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In the Footsteps of Alan Lomax: The Artists Behind the Music



By TERRY TEACHOUT

If you know any of Aaron Copland's music, then you probably know "Hoedown," the finale of "Rodeo," the score that Mr. Copland wrote in 1942 for Agnes de Mille's ever-popular ballet about love among the cowpokes. "Hoedown" is a high-stepping orchestral fantasy based on "Bonaparte's Retreat," a 19th-century fiddle tune that Mr. Copland ran across in "Our Singing Country," a 1941 book co-edited by Alan Lomax, the celebrated folk-song collector. The version of "Bonaparte's Retreat" found in "Our Singing Country" was transcribed from a recording made by Mr. Lomax on a 1937 trip to Kentucky for the Library of Congress. It's a note-for-note rendering of the way the song was played by a fiddler named Bill Stepp. Every time you hear a symphony orchestra perform "Hoedown," you hear the ghost of Mr. Stepp's supremely virtuosic playing.



Elsie Risner and Becky Arnelt

Fiddler Bill Stepp in Kentucky's Magoffin County in the 1930s.

So...who was he?

The thousands of field recordings of American folk and vernacular music that were made by Mr. Lomax and his colleagues rank high among the cultural treasures to be found in the Library of Congress. Some of them, like "Bonaparte's Retreat," have made their way into the collective consciousness of musicians and music lovers throughout the world. Next to nothing is known about most of the people who cut those rough-hewn recordings, nearly all of whom were amateurs or semiprofessionals who made music purely for their own pleasure and that of their families and friends. Yet many of them were also uniquely gifted musicians who were as remarkable in their homespun way as Mr. Copland or Ms. de Mille—or, for that matter, Mr. Lomax, who is far better remembered today than the artists whose music he documented.

Enter Stephen Wade, a musician and folklorist who has long been fascinated by the Library of Congress field recordings. Following in Mr. Lomax's footsteps, Mr. Wade went back into the field to track down the descendants of 12 of the near-forgotten musicians who recorded for the Library of Congress between 1934 and 1942. He has turned his findings into an extraordinary book called "The Beautiful Music All Around Us: Field Recordings and the American Experience" that was published earlier this month by the University of Illinois Press. It's a masterpiece of humane scholarship—but one that reads like a detective story. Working against the fast-ticking clock of mortality, Mr. Wade succeeded in documenting the lives and work of a dozen folk artists whose stories came perilously close to vanishing down the memory hole.

Mr. Wade's subjects came from all walks of life. Some were housewives; others, prisoners. One was a coal miner, another a 12-year-old schoolgirl. Jess Morris of Dalhart, Texas, who recorded "Goodbye, Old Paint" for the Library of Congress, was a classical violinist turned cowboy-fiddler. As for Mr. Stepp, who was born in a Kentucky cave in 1875, he was the son of a prostitute who spent his youth as a logger, then became an itinerant fiddler who rode on horseback to the rural dances at which he played. In the words of one man who heard Mr. Stepp at an Election Day schoolhouse dance: "When he'd draw on a bow, you couldn't just stand and listen. When he started playing, people drove like a bee to honey. Nobody held him a light in his playing."

"The Beautiful Music All Around Us" never stoops to the jargon-laden hair-splitting that too often passes for academic scholarship. Instead of reshuffling somebody else's footnotes, Mr. Wade had a simple yet profoundly original idea, then brought it to fruition with a combination of hard work and good luck. He played a hunch—and it paid off. But why should we now care about the obscure folk whose lives he chronicles, interesting though they may have been? The most important reason can be heard on the compact disc that accompanies Mr. Wade's book: They were great musicians whose stories deserve to be told for that reason alone. It's impossible to listen to Vera Hall's gently melancholy singing of "Another Man Done Gone" or Pete Steele's limpid, fast-flowing banjo playing in "Coal Creek March" without wanting to know more about them, and Mr. Wade delivers the goods.

In addition, though, these men and women were also exemplary figures to whose cultural significance Mr. Wade pays impassioned tribute in his introduction. "Their stories are metaphors for how this country has lived," he writes. "One by one they show us what a single person can do in a democracy."

As I read those words, I couldn't help but think of "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," the poem in which Thomas Gray memorialized the "mute inglorious Miltons" of the English countryside whose gifts were known only to their neighbors. "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air," he wrote. Were it not for Messrs. Lomax and Wade, most of the artists whose stories are told in "The Beautiful Music All Around Us" might just as easily have been born to sing unheard. Instead their voices live on, never to be forgotten. They, too, sing *America*.