

Appalachian Journey. American Patchwork Series. Vestapol Production, 1998. 60 min.

Cajun Country: Don't Drop the Potato. American Patchwork Series. Vestapol Production, 1998.60 min.

Dreams and Songs of the Noble Old. American Patchwork Series. Vestapol Production, 1998.60 min.

Jazz Parades: Feet Don't Fait Me Now. American Patchwork Series. Vestapol Production, 1998. 60 min.

Land Where the Blues Began. American Patchwork Series. Vestapol Production, 1998. 60 min.

Mikel J. Koven

Volume 22, numéro 1, 2000

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087852ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087852ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Koven, M. J. (2000). Compte rendu de [*Appalachian Journey*. American Patchwork Series. Vestapol Production, 1998. 60 min. / *Cajun Country: Don't Drop the Potato*. American Patchwork Series. Vestapol Production, 1998.60 min. / *Dreams and Songs of the Noble Old*. American Patchwork Series. Vestapol Production, 1998.60 min. / *Jazz Parades: Feet Don't Fait Me Now*. American Patchwork Series. Vestapol Production, 1998. 60 min. / *Land Where the Blues Began*. American Patchwork Series. Vestapol Production, 1998. 60 min.] *Ethnologies*, 22(1), 272–276. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087852ar>

Appalachian Journey. American Patchwork Series. Vestapol Production, 1998. 60 min.

Cajun Country: Don't Drop the Potato. American Patchwork Series. Vestapol Production, 1998. 60 min.

Dreams and Songs of the Noble Old. American Patchwork Series. Vestapol Production, 1998. 60 min.

Jazz Parades: Feet Don't Fail Me Now. American Patchwork Series. Vestapol Production, 1998. 60 min.

Land Where the Blues Began. American Patchwork Series. Vestapol Production, 1998. 60 min.

Between 1978 and 1985, folksong collector, activist, and scholar Alan Lomax made several field trips deep into the American south videotaping a wide range of traditional musical performers. By 1990, the footage Lomax shot was developed into the American Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) documentary series, "American Patchwork," and broadcast that year. Eight years later, the five parts of American Patchwork have been released on video. Each program, although explicitly about different aspects of American folk music, also uses a variety of ethnomusicological approaches. Rather than assessing these videos only from the perspective of content, this review will explore the American Patchwork Series as demonstrations of different ethnomusicological research foci.

Each hour long documentary combines Lomax's video footage from the field with historical and archival stills, and shots of Lomax in a video editing bay, surrounded by monitors giving exegesis on the primary footage. Holistically, I rather like that technique. Although staged, Lomax's commentaries and tangential references introduce each subject, giving him the latitude to make explicit connections between various forms of music, both traditional and modern. As useful and interesting as these bridges are, the main focus of the series is, and rightly so, the primary footage Lomax shot.

Appalachian Journey, for example, is ostensibly about "mountain music": the forms and subjects of the music of Appalachia, tracing its roots from the first European settlers, through the development of the region's "traditional" instruments like the banjo, and leaving us at the beginning of the bluegrass revival. However, the documentary offers us more than that. Immediately I was struck by the argument Lomax presents about the integration between storytelling and singing. We are presented with wonderful examples of tall

tales and folktales in narration and song, inseparable in the repertoires of the local performers.

Particularly profound are Lomax's arguments that much of European-American Appalachian music, including the development of the banjo, regional fiddle playing techniques and many of the songs themselves, was acculturated from the local African-American communities which existed alongside the white communities. Lomax points to the transformation of the fiddle, for example, into a rhythm instrument, as a direct influence from the local blacks. Likewise, the same argument is made about local dance traditions. Yet the video also demonstrates the subtle differences between white and black variations on these dances. Although really only occupying approximately twelve minutes of screen time, the section of this tape about the black influences on white Appalachian music is an excellent and concise demonstration of acculturation.

If one of the major themes of *Appalachian Journey* is acculturation, then enculturation is an equally important thesis in *Cajun Country*. Lomax favours a more historical approach to this documentary, examining how Louisiana developed its unique mix of French, African, Spanish, and Native cultures. Although perhaps an obvious metaphor to use, Lomax notes that the festive gumbo served during the Cajun Mardi Gras celebrations is reflective of Cajun culture writ large: just as the gumbo is made up of a variety of ingredients from different sources, simmering over heat for a long time, and with a unique taste, so too are the Cajuns. However, the major theme in *Cajun Country* is also the subtitle of the film: "don't drop the potato." This local proverb, as Lomax notes, refers to the importance Cajuns place on their own culture, and the emphasis placed on cultural continuity. In particular, and it is on this note that the video concludes, the Louisiana State government's actions to eradicate the French language in Louisiana in favour of educational homogenization, and how Cajuns have revived the language themselves.

But beyond this major enculturation theme, Lomax also includes some nice examples of the role and status of women and the family in Cajun culture, and how those concerns are reflected in personal experience narratives, customs and their local song traditions. Also, like in *Appalachian Journey*, there is explicit recognition of the symbiosis between black and white Francophone cultures, although the two were, and for the most part still are, segregated. There is an extended section of the tape that tells of Amédée Ardoin, a Creole accordionist

murdered by racists, and how Cajuns appalled by Ardoin's murder carried on his music.

Community is the major theme in *Jazz Parades. Feet Don't Fail Me Now*, a more successful attempt at video ethnography. Lomax keeps his focus consistent in documenting how jazz music developed out of the New Orleans tradition of social and benevolent clubs for African Americans. We begin to understand, in more detail than in the other films, the interrelationship between the community and its musical expressions. Improvisation in jazz, as Lomax demonstrates, is not based as much on the artistry of individual musicians, although that certainly plays a part, as it is on musicians responding and reacting to the community dancing around them. This symbiotic relationship between performer and group is clearly portrayed. As one of the film's informants notes: "you give to the community and you get from the community." At this level, the film is at its strongest.

Throughout the American Patchwork Series, Lomax plays the "survival" card, presenting American expressions as survivals from the Old World, and when dealing with African-American cultural expressions, Lomax makes direct connections back to Africa. In *Jazz Parades*, Lomax equates the improvisational dance traditions with African communal dance traditions, specifically noting the "sliding step" as a direct survival. I am sure Lomax is correct in this equation, but the film's juxtaposition between Lomax's own New Orleans footage and archival footage from Africa is presented without context. The argument is hard to resist, and the dance steps certainly look like equivalents, but one should always be skeptical of this kind of juxtaposition of images. When we are not given the requisite contexts, either situational or historical, we have to trust that the traits being juxtaposed by the filmmaker are in fact equivalents. Moreover, when Lomax generalizes, as he does less than five minutes into this tape, that New Orleans street dancing comes from "black tradition right out of Africa," it just feels pat. His juxtaposition is just too neat, and something feels missing from the equation.

When I first received these tapes, the first one I watched was *The Land Where the Blues Began*. As a blues fan, what I wanted to see was the development of the Mississippi Delta blues styles, and a more historical and diachronic approach. I was disappointed in *Land Where the Blues Began*, since it resists that kind of "fan-oriented" information. When I went back to the tape to make notes on it for this review, I discovered a much more complicated film. As in *Jazz Parades*, some time is spent demonstrating that traditional Delta

instruments and playing techniques are African survivals. However, as the tape moves on, we are presented with exceptional performances from blues performers still living in the Delta region of Mississippi. We hear their own personal experiences, their life stories, and those are bracketed by song performances. However, as we move deeper still into the film, those personal experiences reflect the work experiences poor African Americans lived. And this in turn reveals what I think the film is ultimately about: although we do get discussion of how blues music reflects male/female conflict and longing, this theme is almost dismissed as a standard of the musical form. Instead, the film argues, quite convincingly, that, as we know blues music developed from field hollers and work songs, but that as the work experiences changed, so too did the music. We are presented with a number of different occupational contexts available to Delta blacks including farming, working on the riverboats, railroads, the levees, and in penal chain-gangs. The rhythm of each of these occupations offers subtle variations in the rhythms of blues music and is reflected in the content of the songs. Lomax even gets some of his informants to reconstruct the now discarded work techniques to demonstrate these rhythms. There is an implication that the cause of the standard blues tropes of male/female conflict and longing were a direct result of the hardships from the occupational contexts.

The final tape to be considered here, although very much an integral part of the American Patchwork Series as a whole, is to some extent an amalgamation of the previous four documentaries. *Dreams and Songs of the Noble Old* consist of seven longer interviews with Lomax's elderly informants, most of whom we have met briefly in the other films. Lomax himself states unequivocally the theme of this tape: that the elderly are living connections to the past, and that their way of life is directly expressed through their creative arts, and in this context, Lomax means primarily music. In these extended interviews, we get to know the informants better, and understand in greater detail how their lives are reflected in their music and art.

Although at the most explicit level these documentaries are about music (blues, jazz, Cajun music, and bluegrass), each tape reflects different aspects of ethnomusicological research from enculturation to acculturation, diachronic analysis and synchronic analysis, historical development and Old World survivals, social issues and community. The entire series opens an enormous range of possibilities for future, accessible and entertaining presentations of ethnomusicological research.

However, even as a teaching aid, I have some reservations. Each documentary is quite dense with a lot of information to both tease out and digest. And with a running time of sixty minutes per episode, to show an entire documentary as a teaching aid takes up too much class time, as I myself have discovered when I used *Jazz Parades* for a class. In reviewing this series, I obviously needed to take notes on each tape, and that put me into a slightly privileged position of having my own generated map of the series, complete with counter times. For example, I know when I lecture on acculturation I can now fast forward *Appalachian Journey* to the relevant discussion twenty-six minutes in, and that it runs for about twelve minutes. This break from my lectures visually demonstrates how white Appalachian music was influenced by many regional black traditions and enough time remains for discussion.

Even though I think study guides are too often used as a crutch to replace proper preparation, in this case, a study guide to the series would be useful. Until such a guide is made available, or is produced unofficially, using the “American Patchwork Series” will be difficult (except perhaps as an electronic babysitter), but ultimately well worth the effort.

Mikel J. Koven
University of Wales, Aberystwyth

Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories. By Anne L. Bower, editor. (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. \$17.95 US, ISBN 1-55849-089-2 pbk, \$45 US, 1-55849-088-4 cloth).

I have a professional and personal interest in recipes and so I looked forward to *Recipes for Reading*, a collection of fourteen articles that interpret community fundraising cookbooks. I hoped that it might hold insights for my own research on women’s traditional culture as well as utility for my undergraduate and graduate teaching. And, as someone who shares Margaret Atwood’s passion for recipes — I’m one of those people who read cookbooks the way other people read travel writing: I may not ever make the recipe, but it’s fun to read about it, and to speculate on what kind of people would“ (51) — I expected that I would enjoy reading these articles about recipes. But I finished *Recipes for Reading* feeling disappointed.