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Book Review of Art Rosenbaum: The Mary Lomax Ballad Book: America's Great Twenty-first Century Traditional Singer

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Book Review of Art Rosenbaum: The Mary Lomax Ballad Book:
America's Great Twenty-first Century Traditional Singer

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the three originally released tracks, plus the extra ten, comes to some 30 pages, including photos not found in the original release. Here we get a sense of his Silas Green minstrel beginnings, complete with commentary from Williams himself as well as people who recall hearing him, bolstered by information on his one-stringed instrument, noting not only its African origin, but also its appearance in South America and the Caribbean.

Waide has also given the secular material massive written updates, including not only notes on the tunes not included with the original LP, but his own recent travels in the Florida Panhandle in search of what might be left of the African American shaped note singing tradition. His additions are supported by new notes from Florida folklife grant recipient Doris Dyen, who vividly recalls visits to the shaped note and Primitive Baptist church services heard here. Overall, the book is so packed with explanations about shaped note singing itself and on various churches and their services, song lyrics, and bios on the musicians, that it feels as if these recordings are only now receiving the attention they have long been due.

Frankly, a truly worthy review of this collection would need a book as long as the one included here, but it's as crucial as it is amazing to have this release of musical gold from an overlooked source—improved upon at that—re-claim its space in record shops and music collections worldwide.

BRUCE MILLER

To order: dust-digital.com

Bonnie Payne Loggins, both of whom learned a body of ballads and songs from their father Lemuel Payne (1884-1968). Living and farming in Habersham County, Georgia, Payne is remembered for having been, in Rosenbaum's words, "a fine and prolific singer of traditional ballads and songs." Payne's two daughters—especially Mary—and son Bunyon loved their father's music, and Mary and Bunyon transcribed the texts of many of the ballads and songs that Lemuel knew. Mary kept this repertoire alive, generally consulting the transcribed texts while singing, into the 21st century; Bonnie, because she did not learn to read, continued to sing her father's material from memory. Yet, until now, this family repertoire went largely unheard outside of Habersham County (where Mary Lomax lives) and nearby White County, Georgia (where Bonnie Loggins lives). While Lemuel Payne's performance style was never adequately documented (Rosenbaum knows of only a couple of low-fidelity cassette recordings featuring Payne's vocals), Rosenbaum's field recordings of Mary and Bonnie, combined with Bunyon's and Mary's earlier written transcriptions, provide remarkably full documentation of this family's rich music legacy.

The Mary Lomax Ballad Book features two CDs containing 59 recordings of Mary and Bonnie singing ballads and songs for which they remembered the accompanying tunes. Rosenbaum digitally recorded these performances at the women's homes, and the unaccompanied singing, accordingly, sounds at home—relaxed yet focused. The sisters in their respective recordings sing longer, older (and often tragic) traditional ballads from the British Isles and from pre-industrial America as well as more modern (and sometimes quite humorous) lyric folk songs. A few of Rosenbaum's recordings of Mary and Bonnie were first issued by the Dust-to-Digital label on *The Art of Field Recording: Fifty Years of Traditional American Music Documented by Art Rosenbaum, Vols. I and II*, but most of the recordings are made available for the first time on the two CDs included with *The Mary Lomax Ballad Book*. The mastering on these CDs, by widely recognized sound engineer Mike Graves, is state of the art, which places these recordings among the best-recorded performances ever of traditional ballads sung in an older, noncommercial style.

This collection is effectively organized: each individual recording is numbered to correspond with the text, and, for each ballad or song, the text features a cross-reference with another relevant ballad index (whether Francis James Child's famous collection of British ballads or Malcolm Laws' compendium of "native American" ballads), concise yet helpful scholarly headnotes, and transcriptions of lyrics. Also included are the lyrics from twenty of Lemuel Payne's ballads and songs for which the sisters could not recall the original tunes.

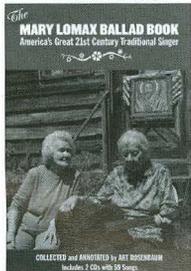
The Mary Lomax Ballad Book features simple yet effective design work by noted graphic designer Susan Archie. Visual motifs used on the covers and elsewhere within the book are borrowed from folk art, an approach appropriate for this project given the fact that Bonnie Loggins is a self-taught "folk" painter known in art circles across northern Georgia. Other aspects of book production, it should be noted, are problematic. There are numerous minor proof-reading oversights within the text, though most are inconsequential. Due to decisions made during the book production process, some of the photos used in *The Mary Lomax Ballad Book* are printed in a way that lacks the sort of visual contrast necessary to embolden and illuminate black-and-white images, and hence some of the images herein seem lifeless, gray. (This must be particularly galling to Rosenbaum, who is an acclaimed visual artist as well as a Grammy Award-winning music historian.) To be fair, such shortcomings do not mar the overall power of this book one iota, yet it can be hoped that a second edition of *The Mary Lomax Ballad Book* will quietly correct such production miscues.

"I would maintain," states Rosenbaum in the aforementioned introductory essay, "that Mary and Bonnie possess the finest and most varied body of American folk songs, learned in family oral tradition, to emerge in the 21st century." Whether or not Rosenbaum's statement is true (after all, the 21st century is still quite young, and it is possible that a similarly magnificent family repertoire of American traditional ballads and songs will be discovered by some future folklorist), *The Mary Lomax Ballad Book* is undeniably significant. It is a trustworthy treasure-trove of recordings and information documenting one family's ballad tradition, and it is a must-have for every American music library and Appalachia/Georgia regional studies collection.

TED OLSON

To order: loomishousepress.com

**The Mary Lomax Ballad Book:
America's Great 21st Century
Traditional Singer**
Art Rosenbaum



Loomis House Press

In his authoritative introduction to *The Mary Lomax Ballad Book*, Art Rosenbaum simply yet eloquently asserts that the book documents "a family's living heritage of American folk song, remarkable in its breadth and richness and valuable in that it has been recovered at this late date." The book focuses on the balladry of two sisters, Mary Payne Lomax and