John A. Lomax Jr.

In 1969, my father John Henry Lomax Jr. (1947-1974), sat down in his Houston, Texas home with a cassette deck and recorded about 360 of his favorite songs preserved from 60 years of hearing them and at least from the 1930's on, singing them. This disc stands as a time capsule of this Texas folk singer's 1930's and 60's repertoire.

I grew up listening to my dad sing these songs as he had grown up listening to his dad sing them. As a youth, it didn't really dawn on me that I had been born into one of America's premier folk music families and that other kids hadn't grown up hearing these songs too.

My brother, Joseph Franklin Lomax, kept the tapes until his death, whereas I inherited them and brought them to Nashville, my home since 1973.

Our dad, a muscular six-footer, sang in a booming baritone voice - he was not a trained vocalist - but rather a singer who learned by doing. What he lacked in polish and professionalism, he made up for with a proud and passionate delivery.

"When he sang, my father had a true quota for the song that I don't believe I ever saw anyone else equal. He could hold the attention of an audience by himself - no guitar, no props - for an hour or more." - Joseph Lomax

My father made a fine living as a successful real estate developer, providing for his wife Margaret "Yvonne" and me - but his passion was music - specifically the cowboy songs, prison laments and Appalachian ballads he learned growing up in Austin. He never tired of sharing these songs of our heritage - rearranging some, condensing others and creating a few along the way. He sang them until the day that he died.

To me, this is music at its purest - a song and a voice - surely the starting point for all the music that has followed, from the the first crude instruments up to symphony orchestras.

Despite his occupational demands, my father John A. found the time to manage, book and tour with blues titan Lightning Hopkins and helped establish the Houston Folklore Society, which provided early exposure for Gary Clark, Lucinda Williams and K. T. Oslin. With Mack McCormick, he led Arhoolie Records founder Chris Strachwitz to Mance Lipscomb who became the first Arhoolie artist. In the Sits, John also released two albums of his most cherished selections for Folkways Records both of which are still available today.

Thus you can imagine my excitement when I discovered the living room cassette from 1969 recorded in his inimitable a capella delivery and characteristic zest! I had them transferred to disc and listened to all the songs many times. Here in this CD is the first batch - preserved so my children, their children and folks everywhere can enjoy these slices of America's treasured past. Hope you like them - there's lots more waiting to be released.

This project involves many Lomaxes, spanning four generations, with their birthdays spread from 1967-1998. My father learned many of these songs from his father, the pioneering folklorist John Henry Lomax. John Jr.'s brother Alan, who carried on and extended the field recording / folk preservation work, was also involved in the recording and promotion of many of the selections. My brother Joseph, who had begun singing professionally in the early 1980s, kept the recordings safe from 1969-1988. Alan's daughter, Dr. Anna Lomax Wood and our cousin Nicholas Hawes made song suggestions; my son Texas writer John Nova Lomax, lent his ears to the project. My daughter photographer Amanda Margaret Lomax, provided insights into photo selection. And my sweet wife Melanie provided her usual insights and support. I'd call that Maximum Lomax!

John M. Lomax / 2016
1. The Buffalo Skinners
This song is a movie, a saga of the Old West and a few of the men who cleared the plains of buffalo and in the process, removed the Indian tribes main source of food and clothing. We ride north with the boys who come home as men scant months later, scarred as if by war. A Whis Whois of prominent artists have recorded a version of this tale, including Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Ramblin' Jack Elliott (twice), Cisco Houston, John Renbourn and more recently Ricky Skaggs and Bruce Hornsby.

2. Git Along Little Dogies
Also known by the beginning of the refrain, “Whoopie ti-yi-ya”; this trail-driving song was one of my grandfather’s earliest discoveries. The song reaches into metaphysical realms as the cowboys ponder Judgment Day. First published in grandfather Lomax’s “Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads” in 1940, it has been recorded by countless Western artists.

3. The Grey Goose
This tale of a “Super Goose” captivates children and adults alike, but dug beneath the fairy-tale surface you will discover an anthem of the resilience and determination of African-Americans. One of my favorite versions was recorded by Sweet Honey In The Rock on the Grammy-winning Lead Belly/Woody Guthrie tribute CD: “A Vision Shared” from 1988.

4. Roosters Crow at Midnight
If you are looking for a great Yuletide song that few people have heard, give a listen to this Lead Belly-seasonal selection. It’s about the best Christmas song ever!

5. Ain’t No More Cane On This Brazos
Here’s a chilling work song in which the overseers drove the women like they drove the men. This was one of Dad’s favorites, another song from Lead Belly’s repertoire. As in the following selection, this sad tale revisits bygone days; at least I hope such brutal force is confined to history.

6. Tin Maker Man
The tin maker men are now gone. Happy Tom Rogers traveled around fixing things, a lost art my father was keen to see remembered. Though he could never work on a pot or pan for his accommodation he always sang the percussive noise, “t-rattle ty-rattle ty BANG”.

It’s another charming children’s song that’s catchy enough to appeal to adults.

7. The Ballad of Aimee McPherson
It’s hard to imagine how big a rock star Aimee Semple McPherson was about 100 years ago. She was an eccentric evangelist pioneer, being an early adopter of radio to spread her Four Square Church message. Based in Los Angeles, the huge church she built still stands today overlooking Silver Lake. The Billy Graham of her era, she conducted national, even international tours. The song chronicles her “kidnapping” and was very popular in the 1930s. See Daniel Epstein’s excellent biography, “Seizer Aimee.” Movie buffs might recall Faye Dunaway and Bette Davis portraying Aimee and her mother in “The Disappearance of Aimee McPherson” (1978).
8. Frankie and Albert
An American classic, it's got all the elements of a great song—memorable characters, two lovers, infidelity, murder, judgment and retribution. Better known as 'Frankie and Johnny', this iconic story has been recorded by Elvis Presley, Sam Cooke, Les Paul and Mary Ford, Van Morrison, Louis Armstrong, Johnny Cash, Lena Horne, Dave Brubeck, Brook Benton, Bob Dylan and heaps more. This version is a unique compilation of my dad's made from notes made by his dad.

9. Hallelujah I'm a Bum
Dating from the late 19th century, this sarcastic lament was the official anthem of the Seattle chapter of the Industrial Workers of the World ('The Wobblies') in 1910. It became widely known and was recorded in 1928 by Harry McClintock and later by Woody Guthrie.

10. The Alamo Song
This anthemic call to arms is well known in the Lone Star State as the rallying call of the doomed defenders of the San Antonio mission, the Alamo. Though all 186 valiant Texas defenders were slaughtered by the vastly larger Mexican Army, their heroic twelve-day stand gave Sam Houston time to assemble his forces for the battle of San Jacinto, securing Texas' independence.

11. Bring Me a Little Water Sylvie
'Tops' delivers a stirring reading of this well-known staple. He paints a vivid, vocal picture of an emotional scene between man and wife. The song has been popularized by Harry Belafonte, The Weavers, Pete Seeger, Lead Belly, Mungo Jerry, Lonnie Donegan and in 2015 by Bob Dylan.

12. No More Shall I Work in the Factory
This lament of the hard life of a factory worker is also known as 'The Factory Girl' but is an entirely different song from the Irish folk ballad. This selection is a cry of triumph by a woman readying herself to 'marry a country boy' and forever forsake the life of a factory worker.

13. The Rattlesnake Song
Another good man bites the dust in this tale, sung just as it appears in 'COWBOY SONGS'. The unusual repetition of a nice 'no - wa - man' gives the tragic story an oddly compelling rhythm.

14. The Ballad of Bobby Kennedy
My father learned this from a university professor and then added some embellishments. Unfortunately the song was completed just weeks before the assassination.

15. The Worms Crawl In
Here's a macabre number my dad learned during his wartime Navy years. In live performance he would really stress the 'uunmurnnns' and get all the kids to squealing. Later we'd sing our own personalized verses.
16. Change the Name of Arkansas
Presented by my dad as if it were an actual speech on the floor of the Arkansas legislature, this stirring rant contrasts with the colorless rhetoric of today (Donald Trump excepted).
[Recording from the 'Unexpurgated Folk: Songs of Men', produced by Mack McCormick in 1980 - used with permission.]

John A. Lomax Jr.

Buffalo Skinners - 3:00
Intro - :12 / Git Along Little Dogies - 3:25
Intro - :18 / The Grey Goose - 2:06
Intro - :19 / Roosters Crow at Midnight - 1:28
Ain't No More Cane on This Brazos - 2:47
Tin Maker Man - 1:13
Intro - :09 / Ballad of Aimee McPherson - 1:55
Intro - :20 / Frankie and Albert - 5:14
Hallelujah I'm a Bum - 1:49
The Alamo Song - 1:47
Intro - :46 / Bring Me a Little Water Sylvie - 2:47
Intro - :21 / No More Shall I Work in the Factory - 1:01
The Rattlesnake Song - 1:28
Intro - :19 / The Ballad of Bobby Kennedy - 2:15
The Worms Crawl In - 1:25
Intro - :55 / Change the Name of Arkansas - 2:44