

## An American Folklorist in Italy

Joey Skee (February 22, 2009)



Alan Lomax's stunning photographs from Italy (1954-1955) are published.



Italian publisher il Saggiatore has produced an exquisite book of American folklorist Alan Lomax's arresting photographs of the people he and musicologist Diego Carpitella recorded during their historic expedition in 1954-55 documenting Italy's rich folk musics. [L'anno più felice della mia vita](#) [2](2008) is edited by ethnomusicologist Goffredo Plastino of Newcastle University and contains a personal essay by Lomax's daughter, anthropologist Anna Lomax Wood of the [Association for Cultural Equity](#) [3], and a foreword by film director Martin Scorsese.



Cinquefrondi (Reggio Calabria province), Calabria, August 1, 1954.

Since the 1930s, Lomax (1915-2002) traveled the States, first with his father John and then with others, to record fiddlers on front porches, gospel congregants in clapboard churches, and chain gangs laying railroad tracks throughout the South. Fleeing the Red Scare plaguing the States after World War II (the FBI repeatedly interviewed Lomax, ultimately developing an 800 page dossier on the folklorist), he spent most of the 1950s in London working at the BBC. It was in that position that Lomax first went to Spain, then Italy, to record folk music. Lomax and Carpitella traveled from Sicily to the Alps recording working people – contadini, shepherds, fishermen, stevedores, and many others – performing the haunting sounds of work songs, lullabies, funeral laments, ballads, and tarantelle. Since 1999, Rounder Records, in conjunction with the Association for Cultural Equity, has been [releasing this remarkable music](#) [4].



Nicosia (Enna province), Sicily, July 5, 1954.

In 1960, Lomax wrote about his Italian experience in the article "[Saga of a Folksong Hunter \[5\]](#)": That year was to be the happiest of my life. Most Italians, no matter who they are or how they live, are concerned about aesthetic matters. They may have only a rocky hillside and their bare hands to work with, but on that hillside they will build a house or a whole village whose lines superbly fit its setting. So, too, a community may have a folk tradition confined to just one or two melodies, but there is passionate concern that these be sung in exactly the right way. [. . .]

Most Italian city musicians regard the songs of their country neighbors with an aversion every bit as strong as that which middle-class American Negroes feel for the genuine folk songs of the Deep South. These urban Italians want everything to be "bella," - that is, pretty, or prettified. [T]he professional purveyors of folk music in Italy leave out from their performances all that is angry, disturbing or strange. And the Radio Italiana, faithful in its obligations to Tin Pan Alley, plugs Neapolitan pop fare and American jazz day after day on its best hours. It is only natural that village folk musicians, after a certain amount of exposure to the TV screens and loudspeakers of RAI should begin to lose confidence in their own tradition.



Rovasenda (Vercelli province), Piemonte, September 27, 1954.

Lomax went on to publish his thoughts on musica popolare in the article “Nuova ipotesi sul canto folcloristico italiano nel quadro della musica popolare mondiale” for the journal *Nuovi Argomenti* (1955-56, No. 17-18), edited at the time by Alberto Moravia, who he had befriended while in Italy. (Coincidentally, the issue also featured a few chapters from Moravia’s *La Ciociara*, Pier Paolo Pasolini’s poem “Le ceneri di Gramsci,” and Danilo Dolci’s first version of “Pagine di un’inchiesta a Palermo.”) Along the way, Lomax photographed the people who sang and played before the microphone.

Folklorists and other scholars interested in the arts have tracked the disturbing news following the success of the Rounder reissues of the Lomax recordings. The Accademia of Santa Cecilia in Rome, where Lomax deposited a copy of the recordings he and Carpitella made in that glorious year, contested the rights to the recordings in Italian court, despite the fact that this venerable Italian musical institution had allowed the magnetic tapes to deteriorate. The result has been that Italians are unable to purchase CDs of their rich cultural legacy in their own country. (They can purchase the recordings online.) Thankfully, Italians are now able to see the images of those who made this amazing music. Hopefully, we in the States will soon be able to have an English-version of this important and handsome collection of photographs.



Montemarano (Avellino province), Campania, January 1955.

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