

## Shorter Features

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The Shorter Features department serves as a forum for sharply focused archival topics which may not require full-length articles. Members of the Society and others knowledgeable in areas of archival interest are encouraged to submit papers for consideration. Shorter Features should range from 500 to 1,000 words in length and contain no annotation. Papers should be sent to Christopher Beam, Shorter Features Editor, *American Archivist*, National Archives and Records Service (NCWA), Washington, DC 20408.

### A Storyteller's Story

STEPHEN WADE

When I first started playing the banjo I was fortunate to be told by someone that the best records, and the most music, in its deepest and most substantial forms—in other words the genuine sound of the banjo and folk music—were to be found on the albums issued by the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress.<sup>1</sup> I went over to the Chicago Public Library then, and there on red vinyl, in a grey business-like album jacket, as if imbued with all the solemnity and high purpose of our government, was AFS L2. This album, like many of its companions, was recorded in the thirties and early forties

and had in its embrace the entrancing and beguiling names of America. Here was to be found Thaddeus Willingham of Gulfport, Mississippi, 1939, playing banjo on "Roll on the Ground"; "Glory in the Meetinghouse" by Luther Strong, fiddler from Dalesburg, Kentucky; "Grub Springs" by W. E. Claunch of Guntown, Mississippi; and J. M. "Sailor Dad" Hunt of Marion, Virginia, singing "Sally Brown." I'm glad to say that the recollection of this music and these records, which hold the fundamental sound to which I aspire in my own playing, is always with me. Two weeks ago, concerned about today's

<sup>1</sup>In 1981, the Archives of Folk Song became the Archive of Folk Culture. From 1928 through the 1950s it was called the Archive of American Folk Song. Throughout most of this presentation Archive of Folk Song has been used.

presentation, I asked Leonard Rapport to tell me in what I had hoped would be a long, erudite detailed explication what were the purposes, accomplishments, and intentions of the archivist's endeavor. He said warmly, quickly, and with a wave of his hand (we were both having a pizza), "Don't worry about it; archives are the raw materials."

Because these records were, to the extent of my knowledge at that time, unavailable to the buyer for purchase; because they were in only one library in Chicago and only on a 24-hour loan; because some were even 78s, which for someone of my generation is altogether mysterious; and because I could get only one or two out at a time, which meant that I would have to go through this over and over, I had to be both committed and persistent, because this wasn't going to be like buying a Beatles record. So for my first contact with this music in a concerted and deep way I am indebted to the work of archivists.

It was always held a tenet of faith in Chicago among its performing folk singers that if you wanted to hear the music of America, its true forms, the fundamental standards, and without the confusion and needs of music as a profession, then go to Washington, go and listen at the Archive of Folk Song. The image was planted in my head that the sincere student would do this and encounter the real thing, wearing headphones and concentrating very intently, close in a corner where card catalogues reached nearly to the skies, and this was a thing that a person born in the city as I was could do, because so many of the great players caught in the call numbers of the Archive of Folk Song had died or else lived very far away. This was one of the best ways to come to know this ar-

chaic, unavailable and deeply stirring music. There the connection again was that here is the truth, and here are the raw materials.

I think it is wonderful that not only the music was to be found here at the Archive but the stories were, too. It does make sense from an outsider's perspective that John Lomax, who was cuator of the Archive of American Folk Song, was at the same time the first director of the folklore collecting in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Writers Project. He was succeeded in this, as many of you know, by Benjamin Botkin who later was head of the Archive of Folk Song. This same Archive, until four years ago, housed a large portion of this material. The songs were there, the stories were there, and the stories' disseminators had worked there. Starting with *American Folklore; A Bibliography of Major Works*, compiled by Joe Hickerson, I began reading in this field. Early on I was given Botkin's seminal *Treasury of American Folklore* and there read on the first page in Carl Sandburg's introduction, his praise of Jack Conroy.<sup>2</sup> He said, "Something rather sweetly modern and quite impossible to see as coming alive out of any former generation is such a story as the editor dug out of the *Chicago Industrial Folklore* by Jack Conroy. There it was hiding out in the manuscripts of the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the state of Illinois. It tells about Slappy Hooper, the world's biggest, fastest and bestest sign painter," and so on. The Archive of Folk Song therefore touched, contained, provided, and disseminated all the things I was interested in, like a cornucopia, like the Mighty Mississippi, a kind of mental, musical metropolis.

<sup>2</sup>Conroy is an author whose stories figure prominently in Wade's "Banjo Dancing."

Although I'd come to Washington to the Archive of Folk Song several times before "Banjo Dancing" and had even gone to the "Buzzard's Nest"<sup>3</sup> where the WPA manuscripts were located, most of my reading started with Joe Hickerson's *Bibliography* and subsequently widened with the bibliographies and references found in each of the books themselves. For my birthday several years ago, my manager, who is also the director of my show, gave me Charles Haywood's *A Bibliography of North American Folklore and Folksong*, which has been a helpful reading guide. Another source for me has been the outcropping of activity of Kenneth Goldstein at the University of Pennsylvania. I met him while performing at the Philadelphia Folk Festival and visited him at the school. His love of books, his several libraries, and his association with a publishing house led to the bibliography of required reading for University of Pennsylvania folklore students. It also led to his student, folklorist/performer Saul Broudy, who has helped me with conceptual hurdles, and to Legacy Books of Hatboro, Pennsylvania, and to their quarterly of new book releases. Correspondence there brought me to Irene Rouse, a used book dealer in nearby Alexandria, Virginia, whose specialty is folklore. My interest in American frontier humor led me to Walter Blair at the University of Chicago, who wrote the first studies in this century on this genre. He suggested different collections of stories and gave me copies of a few he thought I might really enjoy. Since coming to Washington, I have met Professor Larry Mintz of the University of Maryland who edits *American Humor, An Interdisciplinary Newsletter*. His publication and knowledge have brought me great rewards, for he leads me to books,

surveys the field, describes theory, and tells me about what has just been published. It is now my daily habit to go to the Manuscript Reading Room at the Library of Congress to read in the Federal Writers Project collection. The Writers Project, which I understand took three years of constant toil to get in order, is immeasurably easier to work with than when I came here in 1980, for then it was largely bound up in boxes. Librarian Joe Sullivan and his cheerful staff have been warm and helpful to me. Ann Banks, as part of her master's thesis, listed the contents of this collection (and used many of the life stories from it in her well-received *First-Person America*), and Sullivan has expanded it to two typescript volumes and all the files, to my eye, are right in order. I only wish the Manuscript Reading Room had longer hours and two-cent instead of ten-cent xeroxing, and for this copies of the index were available for purchase, that would spare me the effort of duplicating it myself. Having read at the "Buzzard's Nest" and at the temporary location at the Jefferson Building, with its hospital-harsh ambience, the new Manuscript Reading Room is evenly bright, quiet, and altogether progress.

Because I have a synoptical field, because I don't know what I'll like or find of interest until after I've read it, because the heading miscellaneous might be as likely to contain the piece that I would want to perform as much as any other classification in the WPA manuscripts, be it life history, social-ethnic studies, or the folklore project, I enjoy having the large indexes, for they give me the hope that I might finish someday. That there is so much material is ultimately a happy prospect for me but I worry just the same. Therefore when the Haywood book or the 1943 *Check-List*

<sup>3</sup>The staff used this name for the room in which the WPA collections of the Archive of Folk Song and the Music Division were housed.

of *Recorded Songs in the English Language in the Archive of American Folk Song to July, 1940* became available to me, I was happy to get them, snapped them up, for even though dated, they were not obsolete and provide some concision to my interests. Three important musical scholars for me have been Charles Wolfe of Middle Tennessee State University, Art Rosenbaum of the University of Georgia, and Joseph T. Wilson, Director of the National Council for the Traditional Arts. They are all archivists, historians, field workers, and authors and have introduced me to musician-informants in their areas. Their collecting has led to my collecting, and I am currently readying some tapes for submission to the Archive here.

I have found it challenging to work with the musical materials at the Archive of Folk Culture, as it is now known. The music on the reference tapes is dense and closely packed, and, because the tapes reflect the eclecticism and the sequence of the collection, I have found myself distracted by performances on my way with the fast-forward lever to find what I set out to locate. Because the banjo music, for instance, is so scattered in its numbering, there is a lot of it and it is all over, it is hard to get a continuous uninterrupted listening session going for oneself in an afternoon at the Archive. One must go from tape to tape, one song here by an artist on one tape, and then another by him on a different tape. This is not always the case and certainly less so with more contemporary tapes, but fortunately, for me, another bibliographer, Robert Clayton, again under the direction of Joe Hickerson, put together an eighty-eight page bibliography of banjo songs in the collection as part of his master's thesis. I am now involved with Reference Librarian Gerry Parsons and with Alan Jabbour, head of the

American Folklife Center, in taking all the different banjo songs recorded prior to 1950 and putting them together on tape, so all this good banjo music will be gathered like an encyclopedia.

To a far greater extent than the instrumental music of the British Isles, banjo music in the U.S. is learned usually in an oral manner. Even the wide usage now of tablatures, which are a schematic description of banjo playing—the how of the tune, the what, the time values, and the rhythm—is not as clear in this system as in standard notation. Much of my learning has been from people or records, going straight from their sound to my hearing, and sensing the tune and remembering it and thinking it in my mind and then finding it with my fingers. In this music of individualists and stylists, where personality and playing are indivisible, it is best to start with the ear rather than the eye. This is a music where style, the sound, is as significant as (or perhaps more so than) the melody, given the essential simplicity of the tunes. It must be heard to be understood.

On the other hand, the stories I perform are often written, literate imitations of oral events. Often the economy and selectivity of the written story is more direct and contextually clear than a verbatim transcription of a person talking might be. In the best life stories of the Federal Writers Project, there is little wandering and much immediacy; a portrait is being made. In the lesser pieces there is more prolixity and diminished communication. The criteria I use in selecting pieces is what delights me. I ask myself, does the piece engage me and entrance me? Would I be proud to perform it? Is it moving? Is it interesting and compelling to the uncommitted? Does it have dramatic relevance? To what extent is it universal?

The interpolation of tunes and words

is conditioned by what I think the tone of the piece might be and by my limitations as a musician/actor who is attempting an ambidextrous activity in the same way a concert pianist plays with each hand different parts, simultaneously. In an interaction between my director and myself we discuss the interpretation of the pieces and often he suggests devices in the performance or in the text which might help it to reach the audience. Sometimes we might alter a story's context or else anneal elements to create a different mood, but usually,

the majority of pieces I do are verbatim though edited pieces of literature which, after hundreds of performances, fascinate me still and, I hope, delight others. I believe that the stories and the music have a depth and an endless changing diverse quality because they are near the bone, where it is sweetest; they are close, because people like you archivists have made it possible for others, like me, to get to the life up close, to get to the raw materials. I can't thank you enough.

*Early in January 1981, Stephen Wade began a three-week engagement at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. This engagement has never ended and is now the longest continuing performance in that city's history. Even before coming to Washington, Wade was seeking in archival repositories materials for "Banjo Dancing," his story-telling, singing, clogging, banjo-playing one-person show. Washington and its various repositories, and particularly the Library of Congress, has become, for Wade, richly productive.*

*It is rare, perhaps unique, for such an artist to narrate for an audience of archivists and curators his experiences in locating, adapting, and transforming such materials into live performances. Even without the banjo playing and the dancing with which he illustrated points in his talk, Wade's words capture the cadences of his stage presentations.*

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