An Open Letter from Mack McCormick
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Apart from the great cuisine of Galatoire's and the Acme Oyster Bar the most stimulating part of the recent American Folklore Society meeting in New Orleans was the gatherings of blues and country music enthusiasts. Tony Russell, John Cowley, and Bruce Bastin made the long trip from England. The American representations were a diverse group that included Dave Evans, Jeff Titon, Michael Taft, Charles Wolfe, Bill Malone, Chris Strachwitz, Harry Oster, Bill Nowlin, Marian Leighton, D.K. Wilgus, Bob Palmer, Carl Fleischhauer, Alan Jabbour, Archie Green, John Bentley, and others whose names I'm unforgetably omitting.

These were people who share a common interest in recorded music and in its preservation, and mostly people who have behind them solid field work experience which has resulted in significant information or documentary recordings.

In the course of some of our private and hallway conversations there was some candid talk in which I realized that there is a general feeling, particularly in England, that Mack McCormick is sitting on top of a mountain of material that he won't publish. I learned too that I'm regarded with some grumpiness.

To reply to this, let me first of all admit that it is true.

In 1958 when I began serious documentary recording and field research it was not my plan to acquire such a mountain.

In the early years, a steady sequence of records - Treasury of Field Recordings, Mance Lipscomb, Lightnin' Hopkins, Robert Shaw, etc. - made available to other people a great deal of what I had come upon.

Indeed, I have always been eager to get material into the hands and ears of those who expressed the greatest interest. That interest seems to come most persistently from England, and a great deal of my inspiration has been those characteristic blue air letters from collectors asking if I had learned about Texas Alexander or Son Becky or Hop Wilson.
As some of you know, this body of information, representing a number of years of field research has been tied up in a collaboration with Paul Oliver, which has ground exceedingly slow, and now has come to a virtual halt.

There are a number of problems, unrecognized at the outset, which are responsible, although chief among them is the incredible and indescribable mechanics of a trans-Atlantic collaboration. It is a partnership which does not halve the work, but doubles it, and threatens now to make it impossible.

The dilemma exists and I would hope that a way out of it can be found by seeking some fresh and different approach which will in a reasonable amount of time actually produce the book or books on the Texas traditions that everyone is quite weary of hearing about.

A related problem that may help explain my personal conflict is the pressure of death and the passage of time. Many times I have elected to pursue a series of interviews rather than take the time to organize an article or publish something already collected. It is a very real and specific problem. I have hundreds of leads which need to be followed up, and my tendency has been to put my energies into following them up so long as those who can answer our questions remain alive. Thus, inevitably, the mountain grows larger. I'm presently seeking a grant for a research assistant to help organize what has now become an archive scattered in several locations and too often inaccessible even to myself.

In this connection it is particularly important to salute the work of Pete Lowry and Bruce Bastin on the East Coast. There's little time remaining in which to balance the emphasis on Texas and Mississippi, and without such balance our knowledge of the blues tradition is badly biased.

The work of Europeans both in discography and in on-the-spot field work continually stagers me, pleases me, and yet it is an embarrassment that we should leave so much to be done by those who live on the other side of an ocean.

Without others to guide us, America would have long ago managed to totally ignore and junk its own native music.
On the subject of the overdue mountain however, let me point to the recent Henry Thomas double album (Herwin). The extensive notes there were done specifically out of an awareness of how frustrated some people had become. That was an effort to get some of this information out, and, in order to act fairly, some new research was done specifically on behalf of the album's notes.

A more substantial effort is underway.

As far back as 1967 it was obvious that the Texas work was beset with too many delays. I decided then to concentrate on field research outside of Texas and in time this began to focus on the outstanding mystery of Robert Johnson.

Very slowly and gradually a few breakthroughs were made. Each one stands amid dozens of false starts and dead ends, but during the 1970-73 period I located former neighbors and friends who had known him as a youth. I also traced his children, two half-sisters, a widow, and women who had known him closely if briefly.

In each case where a major relative was located, I made a share-of-earnings agreement with the individual in return for the information and personal reminiscences they could provide for this biography.

The work involved travel to Los Angeles, Chicago, St. Louis, Maryland, and other places where the people of Mississippi have scattered. These travels produced photographs of Robert Johnson, his family, as well as related documents and memorabilia.

It has also produced two concise, confirmed eye witness accounts of his murder.

This material is now a 12 chapter manuscript of 150,000 words undergoing final editing. It has an unusual narrative structure becoming a kind of detective story as it relates the quest and moves, step-by-step, through the five year search.

The book is also a tribute to those who preceded me, to the record collectors who guessed at clues I was sometimes in a position to follow up, and to other researchers whose published interviews made it possible for something fresh to be uncovered. It has been a collaborative process.
This is not a definitive book on Robert Johnson. I doubt if there ever will be such a thing. Let's just say that it answers a lot of the questions we've long been asking and puts him more fully in the context of his time and style of life. The final mystery of his incredible passion remains.

When it appears, please look upon it as a piece of work which was inspired by certain eloquent passages written about the mystery of Robert Johnson and by those blue air letter sheets which have been coming to me from a lot of people for a lot of years. I thank you for that inspiration.

Cordially, and with thanks to Blues Unlimited for carrying this message.
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