

Roots music magnate Chris Strachwitz

David Pescovitz at 1:37 PM Friday, Apr 15, 2011



Chris Strachwitz, 79, is the founder of [Arhoolie Records](#), a small, independent, and absolutely incredible record label based in the Bay Area that for 50 years has released an unending stream of obscure and exquisite "down home" roots, blues, folk, and Tejano music. (Strachwitz is also a proprietor of Down Home Music, an equally amazing record (yes, records, but CDs too) shop in El Cerrito, north of Berkeley, California. It should come as no surprise that Strachwitz has his own world class music collection. Indeed, he holds the largest archive of Mexican and Mexican American music on the planet, a total of more than 46,000 recordings mostly on 78s and 45s. Slowly, archivist (and ska-punk trombonist) Antonio Cuellar is digitizing every piece and making them available online through UCLA's [Chicano Studies Research Center](#) library. This week's San Francisco Bay Guardian features an interview with Strachwitz and Cuellar. From the SFBG:

From Strachwitz's well-documented obsession with tracking down Lightnin' Hopkins to record him in 1959, to his increasingly far-flung forays into the backwoods and swamps of the musically-diverse South, his emphasis has been on excavating the genuine, the raw, and the regionally significant. The diversity of music that Arhoolie publishes and records ranges in style from dirty blues to folk ballads, Cajun zydeco to conjunto. The tie that binds them isn't genre, but emotional content.

"They are all very down to earth, totally alive and vibrant, from people who have mostly had a rough life," Strachwitz explains. Perhaps best known for their bang-for-your-buck compilations assembled by region or genre: 15 Early Tejano Classics, Angola Prisoner's Blues, Masters of the Folk Violin, Arhoolie has also released a number of seminal single-artist albums. Bogalusa Boogie by recent Grammy Hall of Fame inductee Clifton Chenier, Flaco Jiménez's 1986 Grammy-winning ranchera album Ay Te Dejo en San Antonio, and the Pine Leaf Boys' 2007 Grammy-nominated Cajun dance album Blues de Musicien exemplify Arhoolie's commitment to unadorned authenticity.

Though it's been a few years since Arhoolie recorded any new material, there's a

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stockpile of one-of-a-kind field recordings patiently awaiting release. A recent addition to the Arhoolie canon is 2010's [Hear Me Howling](#), a four-CD collection housed in the handsome confines of a hardcover scrapbook. This 72-track compilation of raw material, gleaned from a series of Bay Area recording sessions from 1954-71, captures the essence of the music as well as the musicians in the moment: a humorous reference about Strachwitz's "new recording machine," improvised by skiffle group The Skid Band; a soft-spoken call for requests by bluesman Mance Lipscomb; a brief but earnest sermon delivered by the Rev. Louis Overstreet before he launches into an anthem on his electric guitar.

"[Hear me howling!](#)" (SFBG)

"[Hear Me Howling! Blues, Ballads & Beyond: The Arhoolie 50th Anniversary Boxset](#)" (Amazon)

ENTERTAINMENT, MUSIC

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smammy

Best post ever!

#1 • 2:13 PM, Apr 15 • Reply

Antinous / Moderator in reply to **smammy**

Succinct, yet terse.

#2 • 2:16 PM, Apr 15 • Reply

David Pescovitz

Ooops, the text vanished momentarily. But it is back.

#3 • 2:20 PM, Apr 15 • Reply

urbanhick

Reminds me of Alan Lomax's work. Although Lomax travelled much further afield, both men seem to share the same passion for recording little-known (in many cases unheard-of) artists before their work is lost forever. Thank you both, gentlemen!

#4 • 3:51 PM, Apr 15 • Reply

Roy Trumbull

Chris discovered decades ago that international recording companies that licensed American masters were issuing recordings that the source company hadn't keep in print.

#5 • 4:43 PM, Apr 15 • Reply