



ARTS & CULTURE

Remembering Chris Strachwitz's Many Gifts to the World

By Andrew Gilbert May 6 [Save Article](#)

Chris Strachwitz at his Down Home Records store in El Cerrito, Calif. in 2014. The founder of the popular local music store and Arhoolie Records died Friday at age 91. (Paul Chinn/The San Francisco Chronicle via Getty Images)

The first time that Chris Strachwitz blew my mind open was in the mid-1990s.

It was my first pilgrimage to **Down Home Music**, the El Cerrito record store that serves as home base for Arhoolie Records, the label that Strachwitz founded in 1960. Intrigued by the cover art of *Pachuco Boogie*, I added the CD to my stack, allowing me to discover a liminal moment when Mexican-American musicians started absorbing the jump blues and early R&B of their Black neighbors in 1940s Los Angeles. The irresistible sound sparked an epiphany about the buried cultural geography of my hometown, which had recently been torn apart by the LA riots.

Strachwitz, who **died at his apartment in Marin on May 5 at the age of 91**, appreciated that story. A tireless ethnomusicologist, he seemed to experience life as an ongoing series of musical revelations, and he liked nothing better than sharing those transformative sounds.

Running into Strachwitz, a longtime Berkeley resident, at a show or on BART was always a treat, as he was garrulous, opinionated and usually bubbling over with enthusiasm about something he'd recently heard.

Strachwitz spent his life documenting, preserving, producing and releasing a far-flung roster of roots music traditions, including country blues, gospel, bluegrass, jazz, zydeco, Cajun and Tex-Mex music. His massive catalog of Arhoolie albums and compilation projects introduced several generations of listeners to sounds assiduously avoided by mainstream outlets.



Chris Strachwitz, Legendary Roots Music Preservationist, Dies at 91



Chris Strachwitz with Texas blues musician Mance Lipscomb in an undated photo. (Arhoolie Foundation)

“I didn’t care for the slick R&B,” he told me in [an interview for Arhoolie’s 50th anniversary](#). “I liked the raggedy stuff, the stuff where the musicians are obviously expressing themselves. I like honking bands, the beat, the powerful rhythm, and I don’t care if it’s hillbilly or gospel.”

Arhoolie wasn’t a commercial powerhouse, but the sounds that Strachwitz captured or uncovered influenced countless musicians, including Bonnie Raitt, Bob Dylan, Taj Mahal, Ry Cooder and the Rolling Stones (whom Strachwitz successfully pursued for royalties due to ailing bluesman Fred McDowell for “You Gotta Move,” a track on 1971’s *Sticky Fingers*).

The influence of his work soaked into the roots of the communities he treasured, according to Maureen Gosling, who with Chris Simon directed and produced the feature documentary *This Ain’t No Mouse Music! The Story of Chris Strachwitz and Arhoolie Records*.



Speaking from New Orleans, where a [program celebrating the legacy of Arhoolie](#) concluded just hours before his death, Gosling had been to a screening with Simon of Les Blank’s Cajun and zydeco music documentary *J’ai Été Au Bal / I Went to the Dance*. Cajun folklorist Barry Ancelet said, “We knew about these recordings, but to see these compilations of Cajun music combined in a historical context was mind-blowing,” Gosling said. “Michael Doucet listened to them and got excited about playing Cajun music.”

Gosling and Simon got to know Strachwitz when they were part of Blank’s Flower Film team, which ended up being based upstairs from Down Home Music when Blank was working on the classic 1976 documentary about Norteño music, *Chulas Fronteras*. Strachwitz and Blank had met each other in the 1960s at the Ash Grove folk club in Los Angeles, and Strachwitz ended up serving as an advisor, guide and resource for many of Blank’s films.



Arhoolie Records founder Chris Strachwitz. (Alain McLaughlin/Arhoolie Foundation)

“He has that energy and excitement,” Simon said. “They balanced each other out. Les was reserved and wanted to observe. Chris was all excited about everything. He was more interested in the music. Les wanted to get at the person and culture, the surroundings bringing that music forth.”



Strachwitz ended up compiling the Frontera Collection, the world’s largest private archive of Mexican and Mexican-American music. A grant from the San Jose norteño band Los Tigres del Norte’s foundation launched the digitizing process (via UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center), and two decades later, in 2022, the process was completed, encompassing 162,860 tracks.

Blues and Mexican music was part of Strachwitz’s introduction to the United States. Born into an aristocratic Prussian family, he was a teenager when his family resettled in Santa Barbara after being displaced at the end of World War II (his hometown, Gross Reichenau, is now the Polish city Bogaczów). It wasn’t long before American roots music became an abiding obsession.

“I first heard it around 1948 on a radio station from Santa Paula that had some Mexican music, mostly mariachi, but some accordion too,” he told me in 2011. “I loved the sound of it. I thought it was just like hillbilly music, but in a different language.”



El Cerrito’s Arhoolie Records Goes to Smithsonian Folkways

He followed that passion across the South to record Delta blue musicians, and into the Southwest to capture the sounds of the border.

“He was out there when no one else was,” Gosling said. “Alan Lomax was recording for archives, all those folk ballads. But Chris wanted to capture music that people *danced* to.”