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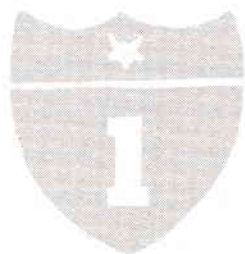
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Ain't It a Pity, I'm in New York City!

Here is a picture of the world: It is a vast globe or ball surrounded on all sides by a sky sparkling with stars. Its surface is divided into land and water. It has upon it two great Continents, five Oceans, many Seas, and Lakes, and Rivers, and Islands, and Mountains. The waters are inhabited by fish and the land is inhabited by man and animals; the land is also covered with trees, and plants of various kinds.

—Picture of the World, lithograph, 1833



I live in Brooklyn, New York, in a gently gentrifying neighborhood called Boerum Hill, eight blocks east of the river and a fifteen-minute subway ride from downtown Manhattan. Last June, I moved to Brooklyn from Charlottesville, Virginia, tugging sagging cardboard boxes through summer swelter, squishing black ants with my flip-flops, balancing potted plants on sloping windowsills, nailing pictures to brick walls. Clawing open a crate of LPs and plugging in an old suitcase record player, I broadcast the hottest songs I could think of: thick, crackling Delta blues.

Brooklyn is removed from mass American culture in complicated

ways and consequently feels intensely foreign to the outsider, no matter how askew your trucker hat, how immense your mental Rolodex of dollar-PBR nights, how frequent your trips to the borough's lone Target. Despite growing up only thirty-five miles due north of Times Square, and having squirmed through graduate school at Columbia University, I still feel unprepared for New York City every time I trip out my front door, scrunching my nose to the smell of street-boiled, urine-soaked trash, corking my ears with headphones, curling myself away from sirens, body taut and defensively posed.

A year later, I'm still learning the mechanics of this new place, walking the streets, sniffing, gawking, searching. Today's incessant, soggy rain does little to alleviate the city's inherent muck, and I think, again, about how New York City is maybe the only place in the world that seems dirtier when it pours. Everything thickens: cigarette butts swell into tar-kissed mush, brown puddles crowd the sidewalk. Rain might shine and polish lesser cities, but here, water lands like shellac, leaden and sticky, solidifying our mess. Afterward, the air bloats, becoming too thick to breathe. It's hard not to hear My Morning Jacket's Jim James's high, desperate howl, and shiver: "All your life / Is obscene." But this is the same story everyone tells: living in New York is serious business. It screams, it stinks, it hurts; people push and shoot and kick and grab and yell and dance and holler. The city stings. You are not welcome.

Luckily for me, Brooklyn is not all sludge. I do not miss parking lots or driveways or property lines or cold, suburban isolation. As Ian Frazier writes, "Like many Americans, I fear living in a nowhere, in a place that is no-place; in Brooklyn, that doesn't trouble me at all." Here there are magnificent bookstores, and too many rock clubs, and grain silos where you can watch packs of theremin players congregate, zapping one another with sound waves. In Brooklyn, on the streets, there are fewer secrets, and I judge whole lives from my living room, chewing a pen and listening to Ike Turner records, pressing my palms into dirty windowpanes, nose flat to the glass. There are people fighting on the sidewalk;

women carrying big, plastic shopping bags; men with newspapers; dogs on leashes of thin white string. Young professionals frown, trudging home from the subway, clutching overstuffed briefcases and sacks of take-out shrimp pad Thai, faces long and prematurely gray, juggling duffel bags stuffed with damp gym clothes, shifting their work from one arm to the next. They are tired. Women with toddlers and sacks of produce smile. The man in the beige trench coat smokes a joint, leans against a street sign, crosses his ankles.

On Friday nights, I fall asleep to Brooklyn Cable Access Television, where Lebroz James, a twentysomething white kid with a beard combed out past his nose, hosts my favorite program: an unpredictable variety show wherein James scrambles eggs, yaps about titties, lifts weights, and superimposes his dancing image over Gwen Stefani videos taped straight from MTV (complete with *TRL* pop-ups). In the afternoons, I buy chicken empanadas from street vendors, eating them with one hand, smearing excess grease on my thrift store jeans. I read back issues of *The New Yorker* on steaming subway platforms, my fingers sticking to the pages until I give up and slump over, fanning my damp face, silently commiserating with the woman in nursing scrubs pressing a bottle of Poland Spring to her forehead. I coerce old pals into packing peanut butter sandwiches and thermoses of lemonade and camping out for free concerts in Prospect Park; I huff over the Brooklyn Bridge, kicking at wayward boards with my sneakers, snapping group pictures for giddy tourists. I wander down Bergen Street at night, peeking in the windows of million-dollar brownstones, coveting crystal chandeliers and floor-to-ceiling bookcases. I smile at kids in huge shorts doing pull-ups on crosswalk signals, their white sneakers dangling, thwapping against the yellow pole. At the end of my block, I watch residents of Gowanus Houses, one of New York's largest housing projects, trickle into the street, slicing fruit and pumping hot summer jams, gathering around our local bodega, nodding their heads at passersby. It's trite but awfully true: Brooklyn is bloated with weird, magnificent life.

Regardless, possibly the biggest upside to living in New York is that nearly everywhere else in the country feels easier when (and if) you leave. Now I understand why New Yorkers make the very best travelers. Here outsider status becomes a perpetual part of the daily web of living. Suddenly, feeling a little bit misplaced seems comparably tame. The armor is already built-in; we hold our bags to our hips and keep our heads down.

In 1942, the Texas-born scholar Alan Lomax went “song hunting” in the Mississippi River basin, armed with a missive from the Smithsonian and the same five-hundred-pound portable recording machine that he first used with his father, the folklorist John Lomax, in 1933. Before his death in 2002, Alan Lomax recorded stacks and stacks of quasi-obscure regional folk songs, beginning with the American South and, eventually, stretching his net most of the way around the world. To some, Alan Lomax was an unapologetic imperialist, selfishly scouring foreign cultures for folk songs, making a career out of capturing and lionizing and publishing and picking apart indigenous anthems that did not belong to him—but Lomax also saved hundreds of folk songs from grim, untimely deaths, offering subsequent generations tiny, mysterious bits of art.

For many modern folklorists, a wariness of the Lomaxes’ methods still lingers. (There is much mostly unsubstantiated fuss about the family’s self-serving agenda, a controversy that began after John refused to sign over his part of the copyright to Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter’s “Goodnight, Irene”—which John recorded at a Louisiana state prison in 1933, and with which the Weavers scored a colossal hit in 1950—despite the Ledbetter family’s continued impoverishment.) But both John and Alan Lomax understood folk songs; they felt them in their teeth. I admire their bone-deep fervor—the way they craved these songs—as much as I admire their bravery, and, to an extent, their nerve. The Lomaxes understood that America has always been a frontier country. One quick glance at an elementary school social studies syllabus makes the point—Daniel Boone, Sacagawea, Thomas Freeman, Peter

Custis, Zebulon Montgomery Pike, Stephen Long, Jedediah Smith, Nathaniel Wyeth, John Audubon. Pillage, claim, steal. Advance, acknowledge, apologize.

There is a famous black-and-white portrait of Alan Lomax, taken in 1941: The room is dim, and Lomax is perched in front of his typewriter, legs splayed. A box of typing paper, an ashtray, and a coffee press crowd a tiny writing table. He is wearing a shirt and tie; a cigarette droops out of the far left corner of his mouth. Blank-faced, Lomax gazes at his paper, hair mussed. I like to stare at his hands: each index finger is pointing straight out, poised to peck, taking careful aim at his keyboard. Along with his father, Alan Lomax is often considered responsible for the preservation and distribution of much of southern American music, and, subsequently, could arguably claim ownership for the past fifty years of rock 'n' roll. Still: here he is, typing with two fingers, like a little kid. Somehow, it makes his work seem less monumental, less intimidating, less dirty.

John and Alan Lomax might be America's most renowned song-catchers, but the notion of trekking into mountains and valleys, poaching and doting over and preserving ancient songs, was hardly a novel endeavor, even in the 1930s. Nor is it extinct. Scholars and academics still toil in libraries and archives and cornfields, rolling up their trousers and wiggling out of their corduroy blazers, tying cardigans around their waists, trying their best to help these songs endure. Part of that impulse comes from the preservationist instinct of people who read too many books; part is imperialist; part is love.

There is something about indigenous, rural music that invites myth-telling, that demands movement and discovery. Like so many other things, this is as much about the quest as it is about the prize. Where music comes from—the landscapes and faces and churches and industries and seasons that create and preserve certain systems of sound—is the real story. It is my perpetual and unmistakable failure as a music critic that I am infinitely more interested in personal details than in studio settings or guitar pedals or synthesizer type or whether or not some-