

Arhoolie Records founder Chris Strachwitz celebrating 50 years of preserving American roots music.

By Jim Harrington
Oakland Tribune

Posted: 01/30/2011 01:00:00 AM PST

Chris Strachwitz can't seem to go 10 minutes without playing music.

As he tells the fabled history of Arhoolie Records, the El Cerrito-based label he founded in 1960, he finds it necessary to mix music with his words. He sits in his small, crowded upstairs office in the back of his record shop Down Home Music on San Pablo Avenue, and splits his attention between a vinyl turntable, a digital database of a near-infinite number of songs and some of his favorite music videos on YouTube.

At each stop, he finds something that corresponds to what he's talking about at that second, usually something that most people have never heard, and smiles. It's the kind of smile that might be shared between two teens listening

to their favorite song on the radio. But, in this case, it belongs to a 79-year-old man who has been collecting, cataloging and recording music, often in the most rustic of settings, for a half-century.

"The late (music critic) Ralph Gleason said to me, 'Chris, you don't have a record company -- you

have a hobby.' Because I only record people I like," says Strachwitz. "And I seem to search out people who aren't very commercial."

Yet, Arhoolie's impact has been huge. Arhoolie Records has issued some 400 albums and recorded more than 6,500 songs -- the vast majority of which were captured by Strachwitz himself. His field recordings have helped popularize numerous branches of Americana roots music -- from Tex-Mex and Cajun to blues

and folk -- and documented many important voices that would've otherwise been ignored. These recordings have influenced musicians ranging from Bob Dylan to Bonnie Raitt to the Rolling Stones, and inspired others to follow in Strachwitz's footsteps.

"Everybody I know -- that's everybody I know in music -- knows who he is," says Ry Cooder, the Grammy-winning producer who became a celebrity in world music when he recorded the Cuban-music showcase "Buena Vista Social Club."

Cooder is just one of several musicians who will gather to help Arhoolie Records celebrate its 50th anniversary Feb. 4 to 6 at the Freight & Salvage Coffeehouse in Berkeley. The three-day celebration will also feature Los Cenzontles, Michael Doucet and BeauSoleil Trio, the Savoy-Doucet Band, Country Joe McDonald and many others.

The event is a benefit for the not-for-profit Arhoolie Foundation, which is dedicated to documenting and preserving traditional and regional vernacular music.

Coming to America

Strachwitz is trying to explain how he went from being an aspiring musician to a professional collector, but he can't put his fingers on the right

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album. He's looking for an LP by George Lewis, the undervalued New Orleans jazz clarinetist and bandleader who died in 1968. When he finally finds it, and drops the needle on the record, he nearly breaks out in a jig.

"When I started out playing clarinet, I wanted to sound like George Lewis," he says. "Then I realized I was never going to sound like him -- I squeaked on the thing! So, I just became a listener."

He looks down at his shoes, then gazes back up, his eyes bright.

"Most people nowadays say, 'Oh, Lewis played out of tune.' I say, 'Who gives a (expletive)! He was so soulful,'" he says. "You hear the horns talk to each other? Amazing."

Lewis is one of the artists featured on Arhoolie's latest release, "Hear Me Howling: Blues, Ballads & Beyond," a four-disc set of songs recorded in the Bay Area from 1954 to 1970. The collection is a gateway into Strachwitz's world. There are many styles represented between the covers, ranging from free jazz to skiffle, but they all ring with what Strachwitz calls "authenticity."

It was that feel, more than any identifiable sound, that first drew Strachwitz's ear to American roots music.

Born in Germany in 1931, Strachwitz was 16 when his family moved to the U.S. after World War II in 1947. The family ended up in Reno, where he began his musical education.

"I very quickly heard all this amazing music on the radio -- hillbilly, polka, jazz," Strachwitz says. His horizons further broadened when he moved to Los Angeles to attend college in 1951.

After a stint in the military -- "I found out in the Army that I wasn't the stupidest person in the world," he says -- he moved to Berkeley, where he still lives, and attended UC Berkeley. He became a high school teacher but his passion remained music. He decided to finally do something about it in the summer of 1960, when he loaded up his car and headed south to try and record some real-deal Texas bluesmen.

The result was "Mance Lipscomb: Texas Sharecropper and Songster," Arhoolie's first release. Thus began a career in field recording -- taping an artist in his or her local environs -- that is pretty much unparalleled, if not in quantity than certainly in longevity.

Strachwitz recorded musicians ranging from Tejano accordionist Flaco Jimenez, Delta bluesman Big Joe Williams, Zydeco titan Clifton Chenier and gospel group the Campbell Brothers. The common thread among these artists -- besides Strachwitz's admiration for their music -- is that it's likely few people would be talking about them today if it weren't for Arhoolie Records.

"There are very few people in the world who have done what Chris has done," says Tom Diamant, general manager of Arhoolie Records. "Chris traveled and recorded in a world that basically doesn't exist anymore. Before Chris came around and issued Cajun music, no one outside of Louisiana ever bought a Cajun record. People didn't know who Flaco Jimenez was until Chris put him out on Arhoolie and made Tex-Mex a household word."

He also developed a reputation for striving to give the mostly impoverished musicians he recorded their financial due. Strachwitz was a longtime fan of Mississippi Fred McDowell, and eventually recorded the bluesman for Arhoolie. Later, when the Rolling Stones recorded McDowell's "You Gotta Move" on

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their 1971 album "Sticky Fingers," Strachwitz fought to make sure McDowell was compensated as the songwriter. After a lengthy and expensive legal battle over royalties, Strachwitz triumphed and was able to present McDowell the "biggest check he'd ever seen in his life" before the bluesman died in 1972.

Current passion

Strachwitz scrolls through a seemingly endless number of digital song files on his computer. He guesses he has 125,000 to 130,000 in there, but he's wrong.

"Oh," he remarks, letting the computer do the counting, "I have 139,000."

And that's just his collection of Mexican music, which is one of his musical obsessions these days. Strachwitz has what is believed to be the largest personal collection of Mexican and Mexican-American music -- from Tejano and border songs to traditional mariachi and norteno tunes. He clicks on one song, "Chulas Frontera" by El Piporro, and it brings him right back to his younger years.

"I just totally fell in love with it the first time I heard it in the '40s or '50s on the radio in Los Angeles," he says. "It's the sound of it, the feel of it, the total authenticity of it."

In particular, he says, the sound of the accordion in Mexican music was a revelation.

"People say, 'Oh, you're German -- you have to have known about accordion music,'" he says. "I say, 'Man, no German can play the accordion like that.'"

Through his Arhoolie Foundation, Strachwitz and crew have been digitizing his collection of Mexican music records -- some of which date to 1906.

Students, scholars and others can listen to the results thus far by visiting the Chris Strachwitz Frontera Collection, which is housed at the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA. Strachwitz also plans to open a listening station tied to the collection at Down Home Music.

"This is really the literature of the average people," Strachwitz says of the music. "They don't write novels. They don't write poems, so much. But they sure write songs."

As the guiding force behind Arhoolie, Strachwitz has managed a handful of financial successes, mainly tied to publishing royalties. He has most benefited from the Country Joe and the Fish anti-war anthem "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die Rag," K.C. Douglas' "Mercury Boogie" (later made a hit by Alan Jackson) and Mississippi Fred McDowell's "You Gotta Move."

But that's hardly what motivates him. Although he's not recording as much anymore, he's still on what Cooder calls "the treasure hunt."

"It's a mission. It's not a job. It's not a career," says Cooder, who has joined Strachwitz on a few "treasure hunts" for hidden roots music gems. "I'm not the trooper that he is. I couldn't keep up with him. If you are going to stay in step with him, then you are going to have to keep long hours. He'd tire me out, and I'd have to go lay down."

Read Jim Harrington's Concert Blog at <http://blogs.mercurynews.com/aei/category/concerts>. Follow him at [Twitter.com/jimthecritic](https://twitter.com/jimthecritic).

Details

What: Concerts featuring Ry Cooder, Los Cenzontles, the Washboard 4 and many others
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2020, www.thefreight.org, proceeds benefit the Arhoolie Foundation, which preserves traditional and regional vernacular music

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