



The Man Who Recorded the World,
by John Szwed
(Arrow, £8.99)

Alan Lomax was “arguably one of the most influential Americans of the 20th century”, says music scholar Szwed. A musicologist, archivist, singer, filmmaker, author, anthropologist and political activist (or subversive to the FBI), Lomax believed musical diversity was like biodiversity: the loss of a song style was “as serious a tragedy as the loss of a species”. He began working with his father - who was also a folklorist - in the 1930s, recording black singers in Texas prisons, men like Huddie Ledbetter, aka Lead Belly. People regarded them as “the dregs of society”, recalled Lomax, yet “when they opened their mouths, out came this flame of beauty”. He had found his purpose in life: Lomax did more than anyone to reveal the power of folk music. When he died in 2002 aged 87, his personal archive contained 5,000 hours of audio recordings and 400,000ft of film. Szwed’s biography is a rich history of 20th-century American vernacular music and a heartfelt homage to the man who changed how people listened to music.

PD Smith