



< Arhoolie Records: 50 Years Of Digging For Down-Home Music

March 15, 2013 6:33 PM

Copyright ©2013 NPR. For personal, noncommercial use only. See Terms of Use. For other uses, prior permission required.

SCOTT SIMON, HOST:

For half a century, Arhoolie Records has scoured the country to bring to a wider audience outstanding musicians who often perform in obscurity - country, blues, Cajun and Mexican-American artists have all been a part of this label with a pretty curious-sounding name. NPR's Laura Sydell has this profile of the man behind Arhoolie who's helped shape our popular music.

LAURA SYDELL, BYLINE: For the past 37 years, Down Home Music Store has sat on a lonely block in El Cerrito, California. And for all that time, the same guy has stocked the store with a treasure trove of American roots music.

CHRIS STRACHWITZ: Pull out for you.

SYDELL: Wow. Wow, Look at this.

STRACHWITZ: Too many records.

SYDELL: That's Chris Strachwitz, and many of the records he's produced fill the bins.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "BALL AND CHAIN")

BIG MAMA THORNTON: (Singing) Sitting by my window, big mama was sitting down looking at the rain.

SYDELL: Strachwitz's label Arhoolie has recorded blues singer Big Mama Thornton, Cajun band Beausoleil and hundreds of others. He bought this building thanks to the money he earned recording a little-known San Francisco Folk musician in 1966.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "FEEL LIKE I'M FIXING TO DIE RAG")

COUNTRY JOE MCDONALD: (Singing) Well, come on, all of you big strong men, my friend needs help again. Yeah, he's got himself in a terrible jam, way down yonder in Vietnam. So, put down your books, pick up the gun, we're gonna have a whole lot of fun. Well, it's one, two, three...

SYDELL: Strachwitz recorded Country Joe McDonald in his Berkeley living room.

STRACHWITZ: And as they walked out he asked me, Chris, what do I owe you for the tape you just made? I said, well, you don't owe me nothing but I said, can I be the publisher? And he said OK. And then all of a sudden he went to Woodstock and sang that song out there, and it got on that record and it got into the movie. And the first check we got was for \$70,000.

SYDELL: But, the truth is Chris Strachwitz hasn't made a whole lot more money from the music he's devoted his life to. He got into American roots music in high school after his family immigrated to the U.S. from post-war Germany in 1947. He was 16 and didn't really dig American pop.

STRACHWITZ: I was subjected to what my classmates and the schoolmates were listening to - all this sappy, how much is that doggy in the window, barf, barf.

SYDELL: But he did discover some small local radio stations that played blues, New Orleans jazz and what was called hillbilly music.

STRACHWITZ: I felt it all had this kind of earthiness to it that I didn't here in any other kind of music. They sang about, you know, how lonesome you are. And those songs really spoke to me and the music did.

SYDELL: Strachwitz decided he wanted to record some of this music himself. In 1960, Strachwitz set off for East Texas. He'd heard a song about Moore's farm and he found it in Navasota. He found Moore and asked him who played for his workers.

STRACHWITZ: And Tom Moore said, well, you have this fellow. They seem to like him here in town. He plays for them, and I don't know his name you can go the railroad station and ask Peg Leg.

Well, it wasn't hard to find Peg Leg and that's how we found out his name was Mance Lipscomb.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SYDELL: Strachwitz found Lipscomb and founded Arhoolie Records to release the recording he made.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "SHAKE SHAKE MAMA")

MANCE LIPSCOMB: (Singing) Oh, they ain't gonna give you no more cherry balls. Oh, they ain't gonna give you no more cherry balls. You've gone drunk and showed you Santa Claus.

SYDELL: The album became a hit in folk circles and Lipscomb became a regular at festivals all over the country. Guitarist Ry Cooder first heard Lipscomb on an Arhoolie disc he found in a shop near his boyhood home in Los Angeles. He still remembers another Arhoolie record he found there.

RY COODER: Big Joe Williams and his nine-string guitar. And it just jumped out of the speaker on this little school record player it. It really did. It just made it quiver and shake.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "I'D RATHER BE SLOPPY DRUNK")

BIG JOE WILLIAMS: (Singing) I'd rather be sloppy drunk, mama, anyway that I know. I'd rather be sloppy drunk, baby, anyway that I know.

COODER: Because of that Big Joe Williams record and that particular song, it decided me, once and for all, I'm going to do this too. I'm going to get good on guitar and I'm going to play it like that and I'm going make records and that's what I'm going to do with my life.

SYDELL: Cooder became a star in his own right and Strachwitz continued to sleuth for music in Louisiana and Texas. In the 1970s, Strachwitz began to record Mexican-American musicians and that drew the attention of academics at UCLA. The school created the Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican American Recordings. The Grammy-winning band Los Tigres del Norte donated \$250,000 to support the collection. On tour in El Paso, Texas, lead singer Jorge Hernandez says the archive is an

important cultural document.

JORGE HERNANDEZ: It will help a lot to have real live people say the truth and to say exactly how they live, how they survive, and how they got here. I think to have this music alive and to have the history of the people.

SYDELL: Guitarist and singer Taj Mahal is also a fan because Strachwitz stuck with his musicians even when there was no money to be made.

TAJ MAHAL: He's never abandoned the music. For that, I mean, he gets my praises for eternity.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #1: Let's make him welcome - Taj Mahal.

(APPLAUSE)

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "MEAN OLD WORLD")

MAHAL: (Singing) (Unintelligible) honey, that's what your daddy have a day...

SYDELL: Mahal sang Strachwitz's praises at the 50th anniversary celebration of Arhoolie Records in Berkeley. The 81-year-old Strachwitz says he's amazed at the influence his hobby has had.

STRACHWITZ: 'Cause I never recorded things I don't like. I just loved what I was doing. I loved to make records. But to see all of this being rewarded by people is really quite extraordinary.

SYDELL: The celebration helped raise money for a foundation that Strachwitz started to archive his entire collection. There's also a CD and essay collection available that documents the event. Laura Sydell, NPR News, San Francisco.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "MEAN OLD WORLD")

MAHAL: (Singing) It's a mean, old world, trying to...

SIMON: This is WEEKEND EDITION from NPR News. I'm Scott Simon.

Copyright © 2013 NPR. All rights reserved. No quotes from the

materials contained herein may be used in any media without attribution to NPR. This transcript is provided for personal, noncommercial use only, pursuant to our Terms of Use. Any other use requires NPR's prior permission. Visit our permissions page for further information.

NPR transcripts are created on a rush deadline by a contractor for NPR, and accuracy and availability may vary. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Please be aware that the authoritative record of NPR's programming is the audio.

©2013 NPR