, for once when she was relating some amusing personal experience, she turned to me and said, 'Shut off dat ghost!'"60 But even more pleasing to Ruby Lomax was McClintock's excited response when she heard her voice played back: "If only I had had a movie camera.... Aunt Harriet shouted with laughter and cried, 'Sing on, ole lady—Yeah, dat's me. Don't you hear me?' etc., etc."61

But even urban dwellers were often unacquainted with the expensive recording technology provided to folk collectors working for the FWP through the Library of Congress. Florida's director of folklore, Stetson Kennedy, recalled using a sixteen-inch acetate disk with a sapphire needle, with instant playback capability: "As a technique I would pretend to be checking the machine and after a few moments of recording would check the machine playback but for the real purpose of letting the informants hear their voices, and it always worked like magic, you know, they may have been shy beforehand but after that they're all ham actors." Recording ex-slaves at the Clara White Mission, where the Negro Writers' Unit (NWU) of Florida was temporarily located, Kennedy also got Eartha White, the daughter of the Mission's
founder, to sing, "and after just a few moments after the playback she raised her hand you know, commanding us to stop, stop the machine, and said 'Hold everything right there, we're going to have a little prayer' and she said, uh, 'Lord, this is Eartha White talking to you again and I just wanted to thank you for giving mankind the intelligence to create such a marvelous machine and for giving us a President like Franklin D. Roosevelt who cares about preserving the songs that people sing. Amen.' These types of stories were used by the Lomaxes to authenticate the value of their collected material in several ways. In the Lomaxes' accounts of their informants' unfamiliarity with the recording machine was evidence of their advanced age and their status as rural "folk." Furthermore, the extreme emotions manifested through physical movement showed the honesty of their performance, as well as documenting the emotional intensity of the "Negro folk."

Lomax also claimed that the recording technology he employed enabled him to create "sound-photographs" of pure, unadulterated folk material, free of any bias or influence on his part as the song catcher, or cowboy, corralling wild subjects. In making this argument, Lomax was cognizant that his own presence as a white listener and interlocutor might make the material he collected suspect of contamination. However, Lomax emphasized his own lack of professional training and academic credentials to prove that the African American songs he collected were completely authentic and had not been tampered with. "I am innocent of musical knowledge, entirely without musical training," he artfully proclaimed. Collectors who were schooled in music, Lomax pointed out, were a liability in the mission to obtain unadulterated specimens. He boastfully related that one of his sponsors, the chief of the Library of Congress's Music Division, had told him before beginning a trip into the field in 1933: "Don't take any musician along with you... What the Library wants is the machine's record of Negro singing and not some musician's interpretation of it; nor do we wish any musician about to tell the Negroes how to sing." The results, Lomax explained, were essentially "sound-photographs of Negro songs, rendered in their own native element, unrestrained, uninfluenced and undirected by anyone who had his own notions of how the songs should be rendered." Nevertheless, Lomax was not quite the purist when it came to folk collecting that he liked to claim he was. His biographer notes that Lomax was not averse to changing sites in order to obtain a better recording and frequently "taught singers the chants he thought they ought to interject in their songs."

In order to find authentic black folk music, Lomax traveled to remote areas "where Negroes are almost entirely isolated from the whites, dependent upon
the resources of their own group for amusement; where they are not only preserving a great body of traditional folk songs but are also creating new songs in the same idiom.”67 Southern penitentiaries seemed to Lomax to provide particularly rich places for this type of collection partly because the prisoners were culturally isolated from the rest of society. In Mississippi he happily noted that the convicts hailed from all over the state, “and the best songs of many communities survived among these singing black men.”68 Racial segregation rigorously practiced in the southern prison system also worked to Lomax’s advantage. As Lomax pointed out: “Negro convicts do not eat or sleep in the same building with white prisoners. They are kept in entirely separate units; they even work separately in the fields. Thus a longtime Negro convict, guarded by Negro trusties, may spend many years with practically no chance of hearing a white man speak or sing.”69 

Furthermore, Lomax felt, without the corrupting influence of white culture, blacks “would slough off the white idiom they may once have employed in their speech and revert more and more to the idiom of the Negro common people.”70 Prisons, in which “the old songs are kept alive and growing as they are passed along to successive generations of convicts,” aided in the preservation of black folk traditions.71 Black convicts would serve as an apt metaphor for the “pure” and unaffected African American folk culture he was seeking; literally imprisoned in the past without access to the forces of assimilation or contemporary culture, their status as unpaid laborers was reminiscent of slavery. Gang labor kept alive musical traditions used to maintain the pace and make the work go faster: “On the penitentiary farms, where Negro labor must be done in groups, the plantation ‘hollers’ yet live.”72 On a collecting trip with his son Alan in the summer of 1933, Lomax visited eleven Texas penitentiaries and, in his words, “interrogated” an estimated 10,000 black convicts in the states of Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, and Tennessee.73 Here, Lomax claimed, they would record songs that were “practically pure Negro creations, both in words and music. Either that, or the songs have become so encrusted with Negro accretions that any trace of white influence is quite obscured.”74 

Early on in his tenure as national advisor on folklore and folkways, in 1936, Lomax tried to incorporate his own technique for gathering Negro folklore from black prisoners. He suggested to the state director of Virginia that his staff utilize the state prisons as a source for folk material. The response was not particularly favorable.75 The director went on to undermine Lomax’s own method of short prison visits by jokingly remarking, “The most practicable method would be to have some worker committed to the institution.”76 Not
surprisingly, Lomax’s reply to this refusal was rather terse. As he remarked to Alsberg: “This note reads like a willing surrender to me.” Instead, he recommended the use of questionnaires, which would “not require personal visits.”

Penitentiaries had other important advantages in addition to the ones Lomax described. Convicts were guaranteed to participate in Lomax’s recording sessions, once he had secured the goodwill of the warden, and Lomax could use them as much as he liked during the times scheduled for their meals and their rest periods. In his memoir, Adventures of a Ballad Hunter, Lomax proudly recounted a recording session from the 1930s with a black prisoner who was reluctant to sing any “sinful” songs since he had become a religious man: “I’s got religion, boss, an’ I’se quit all dat.” Lomax told the prison warden that “Black Samson” had a song that they especially wanted, so the warden sent a guard to fetch the man, and “the frightened Negro shuffled up and took his place before the microphone.” But Samson managed to have the last word by uttering a prayer into the microphone requesting the Lord’s forgiveness for what he was about to sing: “Oh Lord, I knows I’se doin’ wrong. I can’t help myself. I’se down here in the world, an’ I’se gotter do what dis white man tell me. I hopes You unnerstan’ the situation an’ won’t blame me for what I gotter do. Amen!” Lomax would also downplay the coercion by claiming that after the session Black Samson was extremely pleased with the results and hoped that it might soften the hearts of “dose big Washinton men” who would then “do something to help dis po’ nigger.” In a letter to Henry Alsberg, the FWP’s director, Lomax would refer to this recording as his “prize record.” Clearly, Lomax felt that the song that was dearly wrung from an informant was a kind of trophy and testament to his skills as a “ballad hunter.”

And yet, the field notes Ruby Lomax kept during their recording trips to penitentiaries in 1939 reveal that in private the Lomaxes recognized when inmates were being poorly treated. In South Carolina, as Ruby reported to her family, “we saw a sight that shocked us all,—eighty Negroes tied by ankle chain to a long large common chain. The fellows were very good-natured about it, and when . . . a singer would say ‘this is as close as I kin git to the mike,’ the other fellows would shuffle their leg-chains along the big chain until the singer could reach the mike. . . . As guests of the state, John Avery and I, of course, can make no public statement about our reactions.” However, after a friend who had accompanied them asked Lomax to send a letter to the governor, protesting the inmates’ being chained together, Lomax did so, describing it as “unnecessary and inhumane,” but he was careful to praise the courteous conduct of the guards at the Anderson County Prison Camp
and describe this incident as an anomaly among his many trips to southern penitentiaries.\textsuperscript{82}

On a trip to Arkansas, the Lomaxes questioned the guards about the rags the convicts wore that barely covered them. Although they chose not to say anything to the superintendent, privately, Ruby noted, they felt that more funds should be spent on soap and clothing.\textsuperscript{83} In a letter she wrote to her family, Ruby reported that the night after their departure twelve prisoners had tried to escape, and two were killed in the attempt. In a revealing stream of consciousness, she indirectly connected the deaths of the inmates to the deaths of the musical tradition: “We made some pretty good records, but even in the past two years the death rate of old songs has risen.”\textsuperscript{84}

Former convicts Ledbetter and Iron Head proved to be an invaluable help when it came to persuading current inmates to cooperate with his requests. Lomax had once secured Iron Head’s freedom from the governor of Texas and didn’t quell rumors that he had also helped Ledbetter obtain a governor’s pardon.\textsuperscript{85} Many of the prisoners Lomax encountered expressed the hope that he might similarly be able to get them an early release. These efforts, such as they were, were not really acts of altruism. Lomax’s main interest in Ledbetter’s and Iron Head’s parole was so they could serve as traveling companions and help him gain access to black communities. Ledbetter and Iron Head, at Lomax’s urging, “sang for me when I met groups of Negroes in or out of the penitentiary, to show the people what kinds of songs I was looking for. Otherwise I could not easily make my hearers understand.” But Lomax also relied on them as a foil, to draw attention away from his presence: “Furthermore, the singing of these Negroes always aroused the competitive instinct of the listeners, who would then freely give me their songs to show me how far they could excel those ‘niggers from Texas.’”\textsuperscript{86}

Part of Lomax’s definition of authenticity in African American folk expression turned on its rough, unstudied quality. Lomax presented his black convict informants as less susceptible to the pervasive forces of white society, unwilling to abide by the legal codes. They were lawless and uncivilized and therefore, in Lomax’s mind, closer to the primitive impulses he was seeking. Authentic African American folk culture, according to Lomax, was deeply suggestive of a primal, African past. When he heard songs or witnessed expressive black performances that evoked for him stereotypical images of the African jungle and a raw, black primitivism, Lomax felt confident about the genuine nature of the material he was collecting. He once traveled over a thousand miles “to hear the singing of primitive coast Negroes of the Negro Republic on Sandy Island.”\textsuperscript{87} After hearing a particularly beautiful rendition
of an emotional spiritual sung by a mulatto woman, he remarked: "To me and to Alan, there were depth, grace and beauty in this spiritual; quiet power and dignity; and a note of weird, almost uncanny suggestion of turgid, slow-moving rivers in African jungles."\textsuperscript{88}

This emphasis on the racial nature of black Americans also enabled Lomax to argue for the existence of primitive traits among African Americans that had survived the collision with white European cultures. Attending a birthday celebration at which many of the guests were dancing, Lomax once again fell into a private reverie about a primitive African past: "As I sat in the car and listened to the steady, monotonous beat of the guitars, accented by handclaps and the shuffle of feet—the excitement growing as time went on, the rhythm deeper and clearer—again I felt carried across to Africa, and I felt as if I were listening to the tom-toms of savage blacks." Emboldened to approach the windows and steal a glance at the revelers, he was rewarded with an even greater sight of the ineluctable racial and cultural difference he was in search of: "The whole house seemed to throb with the movement of the dancers. I saw the grotesque postures and heard the jumbled and indistinguishable cries of jubilant pleasure, and I realized that Alan and I were now enjoying a unique experience amid a people that we really knew very little about."\textsuperscript{89} This would affect the instructions he issued to FWP state directors regarding the types of folklore he wanted and led Lomax to place greater emphasis on elements of black folk culture likely to appear to a white readership as unfamiliar and exotic.

For Lomax, the black emotionalism that was the keynote of African American folk music could not coexist with the conscious artistry of the professional performer. Lomax was fond of black folk performers who seemed to lose themselves in their delivery, becoming heedlessly unaware of their audience. "Were it possible," he declared, "for the world to listen to such a group singing, with no vestige of self-consciousness or artificiality, the songs that seem to have sprung full-panoplied with beauty and power from the emotional experiences of a people—I say that the world would stop and listen."\textsuperscript{90} Describing Iron Head’s moving renditions of prison work songs, he observed that "most of them were dominated by brooding sadness. Here was no studied art. The words, the music, the rhythm, were simple, the natural emotional outpouring of the black man in confinement. The listener found himself swept along with the primitive emotions aroused, and, despite himself, discovered his own body swaying in unison with the urge of Iron Head’s melodies."\textsuperscript{91} In another description of an informant’s untrained ability, he noted its power: "His speaking and singing voice brought chilly sensations along
my spine, always tore at my heartstring—deep, vibrant, resonant, tremulous at times from whatever emotions influenced his simple nature."92 This raw passion, Lomax felt, was inseparable from its source.93

Lomax praised the "natural" musicality of black Americans as an intrinsic part of their racial character. "It is well known," he declared, "that the Negro is fond of singing. He is endowed by nature with a strong sense of rhythm. His songs burst from him, when in his own environment, as naturally and as freely as those of a bird among its native trees."94 As Lomax explained: "The lonely field worker, the gangs building levees and railroads, the cook, the housemaid, all ... create new songs, new forms of expression while they cheerfully labor. They go singing, singing, all the day even where you would not expect to find music—in the penitentiaries."95 This description contains overtones of the stereotypical image of the carefree slave of plantation fiction, who was simpleminded enough to be singing even when performing back-breaking labor.

Lomax's definition of authentic black folk music had the added advantage of making it something black performers could not really lay individual claim to, or take credit for, thereby sidestepping any questions of financial compensation. Although unstated, Lomax had another reason for using black convicts. He was in little danger of being sued for ownership claims by those who were completely cut off from the commercial market. Lomax's fast and free approach in utilizing a wide variety of sources for his published work would lead him into legal difficulties over the question of ownership and copyrights. As the publisher of American Ballads, Macmillan received many written complaints from those who claimed authorial rights. The publisher would also become embroiled in lawsuits filed by other publishing companies representing the interests of their clients.96 This experience motivated Lomax to find folk singers who would not be able to demand compensation or recognition for their contribution to his collection. Thus, Lomax's later recruitments would consist of gypsies as well as convicted felons. When he and Alan came across a gypsy camp in Texas in 1934, Lomax saw his escape from legal encumbrances. As biographer Nolan Porterfield explains, "Because the gypsies had no written language (as Lomax happily announced), all their songs were folksongs—that is, none were in print because their language was entirely oral. No copyright problems here."97

At the center of these legal difficulties lay the thorny issue of cultural ownership: Who was the rightful owner of the folk material Lomax was gathering and marketing to the public? The answer was complicated by the fact that Lomax was laying authorship claims (solely on the basis of his role as an
interlocutor) to cultural expressions that were clearly not part of his identity or heritage. Through his inventive definition of what constituted “authentic” black folk culture, Lomax validated only those black folk performers who did not request financial compensation for their work and delegitimized professional black folk artists. Lomax thus authorized his own appropriation of black cultural expression for his individual profit.

The assumption folk collectors like John Lomax made in the 1930s about their informants’ material was that as folk material, it did not belong to the informants. Folk culture, for Lomax, was by definition without an author, or artist, who could lay an individual claim upon the product. The informants from whom Lomax gathered his collection were therefore not entitled to any kind of authorship claims for either recompense in the form of financial remuneration or acknowledgment as individual artists. Lomax and other folk collectors thought black folk performers should offer their stuff up freely and gladly. For Lomax, folk culture that was “authentic” did not rightfully belong to anyone, although this putative belief did not keep him from copyrighting as much folk material as he could. He saw his role as primarily that of the presenter of folk songs rather than of folk performers and was pleased when he felt he had been successful in bringing an obscure and deserving song to the public’s attention. As he noted happily, “the Rock Island song, found only in the Arkansas penitentiary, has been on the radio throughout the country, while this version of John Henry has a place of honor in Dr. B. A. Botkin’s important book, Treasury of Folk Lore.” Although Lomax would give some recognition in his autobiography to a couple of talented musicians he found in the prisons of the South, generally he was only willing to recognize the quality of the songs themselves rather than the artists who performed them.

But white folklorists’ definition of what constituted “authentic” folk culture and folk performers was directly at odds with a long-standing black tradition that drew on black expressiveness for commercial exchange as a means of survival. Lomax’s attitude was sharply antithetical to the African American tradition in which material is re-created and thus laid claim to by folk artists who, in altering it, make it their own by placing their individual stamp on it. These opposing views on the role and importance of the individual folk artist would remain a fundamental point of misunderstanding and conflict between Lomax and his black performers.

While the Lomaxes preferred to get their material from black informants for free, they were not above bribing reluctant participants if necessary. In an effort to record a children’s song at a “Colored High School” in the spring of 1939, “Mr. Lomax offered twenty-five cents to every child who would sing
him a lullaby that he had not already recorded." Although this generous offer met with little response, one boy came forward with a song his grandmother used to sing, but the accompanist didn’t want to play anymore, "and so Frank Gallaway could not record his lullaby, was disappointed not only at missing the quarter, but also at failing to ‘get on the machine.’ A dime helped soothe his feelings."  

Although Lomax routinely offered small monetary gifts as incentives with which to bribe his informants, his field notes from the recording trips he made throughout the South reveal his astonishment and anger when an “informant” requested any kind of compensation for their performance, even though Lomax himself profited hugely from this material. However he might represent his own generous nature, Lomax was observed by others as being somewhat stingy in the monetary tips he sometimes gave to his informants. For a day’s work of recording, he might bestow a dime on each participant. Another witness claimed that after an all-night session with a group of black prisoners, Lomax gave the warden eighty cents with which to purchase cigarettes for the men. The folklorist Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, an erstwhile friend and colleague of Lomax, would later recall his immense reluctance to pay his informants. When asked if the folklorists of her generation paid “anyone whose material they used—revenues or something?” Barnicle replied: “I did. . . . If Lomax wanted anyone he thought was valuable he’d pay them a little something. . . . He was the stingiest man on earth. He came from the South and his family was very poor. He didn’t have any kind of decent, what we call education—knowing how to act properly and all that. . . . He was a scoundrel.” Lawrence Gellert, a fellow folklorist with left-wing sympathies, published an article in *New Masses*, which argued that Lomax “embodies the slavemaster attitude intact. . . . [and] failed to get to the heart of contemporary Negro folk lore.” Gellert also criticized Lomax’s unorthodox collecting methods, which involved bribing prison guards and forcing convicts to sing against their will.

The Lomaxes did make note of African Americans who resented their requests for material and performances when it became clear no compensation would be forthcoming. In one of the revealing anecdotes included in the Lomaxes’ field notes, they told of arranging with a black preacher to record some spirituals “at his house where we could get electrical connections.” But when the Lomaxes arrived as scheduled, Reverend Johnson wasn’t there. Instead, “we found his sister . . . declaring that she was a good songster but didn’t propose to sing for nothin’ and have some white man makin’ a bushel o’ money outa her songs.” So the Lomaxes “shook the dust of . . . the
plantation off our feet and as best we could off the machine and went back to New Roads.”\textsuperscript{107}

When Lomax encountered Lucious Curtis, “a honky-tonk, guitar picking Negro, living on a precarious income from pick-ups at dance halls,” he bought him “a new set of 75 cent strings for his guitar” in order to get him to play. Lomax commented that Curtis “seemed proud of them until I mentioned the expense when dividing the tip between him and Willie.”\textsuperscript{108} After Curtis and his friend Willie Ford had played their entire repertoire of blues, Lomax could not get him to perform his favorite again: “The best tune, Crawling King Snake Blues, Lucious refused repeatedly to play again. After I begged him I offered a dollar for this one song. Although I promised him that the Library would protect him in his rights he would not be moved. ‘I think I can sell it to NBC’ he said.”\textsuperscript{109} The refusal piqued Lomax. He preferred to think of the money he sometimes used to gain an informant’s cooperation not as a payment for the material but rather as a “tip” for the performance. If he felt his black informants were becoming overly greedy, as in the case of Lucious Curtis and later with Leadbelly, he used this as evidence that they were not real folk performers. Thus, the connection between money and folk art was a crucial one for Lomax, and he would undermine in various ways folk performers who felt entitled to recompense for their artistic creation.

Repeatedly, Lomax commented favorably on the anomaly of black informants who did not request payment for their services. Remembering his recording sessions with Iron Head, Lomax described him as possessing “the dignity of a Roman Senator. While other Negroes swarmed around us begging for money, even for a penny apiece, he did not ask for a tip. When we paid him something for his time, he thanked us with grave courtesy, saying that he had little use for money except for one purpose.”\textsuperscript{110} Lomax attributed this noble bearing partly to racial lineage and asked Iron Head if he had Indian blood and received an affirmative nod.\textsuperscript{111}

Although Lomax resented it when informants expressed reservations about offering up their material for free, he felt no compunction about using such materials for his personal gain, establishing a lifelong career with prestige and financial remuneration for the folk culture he “collected” and then presented. In a letter to Alan, Lomax mentioned one of his more successful collection attempts: “I wish you could have seen Henry Trevillion when Miss Terrill and I put him behind the microphone . . . and heard him talk and sing for two hours, a lot of it new stuff. I got it all and plan to incorporate it practically entire in my book.”\textsuperscript{112} Later Lomax referred to the financial profits he and Alan had made from book and radio royalties and other sundries as
“cashing in on the folk music we have collected” and “the racket I run with the Ballads.”113

Perhaps no other source is as illuminating for understanding Lomax’s complicated relationship with African American folk informants as the famous and well-publicized affiliation he established with Ledbetter. It was during his travels in 1933 that Lomax encountered this formidable talent at the Angola State Prison Farm in Louisiana. He immediately recognized the star quality of Ledbetter’s performance and planned to use it to his own economic advantage; he wrote to Ruby, “He sung us one song which I shall copyright as soon as I get to Washington and try to market in sheet music form.”114 Although Porterfield credits Lomax with “trying to keep [Ledbetter] ‘pure’ and prevent him from slickening up his act with pop songs and commercial stage business,” it is clear that Lomax responded to his potential as a professional performer, for it was Ledbetter whom he chose, out of the thousands of black convicts he heard, to make famous.115 Although he would secure the convict Iron Head’s release as a replacement assistant following Ledbetter’s departure, Lomax harbored “no illusions about trying to make him a star’ in the Leadbelly fashion, for while Iron Head was an able musician with a large repertoire, he lacked Leadbelly’s flair for performance.”116 Still, it was a tricky compromise to market a professional like Ledbetter as an example of “authentic” black folk singing. Leadbelly, Lomax worried, was increasingly becoming too much of the consummate performer, and he confided to his wife that he was “disturbed and distressed at his beginning tendency to show off in his songs and talk, when his money value is to be natural and sincere as he was in prison.”117

In the enduring mythology that surrounds the story of Leadbelly and Lomax, Lomax is credited with securing Ledbetter’s release by the governor of Louisiana. That this belief persists is a testament to Lomax’s ability to sell a good story to the public and says more about Lomax’s self-invention as a heroic white adventurer than it does about the reality of the business relationship they constructed. According to Lomax, his “discovery” of Leadbelly led to the singer recording an original composition for the governor in which he asked for the governor’s pardon. Lomax immediately took it to the governor, and a month later, Ledbetter was released: “I was sitting in a hotel in Texas when I got a tap on my shoulder. I looked up and there was Leadbelly with his guitar.”118 Lomax actually made the recording a year after his initial meeting with Ledbetter, and there is no evidence that the governor ever heard it.

Lomax’s version, however, supported the image of himself that he was trying to promote as Ledbetter’s savior. The grateful Leadbelly, Lomax reported,
searched him out and declared his intentions to be a faithful servant to the white man who had rescued him. Lomax's version of his "discovery" of Leadbelly would later be immortalized on film for the *March of Time* documentary series. In 1935, cameramen shot the reenactment of their first meeting using a script written by Alan and John. Ledbetter told Lomax: "Thank you, sir, boss, thank you. I'll drive you all over the United States and I'll sing all songs for you. You be my big boss and I'll be your man." Lomax also had a personal interest in perpetuating the story that he had helped obtain Ledbetter's release. As he told his wife, the singer's belief in Lomax's aid was the best security he could have in traveling with a potentially dangerous ex-convict: "Don't be uneasy. . . . He thinks I freed him."

After Ledbetter's performance at the Modern Languages Association conference in 1934, for which the chairman thanked Lomax for having "your talented aborigine 'nigger' sing for the guests," Ledbetter quickly became a hot commodity, with appearances at Yale and Harvard and a media blitz that included notices in *Time* magazine and a poetic tribute in the *New Yorker*. Through all of this, Lomax remained in tight control of his protégé. Within a week of their arrival in New York City, Lomax and Leadbelly signed an agreement that made Lomax his manager and agent for five years for a share of 50 percent of all Leadbelly's earnings.

But as Ledbetter's fame increased, so did his aspirations, exacerbating tensions with the Lomaxes. In spite of Ledbetter's demanding performance schedule, the Lomaxes expected him to wash dishes, act as chauffeur, and execute other household chores. As a result, Ledbetter grew increasingly bitter. Lomax perceived the situation as the result of Ledbetter's fame going to his head and making him "uppity." After the business partnership turned sour in 1935, Ledbetter filed several lawsuits against Lomax, claiming ownership rights to the material and demanding appropriate compensation. Some time after this fiasco, in a letter to her family, Ruby undermined Ledbetter's rights to his folk performances. As she noted somewhat derisively, "It was from Uncle Bob [Ledbetter] that Leadbelly learned many of the songs that he 'composed' himself!" When Leadbelly tried to revive his singing career in New York under new management, he discovered that he had turned over all the rights to his songs to Lomax and Macmillan. At the publisher's insistence, Leadbelly was given permission to use his own material with the proviso that he would give up all future claims against them.

Lomax's rise as a commercial success would be accompanied by a corresponding trend toward increasing professionalization among academic folklorists. Even as the American media and public were evincing a greater
interest in folk cultures and creating an opportunity for their further commercialization, the official voice of the American Folklore Society (AFS) was decrying the pervasive and corrupting influence of market forces on "authentic" folk music and folk artists. Discussions surrounding the annual National Folk Festival of 1938, held in Washington, D.C., revolved around the potential commercial hazards that lurked even in this rarefied intellectual atmosphere. In the official assessment of the festival, which appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore* (the organ of the AFS), the reviewer congratulated the festival's director for successfully presenting "authentic" folk performers. Still, as the *Journal* noted, "it is probably impossible to reproduce a pure folk art under such artificial conditions."129 The president of the AFS, Stith Thompson, also recognized the dangers of commercialism: "Even if the festival itself succeeds in maintaining a thoroughly non-commercial standard, the lure of the radio may spoil a perfectly good folk singer who learns to give the public what it wants. All of this may add to the joy of the nation and may bring hill-billy songs to Broadway, but whatever value they have had for the serious study of folklore has evaporated in the process. Hence it is that many serious folklorists look with a critical eye on the folk festival."130 In the AFS's drive to protect the study of folk cultures from the contaminating and corrupting influences of the commercial market, they also turned their reproving attention upon the FWP and, more specifically, upon the position John Lomax held as the FWP's folklore director.

Originally, Lomax's self-characterization as a lay folk collector had been very much in keeping with the FWP's mission statement to use local amateur talent. However, the FWP's goals to provide employment for unemployed writers, and to make its publications intellectually accessible to the average American while still receiving the blessing of the professional community of social scientists, created a dilemma: How could projects contribute to current scholarship while maintaining a popular literary appeal? This difficulty would appear in Lomax's own publications as he tried to bridge the gap between the academic community and the general reading public. In part, because of Lomax's fast and free approach to folk material, the AFS discredited Lomax as an amateur collector and a commercial sellout. Although the AFS would pay lip service to the important contribution made by lay folk collectors in the 1937 presidential address entitled "American Folklore after Fifty Years," at the very same conference, the council of the AFS would pass a resolution that would lead to Lomax's dismissal from the FWP the following year.

Observing that "the government has entered our field," President Thompson emphasized that the FWP's main contribution had been in the collection
of "good folklore . . . which might otherwise have been lost."\textsuperscript{131} Beyond this, Thompson’s assessment of the quality of their work was much more circum-
spect. "When one considers that the collectors were chosen because they 
were on relief rolls and not because they knew anything about folklore, the 
work they have done has been far beyond expectations," but ultimately, "it is 
to be realized that much of the material they gather will be of little value to 
the serious student.\textsuperscript{132}"

In their pronouncement on the folklore material collected by the FWP, 
the council agreed that no endorsement from the AFS would be forthcoming 
unless "their evaluation, supervision, and continuation were placed under 
expert guidance" provided in part by the AFS.\textsuperscript{133} The amateur collector of 
folklore still had a place in the AFS, Thompson suggested: "They know their 
people intimately, and there is individuality to every traditional item they 
have gathered. There is a personal affection, not only for the people, but also 
for what these people have uttered."\textsuperscript{134} But the amateur was likely to be "unable 
to evaluate what he has collected," Thompson concluded.\textsuperscript{135} Drawing on the 
same logic that Lomax had used to discredit members of the black folk from 
interpreting their own cultural expressions, the AFS was casting doubt on 
Lomax’s ability as a professional folklorist. One year after its indictment of 
the FWP’s use of amateur collectors, at the Fiftieth Annual Meeting, the 
AFS would happily report the appointment of the "trained folklorist, Dr. B. A. 
Botkin" and state "its willingness to cooperate in [FWP] activities."\textsuperscript{136} Ironically, seven years later, Thompson would ask Lomax for advice on his own 
collection of regional folklore. Lomax suggested that Thompson engage an 
African American scholar to write the section on Negro folk culture. In a sad 
testament to the persistent prejudice in and out of academia, Thompson told 
Lomax that he would be loath to hire any African American for the job, even 
if qualified, because "the material had to be treated with more objectivity 
than any black could have."\textsuperscript{137}

Thus, the extensive publicity generated by Lomax’s popular image of the 
folk collector as real-life hero adventurer and his successful promotion of 
Ledbetter would result in his termination from the FWP. Mainly as a result 
of the ire of the professional academic folklorists affiliated with the AFS, 
Lomax would be replaced as the FWP’s folklore editor by Benjamin Botkin, 
whose general demeanor and philosophy regarding the collection of folklore 
was much more conspicuously intellectual. Botkin’s appointment also re-
flected the FWP’s increasing desire to rid itself of the growing negative con-
notations associated with novices, dilettantes, and the provincial attitudes of 
far-flung employees. Botkin had graduated with honors from Harvard, earned
an M.A. from Columbia, and, unlike Lomax, earned a Ph.D., from the University of Nebraska. At the time of his appointment as the FWP’s new national folklore editor, he was a professor at the University of Oklahoma and a frequent contributor to prestigious academic journals. He had, in other words, the kind of status and respect within the scholarly community that Lomax had always craved.¹³⁸

Moreover, Botkin’s approach to folklore collection appeared to be much more cerebral than Lomax’s. Botkin, so it seemed to observers, did not get involved with his informants to the extent that Lomax had. As Jerre Mangione, a colleague of his on the FWP, would recall, Botkin possessed “a quiet and studious demeanor which would have made him inconspicuous in a library.” Mangione remembered a telling incident that occurred while they were both on the FWP staff. They had gone to a Chicago nightclub where the evening’s entertainment was provided by “the gyrations of a mulatto belly dancer called Lovey.” Throughout the performance Botkin remained “hunched over a notebook busily recording his observations of the writhing mulatto, presumably under the heading of living lore.”¹³⁹ It is hard to imagine such a detached response from John Lomax.

In the end, despite the disapproval of the professionals in the field, Lomax’s reinvention of the folk collector as a hero-adventurer would be perpetuated in popular culture representations. Lomax’s efforts to sell himself in the role of the white ballad hunter and adventurer achieved its apotheosis: in 1941, the Library of Congress would form the Radio Research Project for which Lomax’s stories and songs from his collecting days in the field were serialized; ten different programs were broadcast with great success.¹⁴⁰ A few years later, in 1945, Lomax was profiled in a Reader’s Digest article and in the Saturday Review of Literature. As a result of this publicity, 4,000 initial inquiries were sent to the Library of Congress requesting information on Lomax’s recordings housed in the archive, with subsequent letters totaling, in Lomax’s estimate, 30,000.¹⁴¹ The end result of Lomax’s risk taking was now that “thanks to John A. Lomax, America will not have to travel half a million miles afoot, by horseback, stagecoach, train, and automobile to hear these songs. All she will have to do is to order the songs she wants to hear.”¹⁴²

Even Hollywood became interested in translating Lomax’s adventures to the big screen, with Bing Crosby starring as Lomax.¹⁴³ Paramount studio heads wrote to Lomax about the idea, claiming they were “extremely enthusiastic.”¹⁴⁴ They felt obliged to warn him, however, that he might have to embellish his story in order to provide sufficient drama for the film version; the studio would likely need to “take a few liberties about the actual facts in
the lives of yourself and your son.” Clearly, they did not know they were dealing with a master of self-invention. Lomax managed to up their original offer by over $17,000 by pointing out the public’s great interest in folk songs and in himself as a folk song collector. As a hero who had made such sacrifices just so he could salvage a vanishing folk heritage and present it to the public, surely, he argued, he deserved greater financial compensation.

The suggested film version of Lomax’s adventures in the field would never be realized, due in part to Lomax’s lengthy delay in writing his own autobiography, and Lomax would receive payment from Paramount only for the option. A much less sympathetic version of his relationship with Ledbetter would reach the silver screen in 1976: Leadbelly, directed by African American photographer and former Farm Security Administration employee Gordon Parks. Nevertheless, Hollywood’s belief that the moviegoing public would be interested in a film portraying Lomax as a heroic cultural interlocutor, who placed his life in jeopardy by venturing among unknown and potentially dangerous folk communities, is evidence that Lomax’s attempts to popularize the figure of the folk collector had succeeded.

But Lomax had triumphed in another way as well. By his authoritative claims that black folk traditions were dying out as a result of the assimilation of African Americans, Lomax suggested that black Americans who were not members of the folk, such as the black bourgeoisie, could not lay claim to their folk heritage. White folklorists’ definition of “authentic” black folk culture as preindustrial and precapitalist and as intrinsically tied up with the period of slavery not only served to delegitimize contemporary African American folk artists but, by locating the “black folk” temporally in a premodern past, severed folk traditions from black Americans who were engaged in the process of assimilation into American society. These arguments struck at the heart of the political project of the black intelligentsia to regain the authority to represent African American identity and culture. If John Lomax serves as the case study for the FWP’s approach to black folk culture and the success as well as limitations of white folklorists, then the trajectory of Zora Neale Hurston’s early career, as a professionally trained ethnographer and employee of the Negro Writers’ Unit of Florida, serves as a case study for how much racial identity mattered when it came to representing black culture and identity, and how race, class, and gender identities intersected in the FWP. Hurston’s contributions are better understood in the context of African Americans’ employment experiences with the Works Progress Administration and the FWP.