The American Folklife Center Archive contains ethnographic documentation from six continents, including more than one hundred sixty countries and representing hundreds of languages and regional dialects. Included are sound recordings, photographs, field notes, and moving image items created by ethnographers documenting cultural traditions expressed in music, dance, narrative, material culture, drama, religion, games, food habits and occupations. This breadth is quite remarkable when one considers that at its founding, the Archive was focused primarily on the collection of American folksong.

In the earliest days of the Folk Archive, established in 1928 at the Library of Congress, its founder and first head, Robert Winslow Gordon, had as his lifelong quest to collect the entire body of American folk music. Thus, international collections were not pursued during his time at the Library. His successor, John A. Lomax, envisioned a larger role for the Archive in both its mission and collections. Soon after arriving at the Archive in 1933, Lomax initiated a documentary equipment loan program, whereby recording machines would be made available to collectors and, in return, the recordings they made would be added to the collections in the Archive. This resulted in not only a rapid growth in the Archive’s collections, but also in the creation of a network of folklorists and ethnographers excited to use the new recording technologies in their fieldwork, both in the United States and abroad.

Around this same time, an international acquisitions policy for the Archive was established by the Library. John Lomax stated in the 1935 Annual Report:

[I] am glad to report that a unanimous opinion prevails that the Library of Congress is a suitable repository for all the records, words, and music of American folk songs, real, or borrowed (partially or totally) from other countries. A central office at the Library of Congress could in a very few years bring together the words and music of all the songs heretofore noted by independent collectors ... [and] complete in fairly adequate fashion the work of field collection in our comparatively new country.

As a result of this new policy, John Lomax’s son, Alan, was able to take a Library-sponsored recording trip to the Bahamas in 1935, which may have been the first instance of the Archive seeking folklife material from outside the United States. Soon to follow, in 1936-37, was a recording expedition to Haiti by Alan and his wife Elizabeth Lomax. The Archive was then not only able to engage in Library-supported field collecting trips by its own staff, but also to acquire collections from other ethnographers, whether in the U.S. or abroad. By 1936, the Archive acquired one of its first major gift acquisitions of international materials donated by ethnomusicologist Helen Heffron Roberts, which included early wax cylinder recordings done by her and other ethnographers in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean and Pacific Islands.

As the recorded collections in the Archive expanded, the desire grew to distribute the Archive’s holdings to other public and educational institutions. To help meet this goal, the Library’s Recording Laboratory was established in 1941. The Laboratory would become not only a place to copy and distribute 78-rpm albums of the Archive’s holdings to other institutions, but it also became a reliable source for buying and maintaining recording devices, thus allowing the equipment loan program to thrive. The Library of Congress’s reputation swelled among ethnographers in the U.S. and abroad as an appealing repository for sound recordings.

The Lomaxes laid the groundwork for successive heads of the Archive to continue these acquisition practices. Benjamin A. Botkin took over as head...
in 1942, followed soon after by Duncan Emrich in 1945. The duration of World War II did not allow for much domestic fieldwork, so efforts were placed on obtaining collections from other parts of the world. The Archive entered into a cooperative agreement with the Department of State in its international cultural relations program by arranging for expeditions in foreign countries. Botkin wrote in the 1943-44 Annual Report:

At present, we have recording projects under way in Mexico, Cuba, Brazil and Africa. In addition, a recording project in Canada was just completed by Miss Helen Creighton of Nova Scotia. Moreover, we have been most fortunate in obtaining the cooperation of the finest folklorists in other countries in these foreign expeditions. Some of these folklorists included Luiz Heitor Correa de Azevedo (Brazil), William Bascom (Africa); Juan Liscano (Venezuela); Myron Schaeffer (Panama), and Henrietta Yurchenco (Mexico), among many others.

With the use of the Recording Lab, the Archive was also able to acquire collections as “duplication projects.” Copies of original collection materials could be made at the Library and either originals or copies returned to the donor. One of the first major acquisitions in this manner was the Percy Grainger Collection of wax cylinder recordings of British, Danish and Maori songs, which were originally recorded from 1906 to 1927. Other major international duplication projects at this time include recordings by Melville Herskovits (Trinidad, Haiti, and Brazil); Santa Cruz (Chile); and French-Canadian recordings made on cylinders for the National Museum of Canada by Marius Barbeau.

The Archive entered into a number of formal “exchange projects” with other institutions that were willing to exchange copies of their own limited edition published recordings of traditional music with similar published recordings produced by the Library’s Recording Lab. This relationship encouraged even more growth of the Archive’s international collections and built relationships with similar libraries and archives such as the Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv in Germany, the Phonotèque Nationale in France, and the Musée de l’Homme’s Département D’Ethno-Musicologie, also in France. These relationships resulted in the acquisition of many commercial ethnographic recordings collected by French ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget from Ivory Coast, Brazil, French Guinea, West Africa, equatorial Africa, Congo, Tahiti, Laos, New Caledonia, Romania, and Madagascar among others, as well as USIA/ Voice of America featuring traditional music primarily from locations in Africa and Asia.

The U.S. Department of State provided funding for the Library’s Recording Lab to publish discs which included music from around the world. Each album was accompanied by contextual information about the songs and culture, often written by the fieldworker whose recordings are featured. Some examples of these international albums include Bahaman Songs, French Ballads and Dance Tunes, Spanish Religious Songs and Games (L5), recorded by Alan Lomax; Afro-Bahian Religious Songs from Brazil (L13) recorded by Melville Herskovits; Folk Music of Venezuela (L15), recorded by Juan Liscano; Folk Music of Puerto Rico (L18), recorded by Richard Waterman; and Folk Music of Mexico (L19), recorded by Henrietta Yurchenco.

Duncan Emrich, who was head of the Archive from 1945 until 1955, proposed more documentation of traditional music from abroad, especially focusing on Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and Australia. Throughout Emrich’s tenure, the Archive acquired remarkable recordings of West African music from a dozen ethnic groups and six different colonial territories collected.

Ethnomusicologist Vida Chenoweth records Taaqiyáa, her primary contributor of Kaagü̧ Usarufa music and text, Papua New Guinea, 1967. Vida Chenoweth Collection
by Arthur S. Alberts, and anthropological fieldwork conducted in Mexico, Guatemala, Spain, Morocco, and Ireland by Henrietta Yurchenco.

With the formal methods of acquisition of international collections firmly in place, the Archive has continued to thrive as an international repository for the continuing decades under its successive heads, Rae Korson, Alan Jabbour, Joseph C. Hickerson, and now, at the present time, Peggy Bulger and Michael Taft.

A handful of highlights of our international collections that came in the past few decades:

1960s
- Halim El-Dabh Collections, Music from Ethiopia, Mali, and Senegal, 1967
- Paul Bowles Moroccan Music Collection, folk art, and popular music of Morocco.

1970s
- James Madison Carpenter Collection: British folk music, dance, and ritual drama collected in England and Scotland, 1928-35
- Laura Boulton Collection: Africa, Europe, Asia, Latin America, Haiti, Canada, West Indies, and Mexico, 1930s-40s

1980s
- Karl Signell Collection: Cuba, Bosnia, Thailand, and Turkey, 1970s
- Fahnestock South Sea Collection: Bali, Fiji, Java, Kangean Islands, Madura, Marquesas, New Caledonia, Samoa, and the Society Islands, 1940-41

1990s
- Gheorghe and Eugenia Popescu-Judetz Collection: Romanian folk dance and music, 1938-1974
- Ryl's'ki Institute Ukrainian Cylinder Collection, folk music traditions from various regions of Ukraine, 1908-1930s
- Vida Chenoweth: New Guinea music and spoken word, 1960s-1980s
- Joel Martin Halpern Collection: Bulgarian, Laotian, Russian, and Serbo-Croatian traditions in Eastern Europe and Canada, 1950s-1990s

2000s
- Alan Lomax Collection: Caribbean, England, France, Georgia, Ireland, Italy, Morocco, Romania, Russia, Scotland, Spain, and Wales, 1940s-1990s [note: this primarily covers the time after Alan left the Library]
- Dave Lewiston Collection: Bali, Himalayas, Mexico, South America, 1960s-1970s
- Margaret Mills Collection: Afghani women, 1970s-90s

The Archive continues to grow on both a national and international level, with inspiration drawn from our rich history of utilizing recording technologies, building partnerships with ethnographers, and working to preserve the world’s traditions for future generations to learn from and enjoy.

Further information about these collections can be accessed on the American Folklife Center’s website at: http://www.loc.gov/folklife/guides/findaid-geographical.html

References


Annual Reports from the Archive of Folk Song and Folklore Section, 1933-1955.