

# Jelly Roll Morton interviews conducted by Alan Lomax (1938)

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*Jelly Roll Morton*

Jelly Roll Morton (1885-1941), born Ferdinand Joseph Lamothe in New Orleans, had Creole parents. He began playing the piano at an early age in the New Orleans Storyville neighborhood during the birth pangs of jazz. For a decade, starting in 1907, he traveled the country as a vaudeville musician and singer; in 1915 his composition “The Jelly Roll Blues” became the first published jazz tune.

From 1917 to 1923, he continued performing from his base in Los Angeles, then moved to Chicago where he met Walter and Lester Melrose, who had a music publishing company. Along with his sheet music, Morton began recording for Paramount Records in 1923 as well as for Gennett Records in Richmond, Indiana, and for the Autograph label. Backed by various session musicians, particularly the Red Hot Peppers, his most influential recordings came in 1926-30, first for Vocalion, then for RCA-Victor.

With the onslaught of the Depression, Morton’s career languished, so he moved to New York, then Washington, D.C., in 1936. He now hosted show “The History of Jazz” on WOL and performed in a local club. Known in 1937 as the Music Box/Jungle Inn, there he met the young, creative, and energetic Alan Lomax.

Born in Austin, Texas, the son of the folklorist John Lomax, Alan Lomax (1915-2002) had become assistant-in-charge of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress (LC) in 1937. He was always flooded with projects, mostly concerning collecting black and white roots music, but he was thrilled by the discovery of Morton, the famed jazz musician, nearby in Washington.

Various jazz lovers dropped by the Music Box to hear Morton, including Alistair Cooke, a young British reporter who borrowed folk recordings from the LC for his BBC programs. Cooke

introduced Lomax to Morton. According to a June 1938 article in "Down Beat": "For recently Alan Lomax...struck in Jelly Roll a valuable lode of folk music pay dirt. Lomax staked a claim and soon Morton will begin cutting discs on the development of jazz to be filed permanently in the Congressional Library. Playing his piano, singing and talking he will trace the rise of jazz and swing from its folk music sources."

Lomax wasted no time in promoting Morton. In a letter dated May 26, 1938, he suggested including him on a jazz session for the upcoming New York world's fair: Morton "is rated in 'Down Beat' as the most versatile and fertile man in the field of jazz from 1910-1929. I am recording...all of his compositions, all of the folk tunes that he knows with very full biographical material. I think the musicologists of the future will find in it essential material for writing the history of American music."

Lomax's first sessions with Morton lasted over a month, from May 21 through June 12, then picked up again on December 14. Recorded on Presto disc-recording machines, they produced nine hours of music and narrative on 54 twelve-inch discs. Drawing on this motherlode, in 1947, Rudi Blesh's Circle company issued 200 sets of 45 twelve-inch 78rpm discs under the title "The Saga of Mr. Jelly Roll." In the 1950s, Blesh, and also Riverside Records, issued some of the recordings on long-playing albums, and later there were CD reissues, but none were complete or without recording and note flaws.

Under the title "Jelly Roll Morton: The Complete Library of Congress Recordings by Alan Lomax," in 2005, Rounder Records, in conjunction with the Alan Lomax Archive, issued an eight CD boxed set. It includes not only all of the original 1938 recordings, digitally remastered, but 1949 recordings by Lomax of a variety of jazz performers. This eighth CD also features a PDF of transcripts of the original recordings as well as other documents. A separate publication of liner notes, 80 pages, includes information by Lomax biographer John Szwed and much more.

Drawing from his interviews, in 1950, Lomax published "Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and 'Inventor of Jazz.'" The 2001 paperback edition is included in the Rounder boxed set. Lomax would also undertake extensive interviews with Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter, Aunt Molly Jackson, and Woody Guthrie, but his work with Morton would be his most productive and illuminating: "Mister Jelly Roll tried to give me everything he could remember in the month we spent together, but there was too much to tell... He wanted to tell it all. He wanted me to write his life story." Morton was able to squeeze in a few more recordings for Victor and General in New York in late 1939/early 1940 before moving to California just before his death.

The Lomax recordings include a rich, complex mix of dozens of stories and songs, beginning with the story of "I'm Alabama Bound" followed by the song. There is so much biographical information, such as the discussions "New Orleans was a Free and Easy Place" and "The Story of the 1900 New Orleans Riot." The songs are particularly engaging, including "Aaron Harris Blues," "Flee As the Bird to the Mountain," various versions of "Tiger Rag," "Kansas City Stomp," and "Hesitation Blues." Many were his own creations, such as "Original Jelly Roll Blues." There is also a seven-part discussion of "The Murder Ballad," and a two-part version of "Wolverine Blues."

While Lomax was working on his biography, he also drew upon interviews with some of Morton's musical contemporaries, such as Johnny St. Cyr, Pops Foster, and Sidney Bechet, to round out the story of the early years of jazz and blues: "Sometimes they brag, sometimes they remember exactly what was said or how things looked; sometimes they remember it the way they wished it; but somehow out of the crossing of misty memories comes truth--comes a hint of great secrets--how music grows--how artists can be pimps when they have to and still see the world dancing with fiery notes."

This boxed set is a tribute to two incredibly creative personalities, Jelly Roll Morton and Alan Lomax.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.