Vanelli Lorenzo

***Blues Legacies: the construction of Tradition in the work of John and Alan Lomax***

The research trips by John and Alan Lomax under the aegis of the Library of Congress in the prisons of the Southern States produced documentary evidence of paramount importance on the music practices of African Americans in the Jim Crow South. The resonance of their work both in the academic world and among the public developed on a multitude of aspects. The materials that they collected keep on being the base for new discussions and studies in different fields of Academics studies, not only in music, but also social sciences, anthropology, psychology. The institutions that manage those materials continue to produce events for the divulgation and repatriation of the cultural knowledge contained in their archives. The Lomaxes’ work also helped the development of the career of at least two prominent figures in African American music: McKinley Morganfield (Muddy Waters) and Huddie Leadbetter (Leadbelly). Their visibility and career was surely fostered by the resonance of the research of the Lomaxes, where they weren’t directly introduced to the world of Music production by the researchers themselves. In this sense, the influence of those musicians on the course of the history of music can be traced, at least in part, to the input given by the Lomaxes and their work, and to the institutions that backed up their research. The research by the Lomaxes produced also other side-effects. By analyzing the traces of their work methodology and their interpretation of the objectives of their research, the way they produced the documentation, handled it, made it public, we see that they played an important role in the normalization of certain practices over others. What was the effect of completely disregarding the music production in the women’s camp in Parchman, a prison that they visited more than once? How did their selective preferences for what they deemed as “traditional” impact the variety and depth of the documentation produced? In what way their work might have contributed to the tunnel-visioned idealization of the delta blues man as a rough, masculine, dangerous, strong minded, heterosexual ex-farmer?

Lorenzo Vanelli is a PhD researcher from the University of Bologna, Italy. His academic formation comprises a degree in Anthropology (three years), studies in Jazz Piano (three years) and a degree in Musicology (two years), with a specialization in Ethnomusicology. At the moment he is working as a researcher on a project about African American field hollers, that led him to visit different archives in the United States (Library of Congress, Indiana University, Mississippi University, and other archives in Atlanta, Chicago, New York). In the past year he also participated as a researcher in the European Project D.R.U.M., coordinated by prof. Staiti, producing a study about the music of the Grawa brotherhood in Morocco.