

PREFACE

Early in the research for my biography of Muddy Waters, my friend Bruce Nemerov at the Center for Popular Music in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, sent me his article on John Wesley Work III.¹ The Center holds some of Work's personal papers and many of his personal field recordings. John Work, he explained, was the *other guy* on the trip when Muddy was first recorded, and Work had written a manuscript that included dozens of transcriptions of the recorded music. The manuscript and transcriptions had been lost in the 1940s and Bruce asked me to keep a lookout for them.

I only sort of knew what he meant. That is, I knew about Alan Lomax making the trip to the Mississippi Delta in 1941 and coming away with the first recordings of Muddy. I'd heard *The Plantation Recordings*, the collection of Muddy's diverse material from the 1941 and 1942 trips, and I was just getting familiar with the interviews included on it. The "other guy" conducted two of the four interviews with Muddy. Hmm, I thought, should be interesting.

As my research continued, I was further attracted to Work's work because it implied real documentation of Muddy. Researching an illiterate person from a chiefly oral culture was rife with difficulties. Information in Muddy's world was exchanged through stories told from mother to son, from friend to friend. I knew that no matter how hard I looked, what doors I knocked on, cousins I turned up, rocks I turned over, I'd never find a box containing Muddy's childhood diary, no bundles of correspondence expressing his innermost thoughts. Work's meeting with Muddy might mean I'd find field notes.

I found more than that. The name given to the whole of the research was The Fisk University–Library of Congress Coahoma County Study. The study produced great recordings and detailed documentation of the people, lives, and lifestyles of the Clarksdale, Mississippi area. (A four-page questionnaire was completed by scores of residents, among them Muddy and his family.) As I began to explore the files, I found that the evolution of the study, and the story behind it, were as revealing as the results.

I was searching for written documentation specifically on Muddy, but the correspondence, reports, and paperwork I found would have gripped any researcher. This was no pretty picture of institutional cooperation; instead, there was name-calling, hostility, deception—and major accomplishments to boot. I took a left turn from Muddy and explored the study—in the archives of the Center for Popular Music, in the Special Collections Department of the Fisk University Library, in the Library of Congress, and in the Alan Lomax Archives at Hunter College in New York. Aside from Nemerov's article, there was little else published except for Alan Lomax's *The Land Where the Blues Began*, his 1993 account of what had happened fifty years earlier.

Lost Delta Found

Yet the goal of the study was to have been a book based on the project's findings, written by the Fisk participants and jointly edited and published by Fisk and the Library of Congress. Correspondence indicated that the manuscript had been completed in the mid-1940s by John Work, was then submitted to the Library of Congress, and there it was misplaced, recovered, and misplaced again. Lomax's book decades later proved a poor substitute. Despite winning the National Book Critics Circle Award, it was full of historical inaccuracies, the most obvious being the conflation of the two trips into one.

The relative importance of these inaccuracies can be argued, but what my research was revealing was more important: another perspective on these trips existed, another perspective on history. "What does it really mean when the plantation Negro says that he does not remember old folk tales, but enjoys telling a worldly story? What does it mean when he says that he has no time to sing? What does it mean when a woman says that the burial association is better than the church?" These are questions asked by Fisk graduate student Samuel C. Adams, who lived in Coahoma County while participating in the study. In searching for Work's manuscript, I first found Sam Adams's (which was unidentified and which I originally mistook for Work's), then Lewis Jones's, then finally Dr. Work's. The research and analysis by these three had never been released. Until now, all we knew was this white man's perspective; even research done by the African-Americans that Lomax incorporated had been filtered through his viewpoint. Lomax was responsible for a lot of great work, but he did not work alone.

More than sixty years later, here are the facts—the writings of the principal participants of the Fisk–Library of Congress Coahoma County Study. Reading them is like finding old pictures of someone you've always known. The pictures reveal new aspects of an old friend, a deeper sense of dimension. The pictures are worn, and you study the wrinkles—where's this photograph been and why have you not seen it before? The picture's history has become part of the story, and you're hungry for clues, for information, for more and more character. Suddenly, you're struck by things you'd never noticed, by how this lifelong friend you thought you knew well now looks so very different.

—Robert Gordon
Memphis, 2005