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NEW YORK FOLKLORE  
129 Jay Street  
Schenectady, NY 12305  
518/346-7008  
Fax 518/346-6617  
Email: [info@nyfolklore.org](mailto:info@nyfolklore.org)  
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# Irv and Fran Shapiro Folk Music Library

BY MAUREEN DYE

On most spring and fall Thursdays in downtown Glens Falls, you can hear a free concert in Crandall Public Library. Sponsored by the library's Folklife Center, the music may be bluegrass, ethnic, Celtic, roots, or contradance, but it's always engaging. It's often played by local musicians and reflects the heritage of the Southern Adirondacks and Upper Hudson Valley.

Among the frequent concertgoers several years ago were Irv and Fran Shapiro, who had amassed a significant personal folk music collection over a 60-year period. One evening they began discussions with the Folklife Center director, Todd DeGarmo,

and arranged to have their collection donated to The Folklife Center of Crandall Public Library.

The gift included over 600 LP recordings, as well as cassettes, songbooks, sheet music, biographical material on some of the musicians represented in the collection, and the first issue of *American Folk Music Magazine*. Among the albums are spoken word recordings, dance, instrumental, and sacred music from the Americas, Caribbean Islands, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Among the musicians are well-known American performers like Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Cisco Houston, Odetta, Jean Ritchie, and

Peggy Seeger, as well as ordinary folks whose music was recorded in their communities by musicologists and folklorists, such as John and Alan Lomax, among others.

In the latter group is the album *Folksongs and Music from The Berryfields of Blair*, a compilation of songs recorded in 1954 in Scotland's berry fields of Blairgowrie. Situated near several small lakes, the fields attracted pickers from all over Scotland, England, and Ireland. Some made their living working the land; others picked fruit as a way to have a pay-as-you-go holiday. Field hands came alone and in families, staying in tents, dugouts, huts, or caravans on the farm, and included Irish and



Some of the albums covers contained in the Shapiro Collection. Courtesy of the Crandall Public Library's Folklife Center.

Scottish Gypsies or Travellers, who brought with them a wealth of traditional music, dance, and folklore. The Standing Stones Farm, on which these recordings were made, was owned by Belle Stewart and her husband Alex, who were themselves Travellers and became well-known folk performers in the United Kingdom and the United States. The music, tales, and a bit of step dancing were recorded during a *veildib* (pronounced kay'lay)—in this case, a gathering around a campfire at the end of the workday. Poet and folklorist Hamish Henderson made the recordings in association with the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh. This was one of a series of albums produced by Prestige International Records and Kenneth S. Goldstein.

Dr. Goldstein (1927–1995), who co-founded the Philadelphia Folk Music Festival, earned the first PhD in folklore awarded by the University of Pennsylvania, where he served for 25 years as Chair of the Department of Folklore and Folklife. During his lifetime, he produced more than 500 albums of folk and blues music for 11 record companies, including Stinson, Riverside, and Folkways, where he served as folk music director. He was also a personal friend of the Shapiros and offered advice and assistance with their record collection. When the Shapiros sold a part of their collection to Ohio State University in 1964, Dr. Goldstein was due to speak on campus and personally delivered the records, rather than risk damaging them in shipment.

In this collection are albums recorded by scholars, such as archivist John Lomax, who made field recordings in Texas prisons, among other places, in order to preserve our musical and cultural heritage—*Negro Prison Songs* is one such album. There are some 20 albums by Richard Dyer-Bennett, who revived the art of traditional English balladry and minstrelsy, a storytelling format that combines music and poetry, including two highly acclaimed self-titled albums, *Richard Dyer-Bennett #1* and *Richard Dyer-Bennett #2*. American poet and balladeer Carl Sandburg collected and sang songs of the American West. Among them is *Cowboy Songs and Negro*

*Spirituals*, which he recorded for the Decca Records' American Folk Music Series. Mr. Sandburg's book, *The American Songbook*, is also part of this collection.

There are albums that reflect north-eastern, upstate New York, including Pete Seeger's *Champlain Valley Songs* and *Songs of a New York Lumberjack* by Ellen Stekert. There are albums that trace US history and politics: John and Lucy Allison's *Ballads of the American Revolution and the War of 1812*, Woody Guthrie's *Talking Dust Bowl*, and Pete Seeger's *Gazette*—an album of topical songs, including "Banks of Marble," which was written about the Depression but might, with a few lyric changes, describe the Great Recession during the late 2000s. There are also countless albums that trace the roots of our culture back to the British Isles, the Caribbean, and Africa.

There are also some surprises in this collection—reminders that it is, after all, a personal collection. There's popular American dance music from the 1950s and '60s, and *A Treasury of Ribaldry*, selected readings from the work of Oscar Wilde and Ben Franklin, recorded by the comedic English actor Martyn Green.

Irving Shapiro was a professor of public health at the former State of New York Downstate Medical Center and Columbia University. Born in 1918 in the Bronx, he and his wife Frances were longtime residents of New York City and were very involved in the local folk dance scene of the 1950s and 60s. In addition to a long-standing interest in folk music, Mr. Shapiro was also a photographer whose work, *A Soldier's Eye: Europe 1944*, was exhibited locally at the Lower Adirondack Regional Arts Center, SUNY Adirondack, and Union College. For 35 years, the Shapiros split their time between Florida and their farm in Riparius, north of Glens Falls. They moved to Queensbury (just outside Glens Falls) in 2001, where Mr. Shapiro died in 2009.

The Shapiro Folk Music Library has been added to Crandall Public Library's online catalog at [www.crandalllibrary.org](http://www.crandalllibrary.org). Searching "Shapiro folk music library" will provide information on the entire collection of



In the Shapiro Folk Music collection: *Songs of a New York Lumberjack* by Ellen Stekert. (Smithsonian Folkways, 1958). From the Introduction by Ellen Stekert in the liner notes: "The eighteen songs in this album are from the repertoire of one man, Mr. Ezra ("Fuzzy") Barhight, age eighty-one, of Cohocton, New York. He learned most of these songs in his younger years from his mother and from the lumbermen he worked with in his travels across Northern Pennsylvania and southern New York State."

albums. One can also search more specifically for an album, musician, or song title. The call number for each album maintains the Shapiros' own cataloging system (seen added by the Shapiros to the top left of each album cover). The entire collection of albums is also being digitized to fulfill their wishes to keep the albums pristine, while making the music available to the public. Volunteers are using a turntable connected to an Apple computer and Audacity free software to record the music in real time. Each album track is then processed to reduce background noise and clicks to improve the listening experience. Song tracks are labeled with the album and song titles, the artists who perform on each track, and the year in which the album was produced. The tracks are prepared for export and imported into iTunes, from which patrons of the library will be able to listen to the music in the Folklife Center's research room. ▼

Maureen Dye, a volunteer at the Folklife Center since the Great Recession began in 2009, is a long-time folk music fan and the lead volunteer on this project. She is also adjunct instructor of psychology at SUNY Adirondack, Queensbury, NY.

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