



## Alan Lomax's *Folksongs of North America* recommended by Susan Tyler Hitchcock

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" suggests a book for Virginians to read in common. This month, Susan Tyler Hitchcock—Albemarle County resident and author of six books—recommends *Folk Songs of North America* by Alan Lomax.

On one of my many bookshelves, there is a volume so stained and tattered, a tidy book owner might choose to throw it away. Not me. Those are the marks of a long life of love and use, the signs of a book that has gone through thick and thin, close to me all my lifetime.

The book is Alan Lomax's *Folk Songs of North America*, copyright 1960, out of print nowadays. I let it fall open where it may and see a teenaged girl in the mid-60s, in the days of *Shindig* and *Hullabaloo*, when Bob Dylan and Joan Baez were young. There I am again, chording the guitar and learning the songs that Lomax himself learned from cowboys and preachers, from Woody Guthrie and Merle Travis and the Carter Family. *Down in the Valley* and *Sixteen Tons*, *Hard Ain't It Hard* and *The Rising Sun Blues*. I can't open up this book without singing.

I study the book more circumspectly now. I read the introduction — poetry: "The map sings. . . . The blues roll down the Mississippi to New Orleans, where the Creoles mix the musical gumbo of jazz . . ." And history: "On the American frontier men worked and sang together on terms of amity and equality impossible in the Old World. A man was judged not by his accent or his origins, but by his character and capacities. A song was treasured for its suitability to frontier life." Musical analysis: "The slaves continued to sing in leader-chorus style, with a more relaxed throat than the whites, and in

deeper-pitched, mellower voices, which blended richly."

A short study of the author of this book brings his song-by-song notes to life. Alan Lomax learned song-collecting from his father, John Lomax, who had already traveled throughout the Southwest and published *Cowboy Songs and Frontier Ballads* (1910) when his son was born. Starting in the 1930s, before Alan Lomax had even reached 20, father and son began traveling together, collecting songs from prison inmates and gospel preachers, cotton farmers and camp-fire crooners. What resulted was a collection at the heart of what we now consider American folk song. Were it not for them, and people like them in the early twentieth century, many of these songs would have been forgotten.

Think about a book like Alan Lomax's *Folk Songs of North America*. Page after two-dimensional page, black marks on white paper. Yet into how many dimensions can it carry the imagination? Back through time, into my personal past and into our national heritage. Up in rhythm and harmony, pleasures of the moment enriched by other people's joys and sorrows, known and unknown, living and dead. And forward into the future, when my children's children (or so I hope) find this book, stained and tattered, binding cracking open to the pages I love best. They hum a tune, they sing a song, bring me, and memories that precede me, back to life again.