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JOHN LOMAX'S FIRST SOUTHERN
PRISON RECORDINGS, 1933



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John Avery Lomax poses for the camera, trademark cigar in hand, ca. 1940. Photographer Unknown. Courtesy of the Alan Lomax Archive at the Association for Cultural Equity.
Cover Image: "Lightning" Washington performing a work song with other prisoners, Darrington State Prison Farm, Texas, 1934.

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BY MARK ALLAN JACKSON

Nineteen thirty-one was perhaps the hardest year in John Lomax's life. His beloved wife Bess died in late spring, and the financial crisis of the Great Depression slammed down on Republic National, the bank where he was a vice president in the bond division. The resulting stress caused his health to suffer. In October, he stepped down from this position. Dispirited, the sixty-four-year-old cast about for a new direction. Years earlier, he had earned a reputation for collecting folk songs, largely due to *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1910), whose offerings included the now classic "Home on the Range" and "Get Along, Little Dogies." Lomax had largely left this interest behind him when he went into banking in 1917. Then, in his moment of crisis, his thoughts drifted back to his past passion.

Within just a year and a half, Lomax managed to acquire a contract for a folksong book from Macmillan Publishers and to forge a partnership with the Music Division of the Library of Congress. Then in the summer of 1933, he began the first of many collecting tours that would preserve the cultural treasure of our nation's homegrown music. During this trip, Lomax and his son Alan planned to visit a number of sites in their home state of Texas, then drift through other southern locations. Although wanting to record a variety of people representing themselves and their communities through song, Lomax specifically desired to document the collective expression of black America.

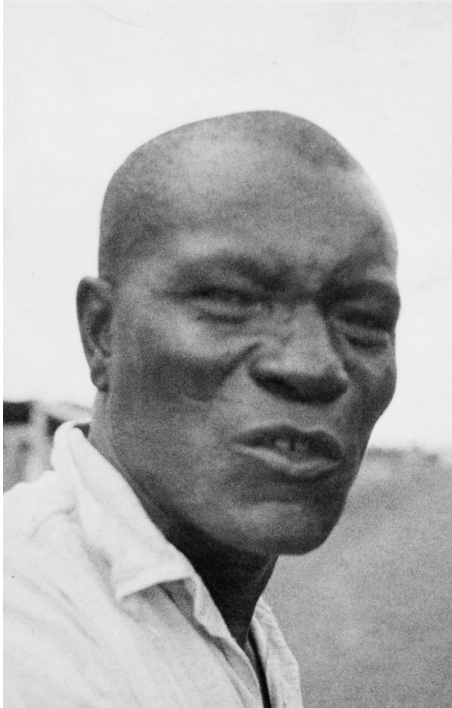
To find the best examples of pure African-American folk song, Lomax planned to travel to remote locations. Prisons were particularly desirable because the folklorist speculated that the isolation of these institutions would ensure the purity of the folk songs found: “Our purpose was to find the Negro who had had the least contact with jazz, the radio, and with the white man,” and “in the prison farm camps . . . the conditions were practically ideal.” For there, “the Negro prisoners were segregated, often guarded by Negro trusties, with no social or other contacts with the whites, except for occasional official relations.” As a result, “They still sang the songs they had brought into confinement, and these songs had been entirely in the keeping of the black man” without “the influence of the idiom and custom of his white neighbors.”¹ This approach became somewhat standardized as other collectors such as his son Alan, Harry Oster, and Bruce Jackson also recorded African-American convicts in southern prisons. But none managed to gain wider access to some of the nation’s most highly guarded spaces than John Lomax, who documented through song the experiences and attitudes of black prisoners in the Jim Crow South.

Before the duo began their excursion, they traveled to Dallas to pick up a Dictaphone cylinder recorder, one with a spring-driven motor that had to be constantly rewound. As Alan later reflected, “It was a rather unlikely tool for one had to speak into the little horn and it mechanically registered the cut on the revolving cylinder.”² Armed with this crude recording tool, they began their adventure.

After disappointment at Huntsville, where the warden would not allow any recording, Lomax found his way to Central State Prison Farm, better known as “Sugar Land” in early July. Decades earlier, Imperial Sugar Company, which itself had leased convicts to work its cane fields, had owned the property, so not much had changed when the prison opened. The farm’s primary crop was sugar cane in the

early years of its existence, but disease and protective federal taxes had ended this practice in the late 1920s, when cotton became the prison farm's main product. No matter what they grew, the prisoners suffered difficult conditions, working from "can to can't," from dawn to dusk, which in summer meant sixteen-hour days. Punishments for those seen to be slacking or rebellious were harsh, including the lash.

In these rough surroundings, John Lomax found three performers whose songs, such as "Ain't No More Cane on the Brazos" and "Black Betty," stood as superb examples of African-American folk expression. He recorded Ernest "Mexico" Williams, a hospital steward, Mose "Clear Rock" Platt, whose singing later earned him a pardon from Governor "Ma" Ferguson, and James "Iron Head" Baker, one of Lomax's favorite discoveries. Although Baker had been in prison on and off since 1902, he was then a trusty. Years after this recording



James "Iron Head" Baker, Central State Prison Farm, Texas, 1934.

Photographer unknown, held by the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress.

session, Lomax had Baker conditionally paroled into his care for folk-song collecting activities.

After this first success, the Lomaxes drove south to Darrington State Prison Farm, arriving on July 7. Prisoners there also worked fields of cotton, along with corn, and their accommodations, especially for the black convicts, were primitive. Although Lomax recorded several groups of singers at Darrington, only two men are named, “Lightning” Washington and Dave Tippin. Most performances were of work songs, such as “Long Gone (“Long John”), which helped set the pace or rhythm for group tasks such as wood chopping.

Afterward, John and Alan traveled into southern Louisiana. There, Lomax finally had the opportunity to rid himself of the Dictaphone recorder, which only managed to capture rough cuts of songs. Earlier, he had arranged with inventor Walter Garwick to ship them a new machine he had just designed. It arrived by train in Baton Rouge, and the Lomaxes picked it up July 12th. But its size and weight initially daunted the collector: “I remember well the first electrically driven machine that I operated in 1933. The amplifier weighed more than one hundred pounds; the turntable case weighed another one hundred; two Edison batteries weighed seventy-five pounds each. The microphone, cable, the tools, etc. accounted for sufficient weight to make the total five hundred pounds. The different cases were bulky, unwieldy and hard to handle. In order to carry them in my car I tore out the back seat and installed the different parts in a specially built-in wooden framework.”³ Still, Lomax hoped that the new machine would improve the fidelity of the songs they collected.

On July 16th, the Lomaxes traveled to Louisiana State Penitentiary, better known as “Angola.” With the Mississippi River snaking around three sides and only one road running the thirty miles to civilization, it was an isolated land. Before it had become a

prison in 1901, Angola had been a private plantation named after the location in Africa where its slaves had come from, and not much had changed from the one incarnation to the other. Long known as a hellish place, the prison had fallen into dire financial straits due to Depression-era cutbacks by the time the Lomaxes arrived. Officials also stopped the convicts from singing while they worked, leaving the folklorists fearful of finding any material.

Still, they encountered worthy singers, especially Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter, who has since become an American legend. He performed several folk songs for them, such as “Frankie and Albert” and “Honey, Take a Whiff on Me.” Unfortunately, Garwick’s machine did not work well, and all of the recordings contain hissing, popping, and other noises. Lomax understood the limitations of these fragmentary recordings, and he returned to Angola in the summer of 1934 to re-record the songs Lead Belly had performed earlier.

After a lengthy stay in New Orleans, where both Lomaxes were hospitalized due to malaria, they traveled north and reached the Mississippi State Prison Farm at Oakley on August 6th. As it was a Sunday, they successfully encouraged the prisoners to sing spirituals, but as the group’s voice rose in the dining hall where they were assembled, the sound overwhelmed the still uncertain recorder, so Lomax pulled a few men aside for a session, on which he offered much praise: “Were it possible 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.”⁴

On August 7th, the Lomaxes rolled into the primary facility of the Mississippi State Prison system, known as Parchman Farm. Since its beginnings as a penal institution, this massive 18,000 acre farm had been the holding place for thousands of convicts,



Prisoners hoeing in a field at Parchman Farm, Mississippi, ca. 1930s. Photographer unknown; held by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History

most of whom were black. The prisoners entered cotton fields before dawn to work the land, and trusty guards watched over the men, guns in hand.

The duo recorded at Parchman for three days, capturing such songs as “Rosie” and “Alabama Bound.” They found so much music that John wrote, “It would require many months to secure all the song material available among those two thousand black men.”⁷⁵ Indeed, father and son would return to Parchman more than at any other penal facility, eventually documenting a massive stock of songs there.

Next, the Lomaxes headed north to Tennessee. Their first stop was the Shelby County Workhouse in Memphis in early August of 1933. Although a new downtown county jail had recently been built, many of its prisoners were housed at a rustic minimum-security facility named Shelby Farms, an isolated stretch of land that formerly had



Prisoners, including Lead Belly, standing behind the fence at Compound #1 in Angola Prison, Louisiana, 1934. Photographer unknown; held by the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress.

been a nineteenth-century commune. There, prisoners grew crops for their fellow inmates and to sell for the benefit of the municipality.

Later, Lomax described the recording environment: “At Memphis, we used for our recording room a large barn, the walls of which were lined with baled hay; the recordings that resulted were free from echo, but at the same time flat in quality.”⁶ During his short stay, Lomax recorded only a few songs; some were variations on pieces already encountered in other southern prisons. For example, a group identified in his field notes as “Negro Prisoners” sang a version of the classic “John Henry” and the work song “Long John.” But here he also first came across “Jumpin’ Judy,” now recognized as a traditional prison song.

He then traveled to Nashville State Penitentiary, a stark change from the prison farms

he had thus far visited. One former inmate described it thus: “It stands like a medieval fortress, with domed towers, barred windows, and high stone walls, on nineteen acres of rocky ground in a wide bend of the Cumberland River.”⁷ This castle-like building, based on New York’s Auburn prison, began receiving prisoners in February 1898 and immediately was overcrowded. When Lomax arrived in 1933, the prison was still awash in human flotsam. Men and women (both black and white) were packed into deteriorating cells, suffering under the administration of cash-strapped state authorities.

Even in this imposing structure, overfilled with those society had convicted and then shunned, Lomax found wonderful singers who gave voice to the experiences of the black community, such as Allen Prothero and John “Black Sampson” Gibson. The Lomaxes recorded a variety of secular songs, such as blues and work songs, as well as spirituals such as “Sit Down, Servant.”

After brief stops in Kentucky, North Carolina, and Virginia, the Lomaxes ended up in Washington, DC. There, in the attic confines of the Jefferson building of the Library of Congress, they worked feverish weeks to arrange and annotate the songs they had found for inclusion in their now classic *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, which was published in October 1934. In the book, Lomax expressed how he saw black America’s songs as a great and undocumented source of literature, an attitude not largely shared by whites of the era. Years later, Lomax called African-American spirituals “Poetic expressions of pungent wit, simple beauty, startling imagery, extraordinary vividness and power.” He also predicted that the music of the black songster, especially in the creation of the country blues, would be accepted as great art: “Some day, I know, his power of phrasing truisms about his people, his trenchant economy of speech, his final outstanding ability to put into short expressive words his deepest emotions, we shall all recognize as a contribution to literature.”⁸

Still, as was often true of his songbooks, John Lomax altered the sequence of stanzas, changed words, or even compiled a version from several sources for *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, justifying these adjustments by stating, “we have brought together what seems the best stanzas, or even lines, from widely separated sources.”⁹ Yet in the recordings he made, we find the unexpurgated views of the prisoners. There, the convicts had the opportunity to speak for themselves, their voices etched in shellac and preserved at the Library of Congress. These songs give witness to both the mundane and shocking experiences of black prisoners held in southern prisons and elevate the collective achievements of his informants from immediate expression into long-term art. But for the most part, they have remained unheard. Now, decades later, they can be encountered here, a gift and a testament to us all.



Mose “Clear Rock” Platt sits atop a wagon, Central State Prison Farm, Texas, 1934. Photographer unknown, held by the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress.

THE RECORDINGS

1. **“Rattler”** (Cylinder 13 AFS 21843B) by Mose “Clear Rock” Platt with unknown prisoner singing back up; recorded in July 1933 at Central State Prison Farm in Texas. The joyous version included in here, complete with barking, belies the song’s story, one typical of prison versions of this folk song, in which the legendary bloodhound Rattler tracks an escaped convict. Although many have recorded this piece, such as the Stanley Brothers and Elizabeth Cotton, Platt was the first to have his documented in prison.
2. **“That’s Alright, Honey”** (AFS 194 Side A) by Mose “Clear Rock” Platt; recorded December 1933 at Central State Prison Farm in Texas. This playful “patting song” seems to be specific to Platt, for the singer did not know where the words and tune came from, and Lomax admits that he never found it elsewhere.¹⁰
3. **“The Midnight Special”** (Cylinder 11 AFS 21843e) by Ernest Williams; recorded in July 1933 at Central State Prison Farm in Texas. Perhaps the best-known southern prison song, “The Midnight Special” had been recorded commercially as early as 1926, but Williams’s version is more poignant than most because the story of the deprivations of imprisonment and the hope for freedom become autobiographical.
4. **“Ain’t No More Cane on the Brazos”** (Cylinder 11AFS 21843f) by Ernest “Mexico” Williams; recorded in July 1933 at Central State Prison Farm in Texas. This song notes the end of cane production at Sugar Land and the conditions there, including the longing felt when “Shorty George,” the train that brought in women for visits, had left.
5. **“Ain’t No More Cane on the Brazos”** (AFS 199 Side B) by Ernest “Mexico” Williams with James “Iron Head” Baker and his quartet singing back up; recorded in December 1933 at Central State Prison Farm in Texas. In this version, Lomax prompts Williams to add a verse noted in *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, the one containing the lines, “You

should have been here in 1910; they was driving the women just like the men.”

6. **“My Yellow Gal”** (AFS 200 Side B) by James “Iron Head” Baker with R.D. Allen and Will Crosby singing back up; recorded in December 1933 at Central State Prison in Texas. This song celebrates a multiracial lover, and Lead Belly numbered it among his favorite pieces to perform and record.

7. **“Black Betty”** (AFS 200 Side B) by James “Iron Head” Baker with R.D. Allen and Will Crosby singing back up; recorded in December 1933 at Central State Prison Farm in Texas. Lomax claimed that this song was about the whip used to punish prisoners rather than a tale of a woman, but both Alan Lomax and Bruce Jackson found prisoners who argued that “Black Betty” was actually the prison transfer truck.¹¹

8. **“The Grey Goose”** (AFS 207 Side B) by James “Iron Head” Baker with R.D. Allen, Will Crosby, and Mose “Clear Rock” Platt singing back up; recorded in December 1933 at Central State Prison Farm in Texas. This song offers the story of an indestructible goose who takes six weeks to fall from the sky after being shot and whose skin breaks the teeth of a lumber-mill saw.

9. **“Long Gone”** (“Long John”) (Cylinder 6 AFS 21842b) by “Lightning” Washington and an unidentified group (possibly including Dave Tippin); recorded in July 1933 at Darrington State Prison Farm in Texas. In 1920, composer W. C. Handy and lyricist Chris Smith took a Kentucky-based folk song about an escaped prisoner and transformed it into “Long Gone.” Since then, many have recorded it, including Bascom Lunsford and De Ford Bailey. Lomax attributed this version solely to Washington, although Dave Tippin may have actually taken the lead on it.

10. **“Long John”** (AFS 183 Side A) by “Lightning” Washington and an unidentified group; recorded in December 1933 at Darrington State Prison Farm in Texas. The lead singer of this piece is different from the version recorded in July, but it is more certain that

Washington was the soloist here as the Lomaxes took better notes after their first trip. This version also stands out in that you can hear the thud of the axes as part of this work song.

11. **“Good God Almighty”** (AFS 183 Side A) by *“Lightning” Washington and an unidentified group; recorded in December 1933 at Darrington State Prison Farm.* The first time Lomax saw Washington perform this work song, he noted, “Lightnin’s eyes blazed as he sang. . . . His strong, graceful body swayed with the rhythm and the fervor of the singing.”¹² Although this version is from the Lomaxes second visit to Darrington, the power of the piece is still evident, especially in the percussive blow of the axes.

12. **“Stewball”** (AFS 1855 Side A) by *an unidentified group; recorded in August 1933 at the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Oakley.* This folk song originated in England in the 1700s and began as a celebration of a real horse named Skewball. In America, it became a part of the African-American tradition as “Stewball”, especially in southern prisons where it was used as a work song.

13. **“John Henry”** (AFS 1867 Side B) by *an unidentified group; recorded in August 1933 at the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Oakley.* This song may be the quintessential American folk piece as the celebration of this steel-driving man has been sung by many performers from different traditions. In this version, the first two stanzas draw on lyrics often associated with “Lass of Roch Royal” (Child Ballad 76).

14. **“He Never Said a Mumbling Word”** (AFS 1856 Side B) by *an unidentified group; recorded August 1933 at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman.* This traditional spiritual contains a graphic depiction of the crucifixion of Christ. In *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, Lomax notes, “the huge and genial Negro blacksmith on Camp C of the Louisiana State Farm at Angola furnished the words and the air for this spiritual, which is known throughout Texas, Mississippi, and Tennessee.”¹³ Due to the poor con-

dition of that recording, a version by prisoners at Parchman is included here.

15. **“Rosie”** (AFS 1859 Side B) *by an unidentified group; recorded August 1933 at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman.* In reflecting on this piece, John Lomax argues that it was “the most stirring of all prison work songs” as it was “filled full of a fierce and bitter despair.” He also described its recording: “A group of convicts at Camp No. 1 of the Mississippi State Farm sang it for us late one evening after they had come in from a day’s work in the fields, and what they sang is essentially unreproducible; for along with the singing one must hear the beat of the hoes on the hard ground, the shouted exclamations at intervals in the song.”¹⁴ Here, you sense why Lomax thought so highly of this rendition.

16. **“Alabama Bound”** (AFS 1863 Side B) *by “Bowlegs”; recorded August 1933 at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman.* This song had been in circulation for many decades before Lomax recorded several versions of it at Parchman. The one by Bowlegs, noted as the “levee-camp version,” was used in *American Ballads and Folk Songs* and appears here.

17. **“Jumpin’ Judy”** (AFS 174 Side A) *by an unidentified group; recorded in August 1933 at the Shelby County Workhouse in Memphis.* This work song focuses on the difficulties of prison life and the possibility of escape or release. This version was the first ever recorded, although the Lomaxes found “Jumpin’ Judy” in Mississippi and Arkansas.

18. **“John Henry”** (AFS 174 Side B) *by an unidentified group; recorded in August 1933 at the Shelby County Workhouse in Memphis.* This version uses a more standard tune and draws upon more traditional stanzas than the one the Lomaxes found at Oakley. Again, the verses associated with “Lass of Roch Royal” appear.

19. **“Jumping Judy”** [“Jumpin’ Judy” in ABFS] (AFS 176 Side B) *by Allen Prothero; recorded August 1933 at the Tennessee State Prison in Nashville.* Of Prothero’s singing,



John Lomax talking with Billy McCrea in Jasper, Texas during a collecting trip in 1934. Photographer unknown; held by the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress.

Lomax writes, “He had a silver tenor voice, clear as a bugle note.”¹⁵ Later, Lomax worked to gain parole for this prisoner, but he died of tuberculosis in April 1936 before his release could be arranged.

20. **“Sit Down, Servant”** (AFS 178 Side B) by *Adie Corbin and Ed Frierson*; recorded in August 1933 at the Tennessee State Prison in Nashville. Corbin and Frierson perform this traditional spiritual in beautiful close harmony that is distinct from other published and recorded versions available in the 1930s.

21. **“Levee Camp Holler”** (AFS 179 Side B) by *John “Black Sampson” Gibson*; recorded in August 1933 at the Tennessee State Prison in Nashville. Gibson had taken up the sanctified life and felt that this secular song was sinful, but at the urging of Lomax and the warden, the prisoner acquiesced, although he notes, “Lord, this levee camp song is mighty bad to sing.”

22. **“Track Lining Song”** (AFS 180 Side A) by John *“Black Sampson”* Gibson; recorded August 1933 at the Tennessee State Prison in Nashville. Titled *“Tie-Shuffling Chant”* in *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, this piece was used in the *“lining or straightening out of a railroad track,”* and *“The accented syllables represent the concerted movements of the gang against their lining bars.”*¹⁶

23. **“Steel Laying Holler”** (AFS 181 Side A) by Rochelle Harris; recorded in August 1933 at the Tennessee State Prison in Nashville. Sung while unloading heavy steel rails from flat cars, this song helped coordinate the efforts of many men. The clanging adds an element of realism to this version as it replicates the sound the steel rails would make as they slammed together

24. **Interview with John Lomax**; recorded October 1933 at the home of Harvard professor George L. Kittredge. Dr. Miles L. Hanley of the American Dialect Society conducted the interview, in which Lomax lays out the reasoning behind the recordings he made the previous summer, especially those in prison camps.

NOTES

1. John and Alan Lomax. *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. New York: Macmillan, 1934: xxx.
2. Alan Lomax. *“Alan Lomax.”* *Decade of Destiny*. ed. Judah L. Grabart and Alice Grabart. Chicago: Contemporary Books, Inc., 1978: 311.
3. John A. Lomax. *“Field Experiences with Recording Machines.”* *Southern Folklore Quarterly*. 1:2 (June) 1937: 58.
4. John Lomax. *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*. New York: Macmillan, 1947: 124.
5. *Ibid*, 126.

6. John Lomax. "Archive of American Folk-Song." *Report of the Librarian of Congress for Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1933*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933: 98.
7. Horace Woodroof. *Stone Wall College*. Nashville: Aurora Publishers, 1970: 5.
8. Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 98, 297.
9. John and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, xxvii.
10. Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 178.
11. Alan Lomax. *The Land Where the Blues Began*. New York: The New Press, 2002: 291; Bruce Jackson. *Wake Up Dead Man: Hard Labor and Southern Blues*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1999: 194.
12. Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 161.
13. John and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, 588.
14. *Ibid*, 62-3.
15. Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, 151.
16. John and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, 14.

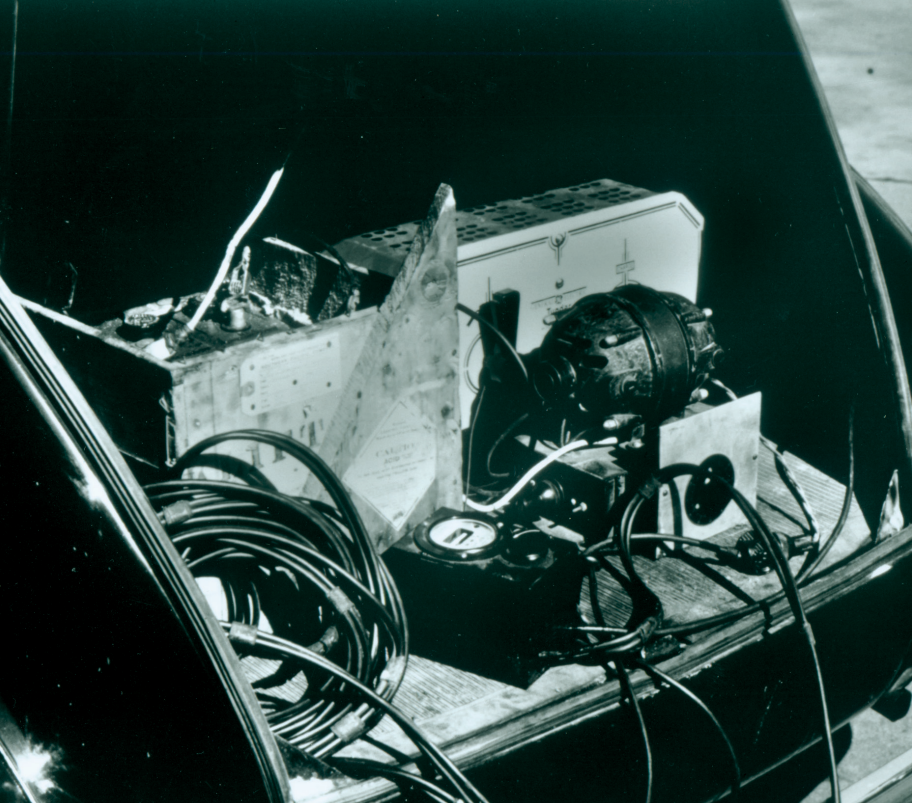
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- John Szwed. *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World*. New York: Viking, 2010.

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The sound files for this CD were digitized in 24-bit/96 kHz audio from the original cylinders and discs by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.



Sound recording equipment carried in the trunk of John Lomax's car, ca. 1934. Photographer unknown; held by the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress.