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Audio Preservation: Archiving as an Act of Restorative Justice

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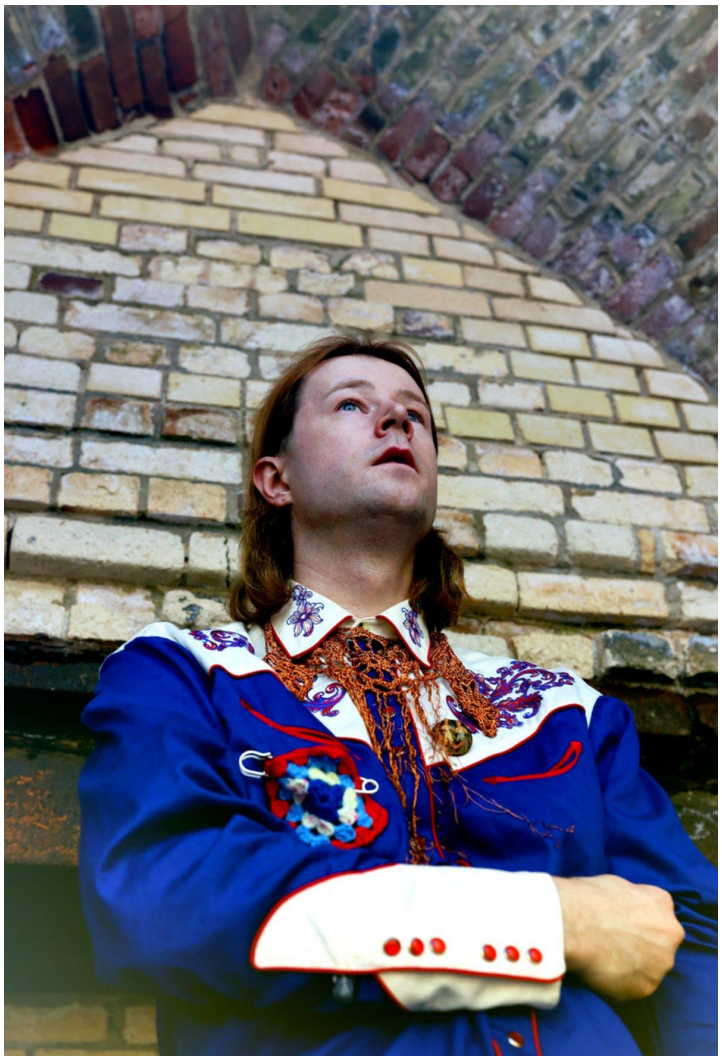

Source

Presently, Connecticut-based Folklorist Derek Piotr is following Lomax's field recording footsteps by digging into and reviving early 20th century North Carolinian "Mountain Music".

His recent 2022 compilation, "Ever Since We've Known it: More North Carolina Mountain Singing", dives into the voice, history, and ancestry of 20th century North Carolinian singer, Lena Turbyfill. When Piotr discovered recordings of Lena's "chrystaline voice singing dark murder ballads", which were a part of the New Deal WPA recordings in the Library of Congress' American Folklife Center, he wanted to know "what is with these sweet girls singing horrible songs?!" Piotr worked backwards, from finding the recordings to tracing lineage and history. Through findagrave.com, he embarked on a Lomax-like search for Lena's descendants in Elk Park, North Carolina. We spoke to Piotr to hear how the field recorder operates now, in 2022.

Many believe the “traveling Lomax field recorder can’t exist anymore because there’s not a wealth of these stories and songs,” Piotr shares, continuing, “I’m trying to counter that with recordings of non-singers, someone who has never been on stage or in front of a microphone but still can remember their ancestors.” Piotr recorded Lena’s daughter Nicola “Aunt Nicky” Pritchard singing her mother’s songs after he met her in 2020. The two struck a close bond before her passing in 2021. Derek talks about the “magic” of meeting Nicky in the UK publication Folk Radio, providing further context on how he sparked connection with Turbyfill’s descendents.

With archived and unheard Appalachian recordings in “hand,” Piotr would meet families and ask “hey do you want to hear your grandpa singing?” and that would open the line of storytelling, “oh yeah grampy would sing that and my dad would play harmonica with him!” Some of the family had no idea these recordings existed at all, pointing to the museum-context debates of where and to whom does art belong to?

Source

The Library of Congress has a policy for transferring record ownership - if you can legally prove descendants “officially”, the Library will transfer the records at no cost. But again, what about all of the undocumented descendants, the slave lineages that were never written and can’t be proven by paper? It sounds like the usual bureaucracies of institutional access, but in this instance, additionally riddled with one-sided / hegemonic histories.

Even if field recordings are taken under public federal programming like the WPA, do most of them end up locked in universities and libraries? “We need another WPA during COVID” Piotr laughs. He shares that some field recordings are fairly “gatekept” and others are available to the public. “It can come down to the policies people have. It’s interesting to see who is persnickety and who isn’t. I found the same recording deposited twice in two different universities. One said ‘absolutely do not broadcast this, do not distribute this. You’ve signed a contract for private research only. I said right but it’s streaming on this other university too, the same tape…” I wondered, who else listens to these recordings? Derek is currently digging into the archives of the Scottish murder ballad “Lamkin,” “I will bet you for some of them, it’s like me and the [original] field recorder are the only people to listen to these. I’ll bet you under 5 people, ever. It’s my duty to get it to above 5 people.”

With all of these audio seeking projects, it’s important to ask who is it for? There’s a big difference between the institutional gatekeepers and the DJ who wants everyone to hear his set.

All of these projects start from the same thing - hearing something you love. A song or sound that moves you so deeply that you feel the impulse to keep it, find more of it, and maybe share it.