Folklife Today
August 2020: Watch Homegrown Concerts and Take the Archive Challenge—at Home!

[00:01]

Announcer: From the Library of Congress in Washington DC.

[MUSIC: William Hamilton Stepp plays “Bonaparte’s retreat”]

[00:33]

John Fenn: Welcome to Folklife Today, I’m John Fenn, the head of Research and Programs at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. I’m being joined by my usual co-host, Steve Winick, who is our writer and editor and the creator of the Folklife Today Blog and podcast. And as kind of our new normal for the time being, we’re remotely recording this podcast from our homes.

Stephen Winick: That’s right. We are in separate locations joined by magic. And we’re going to continue in the same vein of our last episode, in which we talked about what some of our staff members have been doing from home. This episode, we’ll focus on two programs: Homegrown at Home and The Stay at Home Archive Challenge.

John Fenn: To help us talk about these programs, we’re being joined by Thea Austen and Jennifer Cutting. So just logically, because we’ve made the Stay at Home Archive Challenge part of Homegrown at Home, let’s talk about that first.

Stephen Winick: Good plan. So before we start I’ll just say for our listeners that the team that will be on this episode, John and Thea and Jennifer and me, is the team most directly responsible for most of our musical public programs at AFC—we get input from many other staff members, but the concerts and jams and other musical events are mostly handled by the four of us. So when we say “we,” we mean AFC in general, but we also mean this team!

So the Stay at Home Archive challenge is an idea we came up with to help audiences connect with our collections. It kind of has its roots in two previous programs, one of which was the Archive Challenge, and Jennifer was the leader on that one so she’s going to tell us about that program.

[02:02]

Jennifer Cutting: Thanks, Steve. The Archive Challenge goes back to 2015, when the American Folklife Center was celebrating the centennial of Alan Lomax, the folklorist who headed our Archive from 1937 to 1942. We had to think of a way to carry the Lomax Centennial theme to the annual Folk Alliance International conference in Kansas City, Missouri. It’s the world’s largest gathering of the folk music industry and community... about 3,000 performers, record labels, booking agents, festivals and venues...
representing 50 different countries attend that conference every year. You can think of it as a massive Folk Trade Association. And our job was to think of a way to interest the Folk Alliance attendees in our Alan Lomax collections... So I came up with the idea of running a showcase stage; and we would invite performers to do research in our online collections to pick out songs and tunes from the Lomax collections that really spoke to them; to put their own creative spin on them; and then perform them on this showcase stage.

Stephen Winick: I remember that well, as I was the co-emcee of the event with Jennifer. Peggy Seeger, who hadn’t signed up to participate, just showed up and wanted to talk about Alan, so we cleared the stage and let her talk, and got a great little vignette about Alan Lomax in London. And the event was memorably kicked off by Dom Flemons, a Grammy-winner, who performed a Big Bill Broonzy song among others. Let’s hear a bit of that!

[03:57]
[Dom Flemons Performs Hey Hey Baby ]

[05:32]

John Fenn: So that was Dom Flemons with “Hey Hey Baby” by Big Bill Broonzy, the very first song in the first Archive Challenge. So how did the challenge go that year?

Jennifer Cutting: At that first Archive Challenge showcase, 17 very diverse artists brought AFC's collection materials to a whole new audience. The sounds of Cajun, Appalachian, Gospel, Calypso, and Cowboy music from our old wax cylinders and acetate discs came roaring to life again on that stage, and the audience ate it up. Luckily, the event was so successful, and the artists loved participating so much, that Folk Alliance invited us to do it again the next year. We realized that the following year was important, too... it was the 40th anniversary of the AFC. For that celebration, we thought we should broaden it from just being the “Lomax Challenge” to representing all of AFC's collections, so we re-branded it the Archive Challenge.

John Fenn: Now when some people hear “challenge,” they think it might be a contest. But it wasn’t ever really a contest, was it?

Jennifer Cutting: That’s right. The challenge is really that you’re challenging yourself to sift through the collections and find something really cool to begin with, then take that creative leap of making that song or tune your own, and performing the results of your work to a live audience. And, to make a long story short, it’s been a great success and is now an annual event that everyone looks forward to at each year’s Folk Alliance conference.

Stephen Winick: and I'll just mention that another perk for the performers is that we hire a videographer to shoot these showcases and place the individual song videos online at loc.gov, so if you search for Archive Challenge in the main search box on loc.gov, you'll get a whole bunch of cool videos to watch.
John Fenn: And we’ve also done Archive Challenge concerts here at the Library of Congress, in which we invited performers and groups who are mostly local to do 4 song mini-sets. So we encourage you to explore those videos online as well. And those videos aren’t the only benefit to the Library of Congress, are they?

Jennifer Cutting: No, the Library gets a lot out of this. The research these artists have done for the Archive Challenge (in all its different forms) has benefited the Library in that our website and Reading Room are being used by real people for creative work, which is one of the Library’s guiding principles. It’s also true that many wonderful collections have been digitized as a result of these artists’ requests for listening copies of materials that are not yet online. And, the real reward is that these artists who have “fallen in love” with our collections, have kept our archive’s songs in their repertoires and recorded them on their albums, so they’ve become traveling Good Will Ambassadors for the Library of Congress American Folklife Center Archive... and brought so many great songs and tunes back into the living, circulating, oral tradition.

John Fenn: That’s an amazing outcome and it’s really wonderful to see every year. So now that we know a bit about the archive challenge, what about the “Stay at Home” aspect?

Stephen Winick: Well, when the pandemic started, we all were thinking of ways to adapt our programming to the new situation, but we also started thinking about our friends and families and all kinds of people across the country who suddenly were spending more time at home than they were used to. And of course, we started seeing tons of homemade videos from all our musician friends whose gigs were all abruptly canceled—Jennifer and I are in a Celtic band and this happened right at St. Patrick’s Day as we well remember. And Thea is in musical groups as well, and all of that public activity suddenly stopped. And we thought of ways we might get our musician friends but also anyone who had extra time on their hands to engage with our collections. And a few years ago I was involved in a project to get people to share Halloween photos on Flickr with a special hashtag and a creative commons license so the Library could harvest the collections if it wanted to. And I thought we could use that idea of sharing on social media with a tag for homemade Archive Challenge performances.

Jennifer Cutting: And of course it’s not limited to musical performances—you could paint a picture based on an archival photo... or cook a meal based on an archival recipe, and then share that on social media too. So, dear listeners... We are challenging you! Go hunting in our archive for an item that inspires you, and do something with it!

John Fenn: Great. And we have some tips for how to do that, right?

Stephen Winick: Yes, the first thing we did was create a blog post over at Folklife today, that outlined the idea and told people where they could find our collections. So that’s at blogs.loc.gov/Folklife, and search for home archive challenge. So that’s how you can get involved.
John Fenn: and just to give you a sense of what folks out there are doing, we’re going to play you the first response we got. It’s from Marcus Howell, and he posted it on Instagram. It’s a song about a bad flu outbreak in 1929, one of the kind of aftershocks of the great 1918 pandemic. So this is Marcus Howell playing “Influenza.”

[11:35]

[Music: Marcus Howell Plays “Influenza.”]

[13:35]

Stephen Winick: Again, Marcus Howell with “Influenza,” which he learned from a recording John and Ruby Lomax made of Ace Johnson in Texas in 1939. He sent me a nice email, too, saying how big a fan he is of the Library of Congress, which is always nice, so thanks to Marcus Howell! And in addition to that, we’ve gotten blues, ballads, banjo tunes, and some gospel. But we’d love to get more. So again, if you’re interested in taking the archive challenge, you can record yourself performing one of our songs and post it to your social media accounts with our tags. Visit blogs.loc.gov/folklife for more instructions!

John Fenn: Great, thanks Steve. Now it’s time to talk about what has really been the centerpiece of our summer programming, the Homegrown Concert series. And we have Theadocia Austen here, who is our public events coordinator and the producer of that series. Hi Thea!

[14:30]

Theadocia Austen: Hello!

John Fenn: So how is this year different from other years?

Theadocia Austen: It is very different, John. We have been doing the homegrown concert series for twenty years—this is our twentieth season. In a typical year, we would have begun our series in March or April, holding concerts once or twice a week through the summer and into the fall. And we normally hold them in the Coolidge Auditorium and Whittall Pavilion in the Library’s Jefferson Building, which are great venues for live music. But just as the series was gearing up to get started this year, the Library made the difficult decision to cancel all onsite public events because of the pandemic. So the concert team—which is largely us—quickly got moving to create a new format consistent with social distancing and other safety practices. And this mostly means having artists record their own videos and then presenting them online. So, we had to discuss what we wanted and then I had to re-book the series and get the artists started on their recordings. We’re very excited with how it’s turning out.

John Fenn: And we’re calling it Homegrown at Home?

Stephen Winick: Yes. We were kind of kicking around different names like Homegrown from home, but we knew some of the artists technically aren’t doing it at home: either they have good friends who are helping them with studio space or they in some cases
made on-location recordings. But wherever they were, they were there because they felt at home there. So we went with AT HOME, because we hope you’ll feel at home watching musicians who feel at home.

John Fenn: So what was your process for booking the series, Thea?

Well, we did already have the season entirely booked, so the first thing I did was to talk to each of the artists we were already working and find out which of them were interested in trying the new format. Only one of the groups chose to do that. Most preferred to wait and try coming to the Library in person a year or two down the road. Then we worked from there to build an almost entirely new series with artists who were willing to try this new virtual approach. I worked with a list of traditional artists quarantining alone or with someone they could play with. I also went to Folk Alliance this year, so I worked with some of the artists I met there, including several who were in the archive challenge. So I contacted folks I knew would do a great job. We care a great deal about traditional music and we wanted to do what we could to keep artists working. Some of them had lost all of their work. So that was a big motivator. And we’re thrilled to be able to keep presenting the music in a format that keeps everyone safe.

John Fenn: So what is the format?

Theadocia Austen: Well, it varies. For some artists, it’s very basic. The artist performs solo with a guitar or piano in their backyard or their home. But then, Sean Ardoin, a great creole accordionist and singer, who normally plays with a larger group, played live to prerecorded backing tracks for what he calls Kreole Rock-n-Soul. Steve Riley was quarantined with his family, so his kids Burke and Dolsy were his band. They’re only 10 and 7, but they were really good! Walter Parks went to several locations and filmed great footage and also did wonderful studio production on his tracks.

This series is a combination of two different avenues that we’ve been developing now for a little while. We have always honored and featured traditional artists who play music from the communities they were born in and represent with incredible artistic achievement. But we’re also developing another avenue of performance by talented artist/researchers who deeply respect the traditions of master performers and pay homage by researching their music both at the feet of the masters and by listening and learning from archival recordings. This series has both kinds of performers.

Stephen Winick: Yeah, I think a lot of us thought the Walter Parks video was special, so let’s talk about him a little. I first met Walter a few years ago at Folk Alliance. He was interested in the Francis Harper collection of Okefenokee swamp recordings—not a collection that gets used much. But there’s great stuff in it. And he had a video of himself performing some of this music, because he had access to another copy of the collection which was in Georgia, and he had learned some of the songs. So he had this video of himself performing one, and it was just haunting. So Jennifer and I have helped him with research over the years.
Jennifer Cutting: Yes, and this past year Walter decided to perform in the Archive Challenge at Folk Alliance, so we worked with him on that. And then he came and did research in our Folklife Reading Room on one of his trips through Washington, D.C. as well. So we had the pleasure of really getting to know him. And we should say that he's a really accomplished musician who was Richie Havens's right-hand man and guitarist for ten years. So, a monster musician.

Theadocia Austen: Absolutely. It’s been exciting working with him as he put together his ideas for this particular concert. And the amazing thing about his video is that he went down to the Okefenokee where the field recordings were made, and went to the cabin where Tom Chesser, the singer on the recordings, used to live. And he played on the porch and brought back recordings, and then incorporated them into his video. It gives an amazing sense of place to the video. This is new and different. It’s something we can’t do in Coolidge auditorium, to give such a tangible sense of place.

Stephen Winick: So many of the recordings he used were hollers—that is, wordless but melodic cries that people used to identify themselves and communicate over long distances. To warn your family you were coming home from a mile or so away. But sometimes the hollers got combined with song lyrics too. So this is Water Parks singing a hollering version of “Nobody’s Business.”

[22:52]

[Music: Walter Parks performs “Nobody’s Business.”]

[24:15]

John Fenn: That is an absolutely amazing version of “Nobody’s Business” by Walter Parks. So how do we hear these concerts?

Theadocia Austen: The concerts premiere on Facebook each Wednesday at noon. And at the same time, they go live on the concert pages of loc.gov, in the main search engine on loc.gov, and on the Library’s YouTube channel. So you can watch them in any of those places starting noon on Wednesday. The advantage of catching the premiere is that the artist is there to chat with the audience in the comments section! To catch that go to facebook.com/americanfolklifecenter all one word. And look for the top post which should say “AFC plans to premiere a video.” And at noon a button should appear that says “Watch Live” and you click it. But the great thing is that once it airs it’s live forever on the web and YouTube. So to catch all the past concerts, just go to loc.gov/concerts/folklife

John Fenn: Great…and as we mentioned at the beginning, there’s an archive challenge aspect to this series too, isn’t there?

Stephen Winick: Yes. Almost all the artists are playing at least one song they learned from our archival recordings, and some folks have recorded entire videos based on our material. And for that, as with archive challenges in the past, Jennifer and I have really helped the artists with collections research.
John Fenn: so what are some of our favorites?

Stephen Winick: well, the series kicked off with Steve Riley. He’s of course a Cajun accordionist, and a Grammy award winner, and I had a connection with him in that I interviewed him for a magazine I used to write for about 25 years ago. So it was great to work with him again and show him around the online Louisiana collections. His own teacher and mentor Dewey Balfa is in some of our collections. And of course great to see his two kids, Burke, who’s 10 and Dolsy, who’s seven, and they’re both great musicians. So here they are playing “La Petite ou la Grosse.”

[26:22]
[Music: Riley Family band perform “La Petite ou la grosse”]

[28:05]

John Fenn: That was the Riley Family Band with Steve Riley. And I really enjoyed another family band performance in the series, Sihasin. Sihasin is the duo of Jeneda and Clayson Benally, a brother and sister whose dad, Jones Benally, is a great tradition bearer. They are from the Navajo Nation in Arizona. And we had the Benally Family here last year and I got to meet with them. So this is Sihasin with their dad!

[28:33]

Jeneda Benally: I’m hoping that you’d like to hear our father, Mr. Jones Benally. Our father is known in the State of Arizona as a - as an Arizona living treasure. And he is also one of the oldest hoop dancers. I think maybe the oldest. He is about 90 something. And that’s that we know, right?

[Music. Sihasin performs “What Do You See?”]

[30:25]

John Fenn: Again, that was Sihasin from the Navajo Nation....

Theadocia Austen: I should say you really should watch the videos. Because they did this concert outdoors and maintaining social distance...and they brought along family members and even their horse, Moonwalker! So it’s really fun to watch!

John Fenn: Agreed! Jennifer, do you have a favorite?

Jennifer Cutting: I loved a lot of the concerts, but I’ll give a special mention to Emma Björling and Petrus Johansson. Steve and I first saw Emma at Folk Alliance a few years ago with an a cappella women’s vocal quartet called Kongero. And then this past year Emma performed at Folk Alliance with Skye Consort from Canada. She’s just a wonderful, and very versatile singer, and when we contacted her about doing a Homegrown at Home video, she suggested a guitarist, Petrus, who also adds perfect harmony vocals here and there. It’s just a charming concert. And this is a song I absolutely fell in love with when we heard Emma do with Kongero... I practically wore out their CD, playing this song over and over when I got home from Folk Alliance!
Stephen Winick: Emma Björling and Petrus Johansson with “Sjomansbrud.” There are more words in the title, but Swedish folk fans will know which song it is with that abbreviated title, and it gets me out of any more Swedish with my embarrassing accent! So Thea, who do you want to highlight?

Theadocia Austen: It’s impossible to pick a favorite. I’ve loved working with every single artist of this series. Some, like Jay Ungar and Molly Mason, and Carmen Deedy, I’ve known for decades, others I may have met more recently, but have fallen in love with their music and talent. I want to highlight everyone, so I’m going to list the whole series.

The Riley Family Band Featuring Steve Riley: Cajun Music from Louisiana
John McCutcheon: Songs from the American Folklife Center Archive
Sihasin: Jeneda and Clayson Benally from the Navajo Nation (Arizona)
Alasdair Fraser and Natalie Haas: Scottish Music for Fiddle and Cello
Emma Björling and Petrus Johansson: Traditional Songs from Sweden
Sean Ardoin: Creole Music and Zydeco from Louisiana
Jay Ungar and Molly Mason: Oldtime Fiddle Tunes and Songs
Walter Parks: Haunting Swamp Hollers from Georgia
Carmen Agra Deedy: Family Stories from a Master Storyteller
Iona Fyfe: Traditional Songs from Scotland
Eva Salina and Peter Stan: Serbian, Roma, and Jewish Songs
Ann Yao: Chinese Zheng Music from Florida
Si Kahn: Folksongs for Labor Day
Joe Jencks: Songs of Workers and Wanderers
Reggie Harris: Spirituals, Freedom Songs, and Other Songs of Hope
Dom Flemons: Black Cowboy Songs and More from the American Songster
Phil Wiggins, Blues and More from Maryland
Chum Ngek, Cambodian music from Maryland
Changüí Majadero: Cuban Roots Music from California

But let’s hear from Sean Ardoin, with a song called “Keep on Moving.” Sean is a fantastic musician, son of Lawrence Ardoin and grandson of Bois-Sec Ardoin, and a relative of Amede Ardoin who kind of started the whole Cajun and Creole genre. Sean’s song is one of the pieces that gets furthest from traditional music in our series this year, but it still builds on the tradition.

John Fenn: Great, let’s hear it!

[Music: Sean Ardoin plays “Keep on Moving”]
Stephen Winick: Once again, Sean Ardoin with “Keep on Moving.” And I think we have to keep on moving because we’re getting to the end of our show! So tune in for the rest of our concerts at loc.gov/concerts/folklife, and please take the archive challenge-find out how at blogs.loc.gov/folklife!

John Fenn: We do have one more piece of music to play us out. Because one of the concerts in this series was Jay Ungar and Molly Mason, and they played their famous farewell tune from Ken Burns’s The Civil War, “Ashokan Farewell.” But before we hear that, Steve, we should thank our guests, Jennifer Cutting and Theadocia Austen.

Stephen Winick: and we want to thank our engineer Jon Gold. Again, he didn’t do his usual set up or recording in the studio because we can’t even go to the studio. But he’s going to do lots of audio magic to it now that it’s recorded! And we want to thank our colleagues throughout the Library of Congress who will have to deploy this podcast remotely. The Library of Congress really has done a great job of making it possible for us to do our jobs from home and we really do appreciate having jobs, and having colleagues who do their jobs so well under such difficult circumstances. So let’s finish off with Jay Ungar and Molly Mason playing “Ashokan Farewell.”

[38:27]

[Music: Jay Ungar and Molly Mason play “Ashokan Farewell.”]

[40:13]

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov