Recording Review of Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings, 1947-55

Ted Olson
East Tennessee State University, olson@etsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.etsu.edu/etsu-works

Part of the Appalachian Studies Commons

Citation Information

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETSU Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact digilib@etsu.edu.
Recording Review of Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings, 1947-55

Copyright Statement
© Ted Olson

This review is available at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University: https://dc.etsu.edu/etsu-works/1169
Reviews

Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings, 1947-1959

Disc 1: 1947 - '48 Work Songs and Hollers


Disc 2: 1947 - '48 Blues / 1959 Work Songs and Hollers


The state penitentiary system at Parchman is simply a cotton plantation using convicts as labor. The warden is not a penologist, but an experienced plantation manager. His annual report to the legislature is not of salvaged lives; it is a profit and loss statement, with theaccent on profit. (p. 5)

This journalistic observation about the Mississippi State Penitentiary appeared in the New York Post on January 7, 1957. The true agenda of that state-run prison—located near the Mississippi Delta town of Parchman and popularly known as Parchman Farm—did not surprise one reader of that article, Alan Lomax.

Like a number of other Southern states, Mississippi had maintained a system of convict leasing during the nineteenth century; in this practice states granted businesses or corporations the power to use convicts for such labor-intensive purposes as farming, logging, coal mining, and railroad construction. By the early twentieth century, Mississippi discontinued its involvement in that controversial practice, and convicts were relocated to Parchman Farm, where the state itself oversaw prisoners and exploited their labor. Difficult living and working conditions on Parchman Farm, along with close-knit, long-term interactions between prisoners, fostered a diverse African American song culture that included blues, work songs, hollers, and spoken toasts.

In the 1930s father-and-son folklorists John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax began documenting the music of Parchman prisoners for the Archive of Folk Song [eventually renamed the Archive of Folk Culture, part of the Library of Congress' American Folklife Center], and Alan Lomax continued such documentation work at Parchman into the 1940s and 1950s. Of the African American prison song tradition, Lomax wrote (in an essay written for Lomax at that prison farm in 1947, 1948, and 1959; the set also includes a dozen previously unreleased recordings showcasing other aspects of the diverse song repertory of Parchman prisoners.

The mastering heard on the Dust-to-Digital set, prepared by GRAMMY Award-winning engineer Michael Graves, improves upon the sound quality found on previous CD reissues of the original 1958 Negro Prison Songs LP as well as on Rounder Records' 1997 two-CD compilation of a selection of this same material. Thoroughly documenting a painful legacy, the Dust-to-Digital release is, in the end, a thing of beauty. In representing prison culture during pre-Civil Rights Era Mississippi, the set maintains a balance between detailed intimacy and political simplicity. Completing those 44 recordings (over two CDs) is a 120-page hardcover book that offers 77 rare photographs—mostly taken by Lomax—of the Parchman Farm landscape and its captive residents participating in a range of everyday activities, from working to socializing. (Additional recordings and photographs from Lomax's fieldwork at Parchman Farm can be accessed via the Association for Cultural Equity website.)

The Dust-to-Digital set also boasts a distinctive, and aesthetically stunning, design concept (by Barbara Bersche) that is appropriate to the theme of the project. For instance, numerous examples of carefully selected snippets of lyrics taken from the Parchman recordings are transcribed and visually superimposed throughout the book in white font against stark black backgrounds; symbolically, that darkness threatens to overwhelm the powerful verbal expressions of prisoners who had endured the indignities of a regimented and discriminatory existence with strength, wisdom, and humor.

By 1958, Lomax had visited the Mississippi State Penitentiary several times—with his father in the 1930s, and leading his own recording expeditions there in 1947 and 1948. And Lomax would go to Parchman again in 1959. As he conveyed in the aforementioned essay, "I went back to Mississippi in 1947 with the first portable tape machine that came out on the market, for I wanted to record the sounds that were too rich to be documented by the disc machines of former years" (p. 7).

Dust-to-Digital's Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings, 1947-1959 features digitally remastered versions of 32 previously issued recordings collected by Lomax at that prison farm in 1947, 1948, and 1959; the set also includes a dozen previously unreleased recordings showcasing other aspects of the diverse song repertory of Parchman prisoners.

The journalistic observation about the Mississippi State Penitentiary appeared in the New York Post on January 7, 1957. The true agenda of that state-run prison—located near the Mississippi Delta town of Parchman and popularly known as Parchman Farm—did not surprise one reader of that article, Alan Lomax. The state penitentiary system at Parchman is simply a cotton plantation using convicts as labor. The warden is not a penologist, but an experienced plantation manager. His annual report to the legislature is not of salvaged lives; it is a profit and loss statement, with the accent on profit. (p. 5)

This journalistic observation about the Mississippi State Penitentiary appeared in the New York Post on January 7, 1957. The true agenda of that state-run prison—located near the Mississippi Delta town of Parchman and popularly known as Parchman Farm—did not surprise one reader of that article, Alan Lomax.

Like a number of other Southern states, Mississippi had maintained a system of convict leasing during the nineteenth century; in this practice states granted businesses or corporations the power to use convicts for such labor-intensive purposes as farming, logging, coal mining, and railroad construction. By the early twentieth century, Mississippi discontinued its involvement in that controversial practice, and convicts were relocated to Parchman Farm, where the state itself oversaw prisoners and exploited their labor. Difficult living and working conditions on Parchman Farm, along with close-knit, long-term interactions between prisoners, fostered a diverse African American song culture that included blues, work songs, hollers, and spoken toasts.

In the 1930s father-and-son folklorists John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax began documenting the music of Parchman prisoners for the Archive of Folk Song [eventually renamed the Archive of Folk Culture, part of the Library of Congress' American Folklife Center], and Alan Lomax continued such documentation work at Parchman into the 1940s and 1950s. Of the African American prison song tradition, Lomax wrote (in an essay written for Lomax at that prison farm in 1947, 1948, and 1959; the set also includes a dozen previously unreleased recordings showcasing other aspects of the diverse song repertory of Parchman prisoners.

The mastering heard on the Dust-to-Digital set, prepared by GRAMMY Award-winning engineer Michael Graves, improves upon the sound quality found on previous CD reissues of the original 1958 Negro Prison Songs LP as well as on Rounder Records' 1997 two-CD compilation of a selection of this same material. Thoroughly documenting a painful legacy, the Dust-to-Digital release is, in the end, a thing of beauty. In representing prison culture during pre-Civil Rights Era Mississippi, the set maintains a balance between detailed intimacy and political simplicity. Completing those 44 recordings (over two CDs) is a 120-page hardcover book that offers 77 rare photographs—mostly taken by Lomax—of the Parchman Farm landscape and its captive residents participating in a range of everyday activities, from working to socializing. (Additional recordings and photographs from Lomax's fieldwork at Parchman Farm can be accessed via the Association for Cultural Equity website.)

The Dust-to-Digital set also boasts a distinctive, and aesthetically stunning, design concept (by Barbara Bersche) that is appropriate to the theme of the project. For instance, numerous examples of carefully selected snippets of lyrics taken from the Parchman recordings are transcribed and visually superimposed throughout the book in white font against stark black backgrounds; symbolically, that darkness threatens to overwhelm the powerful verbal expressions of prisoners who had endured the indignities of a regimented and discriminatory existence with strength, wisdom, and humor.

By 1958, Lomax had visited the Mississippi State Penitentiary several times—with his father in the 1930s, and leading his own recording expeditions there in 1947 and 1948. And Lomax would go to Parchman again in 1959. As he conveyed in the aforementioned essay, "I went back to Mississippi in 1947 with the first portable tape machine that came out on the market, for I wanted to record the sounds that were too rich to be documented by the disc machines of former years" (p. 7).

Dust-to-Digital's Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings, 1947-1959 features digitally remastered versions of 32 previously issued recordings collected by Lomax at that prison farm in 1947, 1948, and 1959; the set also includes a dozen previously unreleased recordings showcasing other aspects of the diverse song repertory of Parchman prisoners.

The mastering heard on the Dust-to-Digital set, prepared by GRAMMY Award-winning engineer Michael Graves, improves upon the sound quality found on previous CD reissues of the original 1958 Negro Prison Songs LP as well as on Rounder Records' 1997 two-CD compilation of a selection of this same material. Thoroughly documenting a painful legacy, the Dust-to-Digital release is, in the end, a thing of beauty. In representing prison culture during pre-Civil Rights Era Mississippi, the set maintains a balance between detailed intimacy and political simplicity. Completing those 44 recordings (over two CDs) is a 120-page hardcover book that offers 77 rare photographs—mostly taken by Lomax—of the Parchman Farm landscape and its captive residents participating in a range of everyday activities, from working to socializing. (Additional recordings and photographs from Lomax's fieldwork at Parchman Farm can be accessed via the Association for Cultural Equity website.)

The Dust-to-Digital set also boasts a distinctive, and aesthetically stunning, design concept (by Barbara Bersche) that is appropriate to the theme of the project. For instance, numerous examples of carefully selected snippets of lyrics taken from the Parchman recordings are transcribed and visually superimposed throughout the book in white font against stark black backgrounds; symbolically, that darkness threatens to overwhelm the powerful verbal expressions of prisoners who had endured the indignities of a regimented and discriminatory existence with strength, wisdom, and humor.
The book includes three interpretive essays: the 1958 essay by Lomax, a short introduction from Anna Lomax Wood (Lomax's daughter and President of the Association for Cultural Equity), and an illuminating new essay by Bruce Jackson, a noted scholar of prison folklore. In that essay, Jackson provides an eloquent perspective regarding the historical significance of the Dust-to-Digital set:

Black prisoners in all the Southern agricultural prisons in those years participated in two distinct musical traditions: free world (the blues,ollerists, spirituals and other songs they sang outside and, when the situation permitted, sang inside as well) and the worksongs, which were specific to the prison situation, and the recordings in this album represent that range of materials, which is one of the reasons this album is so important: it doesn't just show this or that tradition within Parchman, but the range of musical traditions performed by black prisoners. I know of no other album that does that. (p. 15)

The words, images, and music on Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings, 1947-1959 may have been documented in an earlier era, but this release affirms the timeless power of strength, wisdom, and humor in helping people cope with hard times.

To order: dust-digital.com

Roscoe Holcomb
San Diego State Folk Festival 1972

Rector Hicks
Sugar in the Morning

White Mountain Rag / Cumberland Gap
/Sugar in the Morning / Gathering Flowers For the Master's Bouquet / Policeman / Birdie / Breaking Up Christmas / Arkansas Traveler / There's More Pretty Girls Than One / Sally Goodin / Fortune / Leather Britches / While the Ages Roll On / Yellow Barber / Sally Ann / Black Sheep / Looking For the City / Martha Campbell / Pretty Rainbow / Turkeyfoot Rag / Cotton-Eyed Joe / Liberty / Goin' Home / John Brown's Dream / Rag-picker Bill / Policeman / Stackolee / Old Joe Clark / Flop Eared Mule / Cackling Hen / Forky Deer / Nobody's Darling / Sally Goodin / West Fork Gals / Turkey in the Straw / Birdie / Cripple Creek / Fly Around My Pretty Little Miss / June Apple / I Don't Love Nobody / While the Ages Roll On / Turkeyfoot Rag

This is one of the best Field Recorders' Collective releases, both sound-wise and performance-wise, that I've heard. As listeners of those releases well know, the range can run from purely for the sake of posterity or historical interest right up to "extremely talented performer nicely recorded." This one, featuring fiddler Rector Hicks, is on the better end of that scale. The sound is generally very good. There are a couple of cars or trucks that pass by, but only occasionally, and they serve to bring you back to Hicks' living room. Beginning and ending comments are minimal. The lengths of the tunes, as is often the case on FRC recordings, are rather short, usually in the minute-and-a-half range, but are full-out versions.

Rector Hicks (1914-1989) was from Calhoun County, West Virginia, and he moved to and lived most of his life in Akron, Ohio. He seems mostly to have been a home musician. How much he played out is not mentioned. He must have done so at least occasionally, as the liner notes state that a couple tracks here were from an undated coffee-house