

The Lomax's Global Jukebox Project and its Untold 150 Year Story

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Alan Lomax (1915 { 2002), the prolific collector of folk and traditional songs from around the world, had an even greater mission almost unknown to the public and even his following, and he spent the better part of his last four decades using his song dataset, along with related datasets on the diversity of traditional societies, to develop what he believed was a "unifying theory of culture."

At least that's what he told me when we first met in 1988, after he sent a "cold call" letter to Apple Computer about his vision for a "Global Jukebox" and it trickled down to me, a young founding member of the Apple/Lucasfilm Multimedia Lab.

The story begins in the 1860s with Alan's father John and made news last November, 2022, when Alan's daughter, 77-year-old Anna Lomax Wood, announced that the Global Jukebox was publicly available (1). In 2017, when a preliminary version the Global Jukebox was announced, the New York Times ran a story entitled "The Unfinished Work of Alan Lomax's Global Jukebox" (2).

I had the privilege of working with Alan Lomax through the 1990s; helped him secure funding from Apple and later from Interval Research, Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen's long-term research lab; produced his first and only video demo of the Global Jukebox in 1998; and remain an advisor-at-large on the project.

In addition to its epic timeframe - certainly in contrast to today's tech with its quarterly myopia - it's a story of promoting cultural equity (not without challenges), constantly incorporating newest media technologies, and connecting the dots between global arts and planetary health.

It's also a colorful tale that includes real cowboys, the US Library of Congress, and the BBC; Eleanor Roosevelt, Margaret Mead, Jelly Roll Morton, Hoodie "Leadbelly" Leadbetter; Mick Jagger, Lennon and McCartney, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and Bob Dylan; and US President John F. Kennedy's Science Advisor and MIT Media Lab Co-Founder (with Nicholas Negroponte) Jerome Wiesner.

(1) <https://phys.org/news/2022-11-global-jukebox-arts-database-publicly.html> (Feb 15, 2023)

(2) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/11/arts/music/alan-lomax-global-jukebox-digital-archive.html> (Feb 15, 2023)

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