

# **PARCHMAN FARM: PHOTOGRAPHS AND FIELD RECORDINGS: 1947-1959 BY BRUCE JACKSON**



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## **Review**

The folklorist Alan Lomax paid several visits to the Mississippi State Penitentiary, a.k.a. Parchman Farm, and this set presents a sober digest of his findings: work songs, their rhythms often marked by the chop of timber; rough gems like John Dudley's Cool Drink of Water Blues, as much of a respite as it sounds; striking photographs, published for the first time; insightful essays, from then and now, ringing sternly with empathy. --Nate Chinen, New York Times, November 2014

As is typical for Dust-to-Digital releases these days, the two discs of Parchman Farm are packaged in a beautiful hardbound book filled with black-and-white photos shot by Lomax on his final visit. The liner notes are taken from previous issues of the material, though nearly a dozen of the 44 tracks have never been released before. It may be hard to enjoy this music without suppressing parts of your consciousness, but its power and resourcefulness are unmistakable. --Peter Margasak, Chicago Reader, November 2014

## **About the Author**

Alan Lomax is Director, Cantometrics and Choreometrics Projects at Columbia University.

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In 1947, 1948 and 1959, renowned folklorist Alan Lomax (1915-2002) went behind the barbed wire into the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman. Armed with a reel-to-reel tape deck--and, in 1959, a camera--Lomax documented as best an outsider could the stark and savage conditions of the prison farm, where the black inmates labored "from can't to can't," chopping timber, clearing ground and picking cotton for the state. They sang as they worked, keeping time with axes or hoes, adapting to their condition the slavery-time hollers that sustained their forebears and creating a new body of American song. Theirs was music, as Lomax wrote, that "testified to the love of truth and beauty which is a universal human trait." Their songs participated in two distinct musical traditions: free world (the blues, hollers, spirituals and other songs they sang outside and, when the situation permitted, sang inside as well) and the work songs, which were specific to the prison situation.

A chilling account of how slavery persisted well into the 20th century in the institutionalized form of the chain gang, Parchman Farm includes two CDs with 44 of Lomax's remastered audio recordings and a book of more than 70 of Lomax's photographs, many published here for the first time.

- Sales Rank: #983678 in Books
- Brand: Various
- Published on: 2015-09-29
- Released on: 2014-11-11
- Number of discs: 2
- Format: Box set
- Number of items: 2
- Dimensions: 9.80" h x 1.00" w x 6.80" l, 1.70 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 124 pages

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Most helpful customer reviews

14 of 14 people found the following review helpful.

An audio portrait of working on a chain gang is supplemented by a deluxe photo book

By Steve Ramm

I'm always anxious to see what comes from Lance and April Ledbetter who run the independent award-winning label, Dust to Digital. "Eclectic" and "High Quality" are two phrases that I always use when describing their products. They've found a way to combine audio CDs with a book publishing business. One example is the joint venture with the Alan Lomax Archive – Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings 1947-1959 - which documents folklorist Lomax's field recording visit to the Mississippi State Penitentiary, armed with a reel-to-reel tape recorder to capture the prisoners' work songs. 44 of these recordings (12 previously unissued) were remastered and fill two CD inserted in the 124-page hardbound book, filled with 77 photos taken by Lomax on the 1959 trip. There are essays to tell the story and details on the dates of the recordings.

If you want to hear REAL chain gang songs, this package will give you the opportunity. And the deluxe packaging is great!

I hope you found this review both informative and helpful.

Steve Ramm

"Anything Phonographic"

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

A MOVING TESTAMENT TO THE HUMAN SPIRIT.

By Stuart Jefferson

"In the pen itself, we saw that the songs, quite literally, kept the men alive and normal." Alan Lomax.

This is another very fine release (along with "Lead Kindly Light") from the Dust To Digital label. In a nutshell--everything is very nicely done--the beautiful, thick, die-cut slipcase, the thick boards used for the covers of the book, the informative and interesting essays, the (mostly) b&w photographs, and the authentic songs with great sound.

Parchman Farm looms large in the blues idiom--both in songs about the prison, and in the several blues artists that served time there. Fans/collectors will recognize a number of these songs through various earlier releases, but never in a package which includes a high quality book filled with (77) period photographs of prisoners going about their daily lives. Plus there are 12 previously unreleased songs from the same sessions John Lomax recorded from 1947-1959 on the Farm.

The combination of songs (including vocals accompanied by axes, hoes, guitar, harmonica, plus solo vocals, and unaccompanied group vocals) and the very atmospheric period photographs opens the door to a way of life of forced labor that has been entrenched in the South for many years. And while the photos are stark reminders of that prison farm life, the songs have a feeling of hope, of eventual salvation, of hopefully better times ahead, and (of course) women and the crimes that put these men on the farm. The rhythms of these songs are used while working outside, in brutal heat with no rest, to keep spirits and the work-pace steady. Plus it kept everyone working at the same pace so that no one would be singled out for a beating. Hearing someone sing over the sound of an axe chopping wood, or a long-handled hoe grubbing through the packed earth of a long furrow is to catch a glimmer into a world none of us will ever experience.

For blues fans who are interested in this type of music (like me), the combination of photos depicting various parts of prison life--working, dancing, visitations, etc. and the work songs--many of them in a call-and-response style while working--is a view of life from a not to distant past in America. Songs like "Rosie", "The Prettiest Train I Ever Saw", "Levee Camp Holler", "Disability Boogie", "Poor Lazarus", and "Up The River" are quite moving in their no-nonsense rhythms and lyrics.

This set would be a fine addition to anyone's library who has an interest in this music and/or Parchman Farm. Much of this music is moving with a strangely disturbing element underneath. This isn't something you'll slip into your player when friends drop by to talk. This is something to listen to as a stark reminder of a brutal life we will never know. And through it all the music is what keeps these men on their paths to "gettin' out". This collection is a part of both American history and the blues music genre.

4 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Full of Life

By John Adams

Pristine sounding recordings with equally looking photos in included book.

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