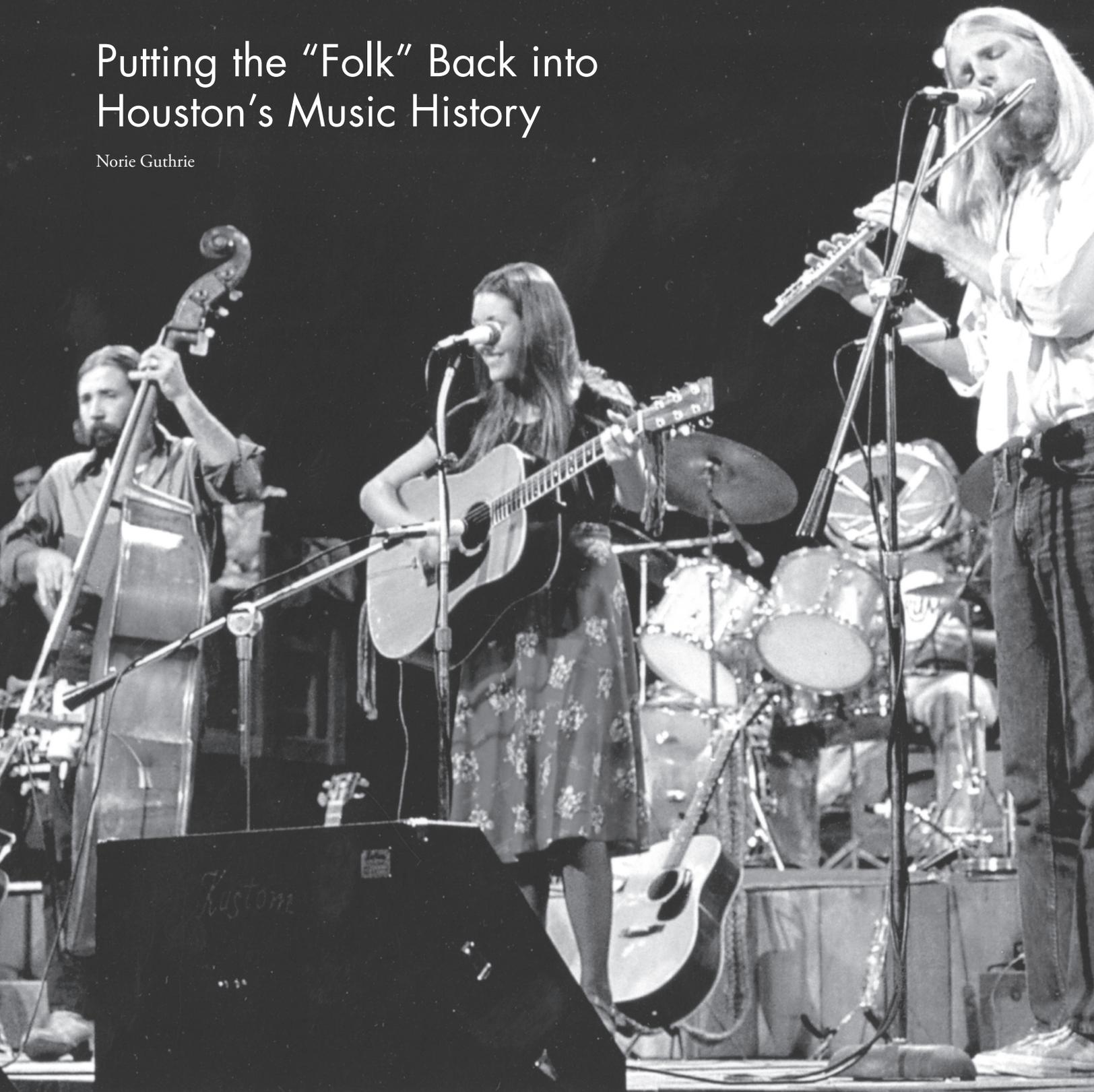


Putting the "Folk" Back into Houston's Music History

Norie Guthrie



Wheatfield at Austin City Limits, left to right: Bob Russell, Connie Mims, Damian Hevia (drums), and Craig Calvert, 1976. Courtesy of the Wheatfield and St. Elmo's Fire collection, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University.



While Austin enjoys international acclaim for its live music scene, Houston has long had one of the richest and most diverse musical histories of any city in Texas. Although not always adequately recognized for its contributions to the state's songwriting traditions, Houston had a thriving folk music scene from the 1960s to the 1980s, helping launch the careers of numerous singer-songwriters.

Founded in January 2016, the Houston Folk Music Archive at the Woodson Research Center, which is part of Rice University's Fondren Library, seeks to preserve and celebrate Houston's folk music history, including its artists, venue owners, promoters, producers, and others.

During the process of digitizing 2-track radio reels from Rice University's student-run radio station, KTRU, I discovered a large number of folk music recordings, including live shows, interviews, and in-studio performances. Among these were such radio programs as *Arbuckle Flat and Chicken Skin Music*, which feature interviews and performances by Eric Taylor, Nanci Griffith, Lucinda Williams, Vince Bell, and others. The musicians tell stories about how they ended up in Houston and became part of the thriving folk community centered in the Montrose neighborhood.

Not having grown up in the area, I was unaware that the local scene was so vibrant that several artists, including Lucinda Williams, had left Austin to join Houston's tight-knit folk community. I decided to dig deeper and discovered that, throughout the 1960s and into the 1980s, Houston was home to a dynamic folk scene, which included Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, Don Sanders, Lynn Langham, Richard J. Dobson, K.T. Oslin, Lyle Lovett, Robert Earl Keen, and many others. I was convinced that it was time to reach out to the Houston community and begin building an archive dedicated to the area's remarkable folk music history.

My first contact was with Craig Calvert of the band Wheatfield, later known as St. Elmo's Fire. In the mid-to-late-1970s, Wheatfield/St. Elmo's Fire was an Americana band that played prominent Texas venues such as the Armadillo World Headquarters, Liberty Hall, and the



Shake Russell, Dana Cooper, and Jimmy Raycraft at Rockefeller's, ca. 1981. Courtesy of the Danny McVey collection, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University.

Texas Opry House, as well as composing and performing what is arguably the first rock ballet, *Caliban*. The group also appeared on the acclaimed PBS television series *Austin City Limits*. Holding out for a major label record deal that never materialized, the band broke up in 1979.

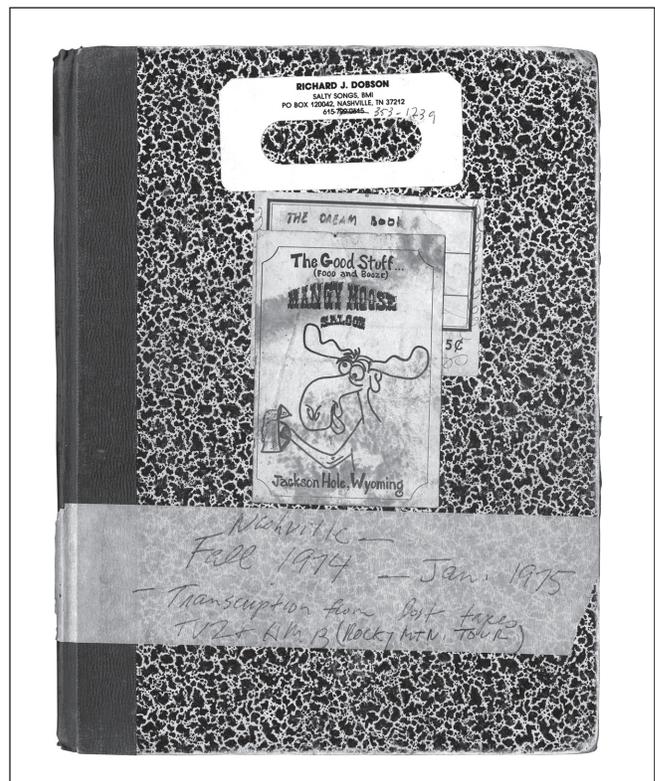
Because the group was so popular at Rice and other university campuses, KTRU had many recordings of Wheatfield's live shows and interviews. After speaking with Craig Calvert about our wish to build an archival collection on the band, he enthusiastically donated scrapbooks, photographs, posters, and ephemera to go along with the recordings already in our possession. Curated by Calvert's mother, the scrapbooks document a wide range of items, including music venue calendars, matchbooks, and photographs of Wheatfield performing. Our efforts at acquiring archival materials related to Wheatfield were so successful that I began contacting other musicians.

Over the past year and a half, the Houston Folk Music Archive has received collections from such artists as Don Sanders, Richard J. Dobson, Vince Bell, George Ensle, The Banded Geckos, David Rodriguez, Jack Saunders, Lucille Borella of the duo Bill and Lucille Cade, Linda Lowe, and Danny Everitt. While these musicians may not be household names, they are an important part of the Houston-area folk music community. Don Sanders, who started performing in the mid-1960s, was an early influence on Lyle Lovett. Jack Saunders, who founded White Cat Studios, has performed with such popular songwriters as Shake Russell and Willis Alan Ramsey. These musicians, along with many others, helped

keep Houston's folk music scene alive and active in small clubs throughout the city, especially in the Montrose area.

One of the archive's more notable collections came from Richard J. Dobson, whose songs have been recorded by the Carter Family, Nanci Griffith, Guy Clark, and Johnny Cash. Along with Guy and Susanna Clark, Dobson co-wrote the song "Old Friends," from Clark's album of the same name. Dobson's collection includes notebooks chronicling his 1974-1975 Rocky Mountain tour with Townes Van Zandt and the Hemmer Ridge Mountain Boys. Dobson recorded many of the performances on that tour, along with conversations involving other performers. Although the original tapes have been lost, he transcribed some of the recordings, which detail drunken escapades and the humorous interactions among the musicians and others involved in the tour. Dobson's correspondence and related business records also highlight his experiences as an early "independent" artist.

In a different vein, Vince Bell's collection shows how his burgeoning musical career was temporarily sidelined by a car accident that left him with a traumatic brain injury. His materials reveal how he re-taught himself to play and eventually go on to record critically-acclaimed albums. There is an impressive breadth to the collection, which includes early



Richard Dobson's travel journal from his 1974-75 Rocky Mountain tour. Courtesy of the Richard J. Dobson Collection, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University.

"One of the best things to happen to music in years."
—BILLBOARD

"The best title big band in America."
—RICHMOND TIMES DISPATCH
JUNE 12-14

LEON REDBONE
JUNE 15

"A GEM!"
—Stewart Klein, Metromedia TV

"A CLASSIC—BEAUTIFUL."
—Jack Kroll, Newsweek

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—Nat Hentoff, Village Voice

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Rockefeller's
THE NIGHT CLUB

		S	M	T	W	T	F	S
			1	2	3	4	5	6
			DR. ROCKIT AND THE SISTERS OF MERCY	IDAC BENEFIT BUTCH HANCOCK AND D-DAY	HELPS STILL BLUES BAND	GUY CLARK		FLORA PURIM WITH AIRTO
		7	8	9	10	11	12	13
		PRIVATE PARTY	DR. ROCKIT AND THE SISTERS OF MERCY		DANNY EVERITT BAND	THE KRAYOLAS		ROOMFUL OF BLUES
		14	15	16	17	18	19	20
		ROOMFUL OF BLUES	LEON REDBONE	PRIVATE PARTY				SHAKE RUSSELL/DANA COOPER BAND
		21	22	23	24	25	26	27
		LAST OF THE BLUE DEVILS - PREVIEW	DR. ROCKIT AND THE SISTERS OF MERCY			JAY McSHANN - LIVE! THE LAST OF THE BLUE DEVILS		
		28	29	30				
		JAY McSHANN LAST OF THE BLUE DEVILS	DR. ROCKIT AND THE SISTERS OF MERCY		INFORMATION: 864-6242 BOX OFFICE (AFTER 1:00): 861-9365 TICKETS FOR MOST SHOWS AVAILABLE AT TICKETMASTER			

JUNE

Rockefeller's June 1982 calendar. Courtesy of the Rockefeller's business records, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University.

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VOL. II # 3 APRIL 1967

THE CASE OF THE UNACCOMPANIED FOLK SINGER

by John A. Lomax

This article is in no way an apology for nor in defense of unaccompanied singing, which is my style, but is more an explanation of it.

I estimate some 95% of real folk songs were made up as unaccompanied songs and a large proportion were later collected as such. Certainly this is true of the work song category; the working cowboy's hands were fully occupied as he guarded the herds, likewise the sailors had no place for accompaniment during his line heaving; the penitentiary work gangs, with or without a song leader, improvised his songs only with oral rhythm. For my part I feel that these are among the best folk songs, the meat and potatoes so to speak, and they can be resung truer and better if done unaccompanied.

Accepting the premise that the song came first, is it not important that it be kept foremost? To me, every word of a song is essential to assure the full impact on the audience. The emotional theme of a good song or the powerful narrative of a ballad are sufficient for my taste and I wish them fully to reach my listeners. Most of the great folk singers as Leadbelly, Burl, Mance, Lightning, Pete and many others use accompaniment, but artfully and usually subdued. On the other hand, I heartily agree with the thought I recently heard on the radio: "If the words of a song are not understandable, the singer would have been better to have stayed in bed." In retrospect, I recall countless times, it seems, when I have unsuccessfully strained to catch the words of a good song but due to the volume of the accompaniment, could not. And, Lord, that interminable tuning! It tests the patience of even the best audience; an unaccompanied singer would be going way down the road during the "tuning gap."

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Cover page of the Houston Folklore Bulletin from the Houston Folklore Society, April 1967. In the cover article, John A. Lomax, Jr. explains his tendency to sing without accompaniment. Courtesy of the Houston Folklore and Music Society records, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University.

journals and photographs tracing his recovery, touring, and the writing of his autobiographies.

While performers are an integral part of any music scene, they would not exist without venues in which they can showcase their art and earn a living. Especially during the 1970s and early 1980s, Houston had a variety of such venues



Liberty Hall, ca. 1971. Courtesy of the Liberty Hall collection, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University.

that were essential to the flourishing folk music scene. Liberty Hall, near downtown, and Rockefeller's, on Washington Avenue, were important local music clubs, although neither was exclusively folk. The Liberty Hall Collection includes posters and a scrapbook tracing the venue's first two years. Rockefeller's archival materials include such business records as booking sheets, contracts, monthly calendars, and photographs. The Houston Folk Music Archive also has a poster collection from the short-lived downtown venue, The Sweetheart of Texas Concert Hall and Saloon, which featured shows with such artists as Townes Van Zandt and Lucinda Williams. Building on the materials we already have collected from Houston-area music locales, we have begun developing a list of 50 additional venues, including restaurants, clubs, and any location where folk musicians have played. Our goal is to eventually create a GIS (Geographic Information System) enhanced map to document these venues.

Other organizations and entities that have been crucial to the success of Houston's folk scene include the Houston Folklore and Folk Music Society. Originally the Houston Folklore Society, this was an early home and training ground

for Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt, among others. John A. Lomax, Jr., a founding member of the Society, organized concerts with Lightnin' Hopkins at the local Jewish Community Center. These proved to be very important in the early development of the local folk music scene. Recently, the Houston Folk Music Archive acquired the Society's newsletters chronicling the history of the still active organization. The first newsletter even features Guy Clark and Susan Spaw's wedding announcement.

In addition, the archive has a growing collection from John Lomax III, son of John A. Lomax, Jr., a music writer who managed Townes Van Zandt and Steve Earle. Sound engineer Danny McVey also has donated his materials. These collections from non-musicians provide valuable insight into those people who were not performers but were still a vital part of the area's folk music scene.

Oral interviews are another important component in preserving and documenting history. The Houston Folk Music Archive currently has oral interviews with thirteen musicians and others involved in the local folk music community. These include Liberty Hall co-founders Lynda Herrera and Ryan Trimble, along with musicians Vince Bell, Richard J. Dobson, Judy Clements, Dana Cooper, George Ensle, Lynn Langham, Jack Saunders, Don Sanders, and Isabelle Ganz, as well as sound engineer Danny McVey and former KTRU DJ, David John Scribner, host of the show *Chicken Skin Music*. These interviews are available online at: www.scholarship.rice.edu

One of the Houston Folk Music Archive's newest projects involves creating an online exhibit to showcase our collections and provide additional information about the Houston folk scene. The oral histories will employ the University of Kentucky's Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS), which synchronizes the video's audio with the transcript, thereby allowing users to watch what parts interest them most. These oral histories will then be supported by photographs, fliers, and other graphic materials that help bring the Houston scene to life. The Liberty Hall online exhibit, which includes oral histories, posters, photographs, and ephemera, is currently live and available online at: <http://digitalprojects.rice.edu/liberty-hall/>.

Although the Houston Folk Music Archive has only been in existence for a short time, it has become an important resource for documenting the local folk music scene. To learn more about our collections, please visit www.archives.library.rice.edu or follow the Houston Folk Music Archive on *Facebook*. ★

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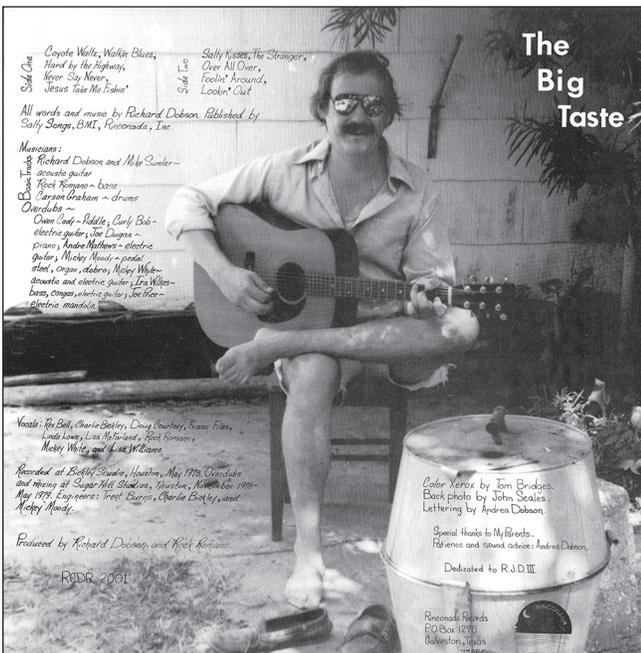
Liberty Hall poster featuring Dogtooth Violet and Wheatfield before they changed their name to St. Elmo's Fire, 1975. Courtesy of the Liberty Hall collection, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University.



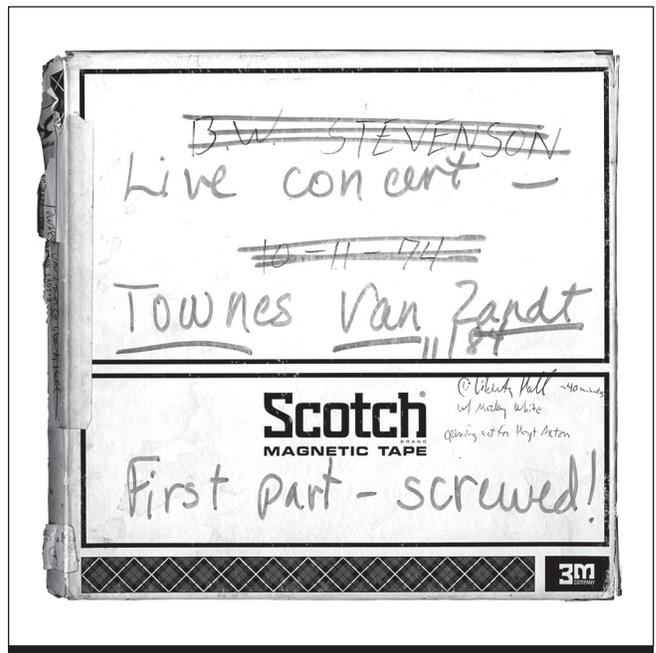
John A. Lomax, Jr. holding his son, Joseph. Courtesy of the Joseph Lomax collection, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University.



Vince Bell photo session proofs, ca. 1976. Courtesy of the Vince Bell collection, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University.



Richard Dobson's second album *The Big Taste*, 1979. Courtesy of the Richard J. Dobson collection, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University.



Townes Van Zandt with Mickey White live at Liberty Hall and simulcast on KPFT, July 1977. Courtesy of the Houston Folk Music collection, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University.