

Cultural Conservation and the Tradition of Media Documentation

by Nicholas R. Spitzer

During fieldwork in Michigan's Upper Peninsula in 1986 I met an elderly French musician at his home in Sault Ste. Marie. After explaining my role as a Smithsonian folklorist looking for representatives of traditional culture, our talk turned to fiddling. The initially shy man began to beam, and I expected him to open a nearby instrument case and play. Instead, he turned on the VCR, and together we sat to watch him fiddling, surrounded on screen by children and grandchildren. One of them had thought to video tape "paw-paw's" music on his most recent birthday.

Nearly every practicing folklorist or anthropologist has a similar story. Members of traditional communities now use increasingly inexpensive, high-quality cassette recorders and video cameras to document their own traditions. In the Amazon, an Indian dressed in feathers, paint and sunglasses meets the fieldworker with a SONY in hopes of recording *him* singing American songs; in Louisiana, Spanish-speaking Isleño residents of the lower delta trade homemade cassettes of their ancient Canary Island songs.

Media forms have always had double-edged potential: exclusion or homogenization of folk performance traditions in many commercial settings, balanced by more beneficial applications of documentary technology on behalf of folk community expression. Traditional communities usually have little say concerning how or even whether they are depicted on national television. Unmediated traditional music, with historic exceptions noted below, is rarely issued by major record companies. While Thomas Edison envisioned that his "Home Phonograph" of 1878 would be used by middle-class families to record their personal traditions, he apparently did not see the potential to document cultures undergoing change outside the mainstream. Yet documentary media are today widely accepted as ways that traditional communities – often in tandem with folklorists – conserve and represent their own cultures. However, around the turn of the century, different, sometimes conflicting motivations guided folklorists and anthropologists as they recorded traditional culture.

Ballad scholars, who had previously sought old songs from printed sources, began field collecting with pen and paper in the 19th century. English folklorist Cecil Sharp, working in the Appalachian region in 1917,

wanted to collect "survivals" of British ballads. Sharp is said to have memorized the words and melodies so that he could later annotate them. Reputedly a fast note-taker, Sharp eschewed the cylinder technology of the day, and, thus did not record the actual sounds, words and ambience of the material. He promulgated in print and in person his "finds" of relict British culture still alive in remote America. An activist in his day, Sharp hoped to reach like-minded collectors and encourage national acceptance of folk music in England.

By contrast, some anthropologists turned quickly to early cylinder recording technology to document "objectively" the stories and songs of American Indians. Nearly thirty years before Sharp's work, Jesse Walter Fewkes had recorded Passamaquoddy Indians in Maine with an Edison cylinder machine. With his "scientific" approach Fewkes compared the language content and patterns of songs to "specimens" and "sections of a cellular structure." He viewed play-back in the laboratory as a means to a more studied understanding of the materials than possible in a live situation. Alice Cunningham Fletcher, the first woman president of the American Folklore Society, followed Fewkes in his recording approach. By 1907 musicologist Frances Densmore had begun her life-long work, the recording of more than 3,000 cylinders of Indian song for the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology. In the 1950s the Library of Congress began to reissue such early ethnographic recordings, and by 1979 copies of the recordings with accompanying description had been made available to community descendants through the American Folklife Center's Federal Cylinder Project.

At the turn of the century the recording of Indian music had been left largely to anthropologists – possibly because of community isolation and relative lack of profit potential. However, commercial recording companies like Berliner, Edison and Columbia began selling cylinders of traditional ethnic music – Jewish, Italian, French, Czech, Polish, Swedish and Russian among others – back to European immigrant communities in northeastern cities.

In the 1920s disc recordings eclipsed cylinders as the medium for commercial dissemination. Portable disc-cutting equipment also made it possible for companies to leave their northern urban studios and travel to



English folklorist Cecil Sharp collecting a ballad from Mrs. Pratt of Hindman, Knott County, Kentucky (1917). Field assistant Maud Karpeles is to the right. Photo courtesy Vaughn Williams Memorial Library, English Folk Dance and Song Society

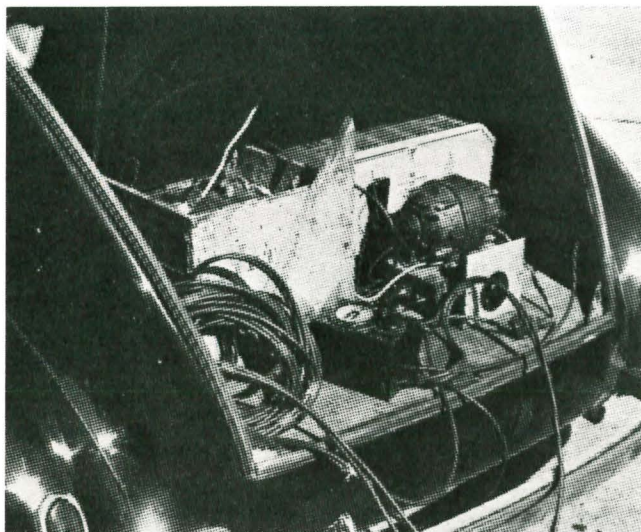
southern cities and towns in search of English-language folk materials. In retrospect, record company scouts like Ralph Peer and Polk Brockman served as “unwitting folklorists,” as they began in 1923 to record commercial discs of instrumentally accompanied songs kindred to what Cecil Sharp had taken down by pen only five years earlier.

Beyond British ballads the recording companies marketed new American songs like the “Wreck of the ’97” and “Miller’s Cave,” as well as a wide range of “hillbilly” stringband music, “race records” (as blues and gospel were called), and by the late 1920s regional ethnic styles such as Cajun and Texas-Mexican music. As the case with cylinders, the buying audiences were the specific folk/ethnic communities where the music originated. However, as the record companies attempted to widen audiences, and community members sought mainstream lifestyles, more acculturated and hybrid forms of music were recorded. By the 1930s old-time stringbands

gave way increasingly to “crooners” and western swing orchestras; blues, though less affected, became urbanized; Cajun music included English vocals and edged toward country music in style.

In contrast to commercial recording, folklorist Robert W. Gordon, the first director of the Library of Congress’s Archive of American Folk Song, began in 1925 to document southern folk music and narratives. Gordon worked with mountain Anglos near Asheville, North Carolina, and coastal Blacks in Darien, Georgia. Like Sharp he took the antiquarian view: his “finds” represented earlier stages of cultural evolution in which one might seek the sources of poetic creativity. However, Gordon experimented with recording technology as a means of data collection:

... my field work will be so conducted that I may bring back to my study the still living specimens for later work. ... I can at any moment recall the *actual* singer though miles away. And what I fail to do in the way of proper interpretation will be open to others who come after me. I shall not muddy the water or conceal the trail.



The back of John and Alan Lomax's car was modified to hold disc-cutting equipment for their 1930s field trips. Photo courtesy Archive of Folk Culture, Library of Congress

John A. Lomax, who followed Gordon at the Archive of American Folk Song and collected throughout the South and West in the 1930s, modified his car to transport new, but cumbersome, aluminum-disc recording technology. On field trips made with family members, especially son Alan, he sought old forms of musical expression – not as remnants of an earlier life but as exemplars of the current vitality of a pluralistic America. Lomax, a self-proclaimed “ballad hunter,” used his recordings to argue for an American tradition of folksong performers, “. . . who still sing the cowboy songs, the sea songs, the lumberjack songs, the bad-man ballads. . . the songs of the down-and-out classes. . .”

As a youth in East Texas at the turn of the century Lomax had written down cowboy songs heard on the family ranch; now he used sound recordings as audio evidence to refute notions of Cecil Sharp and others that many Americans lacked a worthwhile native cultural inheritance. Especially significant among the over 3,000 recordings made by the Lomaxes for the Library of Congress are worksongs, blues, shouts, spirituals, sermons and gospel music, all of which helped prove the integrity of Black folk culture and its influence on other musical forms.

It is instructive today to hear the divergence between what commercial companies recorded in the 1930s and the parallel work of the Lomaxes. In Louisiana French music, for example, even the earliest 1928-9 New Orleans studio sessions of Columbia, Okeh Records and others limited their recordings to the waltzes and two-steps of Cajun dance music. By 1934, when commercial companies had turned to acculturated styles, the Lomaxes journeyed to rural south Louisiana to make field-recordings of the traditional dance music as well as old French ballads, drinking songs and *juré* chants – the African-influenced roots of Creole zydeco music.

Moses Asch, a Jewish emigré from Poland who combined experience as an electronics engineer with political activism, produced the most notable commercial recordings equivalent to the Lomax field material. Asch sought primarily traditional music for a series of his own New York-based companies before finally establishing Folkways Records in 1947. He documented and disseminated an encyclopedic archive of human sound.

Small record companies founded a generation or more later – Arhoolie, Yazoo, Rounder, Shanachie – still show the influence of Asch's vision.

Photography, like sound recording, has long been a favored tool of folklorists because of its relatively unobtrusive nature, simple mechanics and powerful effects. Although the technology had been available in the 19th century, the creative period of folkloric documentary photography came in the 1930s within the Farm Security Administration (FSA). FSA photographers (including Ben Shahn, Marion Post Walcott and Dorothea Lange) fanned out into America to document the lives of rural or displaced peoples. Under the direction of New Deal activist Roy E. Stryker most photographers exploited the veracity of stark black and white documentary images to provoke public reaction to widespread poverty.

Photographer Walker Evans collaborating with writer James Agee produced a classic: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1939). This memorable book lives as a polemic, poetic inventory of White tenant farmers' lives in Depression Alabama. While Agee and Evans focused on the artistic impact of their words and photos – with a message of dignity and integrity in an environment of despair – ethnographers interested in the systematic study of culture have since tended to use photography more as a “scientific research method.” Yet many folklorists who use photographs to represent traditional communities still draw on the photo *noir* style and evocative content associated with FSA photographs. At the same time, process-oriented photo documentation – for this Festival for example – also remains an essential folklore field research tool.

Film and video as ethnographic media, like photography, continue the history of tension between the art and science of documentation. Such early films about traditional societies as Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926) included much action

created especially to tell a “story” to the viewer. Later films by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson on the Balinese, John Marshall on Kalahari Bushmen and Robert Gardner on New Guineans looked at the process of specific activities such as dance and ritual or provided audiovisual ethnographies of the culture as a whole.

Based on lengthy field research, ethnographic film in the strictest sense presents “whole acts” in a defined cultural context. While such works serve for data interpretation, classroom use and as text supplements, many films and videos in the last two decades by independent documentors provide a primarily personal aesthetic or exotic experience of cultures. They may reach broad audiences through their entertainment value, but fidelity to the cultures represented is sometimes compromised. The most satisfying films, from a folkloric perspective, are those that have a strong research base, represent traditional communities and their context equitably and are well-realized as media art. One example, *Number Our Days* (1977), by the late anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff and filmmaker Lynne Littman, is a film about a California community of elderly Jews.

As suggested earlier, people in traditional communities today carry out much of the most interesting and significant media documentation of folklife. Such documentation may be an extension of the tradition itself, as when Mexican women put photographs of babies, married children or deceased relatives on home altars. Zuni Indians, who once banned outsiders with pencils from their reservation in 1912 to prevent their writing down of esoteric knowledge, now use radio to transmit their own language and verbal arts.

Self-conscious attempts to examine cultural perception or maintain a sense of cultural continuity through media documents occur regularly. For example, the book *Through Navajo Eyes* (1972) profiled the efforts of visual anthropologists to see what Navajo-produced films could say about their culture. In 1975 school teacher Wendy Ewald began to make cameras available to her rural Kentucky elementary school students – the cultural great-grandchildren of Cecil Sharp’s ballad singers – so that they could document tradition and change in their own lives. This year Cajun folklorist Barry Ancelet and musician Michael Doucet produced a reissue of the now historic 1934 Lomax field recordings of Louisiana Cajuns and Creoles.

Documentary artifacts – text, ethnographic film, traditional music recordings, family photographs and home videos – play many roles: scholarly research and presentation, enhancement of status of traditional culture inside or beyond a community, personal mementos, entertainment, archival preservation for future use. By recording unheard traditions and providing visibility or “airtime,” folklorists and community members can use documentary media to record, interpret and extend expression of traditional societies.



The Luiseño Indian culture bank consists of several suitcases containing documentary slides, tapes, photographs and texts. The suitcases travel to tribal centers in California to preserve and present cultural heritage. Photo courtesy the Luiseño Cultural Preservation Committee

This article has benefited from discussion over the years with folklorist Archie Green.

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Suggested reading

Agee, James and Walker Evans. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. New York: Ballentine Books, 1973 [1939].

Heider, Karl. *Ethnographic Film*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976.

Jackson, Bruce. *Fieldwork*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986.

Library of Congress. *Ethnic Recordings in America: A Neglected Heritage*. Washington, D.C.: American Folklife Center, 1982.

_____. *The Federal Cylinder Project: A Guide to Field Cylinder Collections in Federal Agencies Vol. 1*. Washington, D.C.: American Folklife Center, 1984.



Miwok singer with clapper stick, Brown Tadd, is video-documented by Lorenzo Baca on the *Tuolumne Rancheria* near Sonora, California.
Photo by Lorenzo Baca



Independent videographers Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker document alligator skinner Kim Alfonso, Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana.
Photo by Michael P. Smith courtesy Center for New American Media

Suggested recordings

Anthology of American Folksong, vols. 1-3, Harry Smith, ed. (Folkways Records FA 2951-2953).

Folk Songs of America: The Robert Winslow Gordon Collection, 1922-1932, Debora Kodish and Neil Rosenberg, eds. (Library of Congress, AFS L68).

Louisiana Cajun and Creole Music 1934: The Lomax Recordings, Barry Ancelet and Michael Doucet, producers (Swallow Records LP-8003-2).

Old-Timey Records, Chris Strachwitz, producer (Arhoolie Records).

Suggested films

Cbular Fronteras, by Les Blank. 58 min. color, 16mm. Brazos Films, El Cerrito, California.

Dead Birds, by Robert Gardner. 83 min. color. Phoenix Films, New York.

Nanook of the North, by Robert Flaherty. 55 min. b&w. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Number Our Days, by Barbara Myerhoff and Lynne Littman. 28 min. color, 16mm and video. Direct Cinema, Los Angeles.

Zydeco: Creole Music and Culture in Rural Louisiana, by Nicholas R. Spitzer. 57 min. color video. Center for Gulf South History and Culture, New Orleans, Louisiana.