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Kindred Spirits BY STEVE ZEITLIN

Not long after I moved to New York in 1981, I met the pioneering folklorist Alan Lomax at a party. He seemed interested in talking with me as a newcomer to the field. “I discovered Lead Belly and Muddy Waters,” he said to me out of the blue. “Who have you discovered?” Holding a glass of wine, I was nonplussed, flustered, rendered speechless by the question. I felt I hadn’t yet discovered myself, let alone anyone else.

The Beatles were fond of saying that their manager Brian Epstein didn’t discover the Beatles, as he often claimed. It was the Beatles who discovered Brian Epstein. I would love to have suggested to Alan something to this effect: “Perhaps you didn’t ‘discover’ Muddy Waters, perhaps Muddy Waters discovered you—and I imagine you both discovered something of yourselves in one another.” Many of the singers and storytellers that folklorists claim to have “discovered” are themselves folklorists of sorts, who have, in turn, collected stories and songs their whole lives. And there is often a deep, almost spiritual connection between the folk musicians and the folklorists who documented and promoted their careers—between, for instance, Alan Lomax and Lead Belly, John Cohen of the New Lost City Ramblers and Roscoe Holcomb, folklorist Ralph Rinzler and Doc Watson.

In my work as a folklorist, I have long realized that we are not so much studying the folks we interview and celebrate, but rather documenting their work and partnering with them. They are not our “informants,” a sorry term often used in the discipline, but our collaborators. We are not “studying them,” but learning from them. Much of my work as a folklorist involves documenting cultural forms, but much of it, too, is about connecting with kindred spirits from other walks of life, and collaborating with them to find creative ways to give out-of-the-mainstream art forms and individuals the attention they deserve.

The folk characters I’ve gotten to know in my work, many of whom have passed on,

come back to me in dreams and stories. I discover repeatedly what the folklorist Sandy Rikoon narrowed to three words: “People are smart.” They are my teachers. My relationship with them is a testament to what the writer and teacher Jack Tchen calls solidarity and connection across difference. I am not denying the differences in our stations and walks of life, and I am not trying to be them any more than they are trying to be me. I consider them kindred spirits.

Here is some of what I’ve gleaned from these remarkable individuals. From the Reverend Robert Butler who with his mother, then a blues guitarist in her 70s, ran an informal ministry of song, visiting the sick and infirm in New York City, I learned: “Black folks have all the sayings. White folks got all the money.”

From Moishe Sacks, a retired baker and the unofficial rabbi of the Intervale Jewish Center, the last synagogue remaining in the South Bronx: “Death doesn’t matter to me. I don’t think I’ll know death. I know only two things, the present, how to live.” Interviewed for the documentary film, *The Grand Generation*, which I coproduced with Marjorie Hunt and Paul Wagner, Moishe Sacks taught me a lot about how to live:

I love to braid a Challah, I love to bake a cake... When I was working I had a weekly schedule. Monday a cake called Apple Ness, Tuesday strudel, Wednesday babkes, Thursday this – but at the end of Sunday evening, I was happy, because, by Monday, it went back to Apple Ness. I accomplished what I set out to do. Therefore, I was happy.

I met the homeless man, Tony Butler, at the Broadway-Lafayette stop on the F train. Soon after, I saw him playing a game of solitaire, sitting on one of the benches and dealing out the cards. “The problem with this game,” he tells me, “is that there’s an overabundance of losing combinations.” In the weeks and years that followed, I realized that his observation pertained not only to solitaire, but life itself. According to Tony, “too many things

go wrong, and not enough things go right. When you take right and wrong, and you go like this:”—he used his hands as a balancing scale to demonstrate—“there’s just an overabundance of wrong, there’s just a little right. Wrong is actually what makes the world go round. Wrong is king. Wrong rules. Wrong dominates. The world is actually geared to go wrong. There’s too many ways for things to go wrong, and it’s impossible for everything to go right.”

I met Civil Rights activist and wife of a Pullman porter, Rosina Tucker, when she was 104. My friend Paul Wagner, along with folklorist Jack Santino, introduced me to her when we filmed *The Grand Generation* (currently streaming on folkstreams.net). “Once, a young man asked me,” she said, “what was the world like in your day? You know so often when a younger person will talk to an older person, especially a very old person, they seem to have in the back of their minds that those people are still living back in those days. I wanted to let this young person know that I wasn’t living back then. ‘My day,’ I told him, ‘My day? This IS my day.’”

“I feel that everybody has a purpose in life,” she said, “whether they carry or know that purpose or not—there is a purpose to every life—and I think there is a purpose for my life, and I will live until that purpose is fulfilled.”

I can think of no greater purpose in life than to sing the praises of these great spirits. Moishe Sacks, Rosina Tucker, and Tony Butler are iconic. Folklore, as a form of great nurturance, is palpable in their presence. Many of the individuals who worked closely with me have passed on. I carry them with me, these luminous souls who have immeasurably enriched my spirit. ▼

Steve Zeitlin is the founding director of City Lore in New York City. Photo by Martha Cooper.



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