

COPLAND'S KENTUCKY MUSE
From Hill Country Hoe-Down to Concert Hall Classic
by Alan Jabbour

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In September of 1937, Alan Lomax, working for the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk-Song, packed his Presto disc-recording machine and stock of blank discs and, accompanied by his wife, Elizabeth, headed for eastern Kentucky on a field trip. Judging from Lomax's correspondence with Library colleagues, the trip was a tumultuous one. The roads were terrible; communications with Washington were slow and uncertain; money and blank-disc supplies were low; and there were chronic problems with the disc recorder, a pioneering but highly unstable apparatus for making original recordings in the field by cutting tracks into the surface of a blank acetate disc. The hill country of eastern Kentucky could be forbidding: One of Lomax's letters describes a threatening episode with a hostile man "with his knife open vowing that he intended to rip [my] guts out." But, the same letter reassures, "Most of one's encounters here in Kentucky are as pleasant as one could well imagine. Everywhere you go you are invited to spend the night and forced to eat a meal."

Lomax's adventures yielded many wonderful recordings for the archive. But one recording of an unknown but outstanding fiddler deserves special mention: The tune it documents has become a folk anthem known today by nearly every American – if not by its title, then certainly by its sound. It is the old fifer's and fiddler's march "Bonaparte's Retreat," still a favorite of traditional folk musicians throughout the American South.

The fiddler Lomax discovered was William Hamilton Stepp, whose breathtaking rendition of "Bonaparte's Retreat" Lomax recorded on October 26, 1937, in Salyersville, Kentucky. "Bonaparte's Retreat" is normally a stately march, but Stepp performed it as a lively hoe-down, an interpretation that remains unique among the many versions currently housed in the Library's American Folklife Center. Alan Lomax and his father, John A. Lomax, must have recognized Stepp's performance as something special, for they gave it to composer Ruth Crawford Seeger (of the famous musical Seeger family) to transcribe. Her meticulous, detailed transcription, noting the accelerated tempo, appeared in the Lomaxes' 1941 book, *Our Singing Country*.

The Seeger transcription seems to have caught the eye of composer Aaron Copland, who was searching for appropriate musical sources for his score for Agnes de Mille's 1942 ballet *Rodeo* (shown in performance at left). The lore of the Library has it that Copland may have heard the recording during a visit to its Music Division. Perhaps; but he is not likely to have made a meticulous transcription on the spot, and the detailed Seeger transcription would have provided all he needed.

Thus was born Copland's "Hoe-Down" for *Rodeo*, a headlong, pell-mell dance piece

following so closely the Seeger transcription of Stepp's "Bonaparte" – virtually note for note – that it sounds like an orchestral violin section and xylophone trying to imitate master fiddler Bill Stepp. This up-tempo variant of the old traditional tune, as orchestrated by Copland, quickly became a standard in American concert halls.

Copland's *Rodeo* has not been the only vehicle for the dissemination of Stepp's performance. In 1971, Lomax's original recording was included on the Library's documentary recording *American Fiddle Tunes*. More recently, author-musician Stephen Wade shared it with listeners to National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, and when he edited the CD anthology *A Treasury of Library of Congress Field Recordings*, he included it as the first track. But what really propelled the tune into the American imagination was a television ad: a ubiquitous spot produced by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association using Copland's "Hoe-Down" orchestration as its musical background while intoning, "Beef: It's what's for dinner."

This is a curious way for a tune to become a national anthem. But the creative magic of Bill Stepp's original recording for the Library certainly warrants the popularity it has achieved – some on its own, but more with Copland's help. The original recording is a triumphant example of America's living cultural heritage and an especially vibrant treasure among the many musical gems in the Library's American Folklife Center.