FOLK MUSIC MEETS THE IPOD GENERATION

MAY 4, 2014

In 1938, musical archivist Alan Lomax traveled throughout Michigan, recording more than 900 songs on his Presto audio recorder for the Library of Congress.

From the blues of Detroit to maritime tunes, lumberjack chants to love ballads, Lomax captured the state's musical traditions on his machine, which recorded audio directly to vinyl. Today, two local organizations are exposing these 75-year-old recordings to a whole new – but digitally obsessed – generation.

RETRO RECORDINGS

Tapping into the Lomax collection, this spring middle and high school students from seven area schools used the recordings to create a performance called "The Quest – A Celebration of Community."

The show, scheduled for May 9 at the City Opera House in Traverse City, has taken the group months to write and rehearse, organizers say.

The students are part of SEEDS's After School program and collaborated with the Earthwork Music Collective and Blackbird Arts, said Earthwork's founder, Seth Bernard.

"The Lomax recordings are such a superdiverse and vast collection," Bernard said.

"And there are so many gems and treasures within it."

But how best to translate old tunes to youthful musicians, who are most often glued to their iPods?

Give them "creative empowerment," as Bernard calls it.

Creative empowerment is where the SEEDS program steps in. A local nonprofit that works at solving global issues at a local level, SEEDS challenged the kids to tap into their communities' histories through Lomax's recordings, and then create their own interpretations and original music with the help of Earthworks.
LOCAL JOURNEYS

Bernard, who is directing "The Quest," said that the production uses a range of artistic mediums for its "celebration of local culture - past, present, and future."

"We're talking stories, slideshows, puppets, set designs, and all kinds of songs," he said. "[It will] take the audience on a unique journey through Michigan."

The kids, who come from Kalkaska, Forest Area, Frankfort, Benzie Central, Brethren, Manistee, and Suttons Bay schools, have been working for months on the show, taking inspiration from the old songs and writing new verses, or new songs entirely.

"Old songs are merging with hip-hop beats, rock and roll, choreographed dance moves, and infectious sing-a-long choruses," Bernard said.

One of the kids' songs, inspired by a Detroit-area Lomax blues recording, is called "Engineering," a song about the men who traveled north to take jobs building cars. Another is a revamp of Lester Wells' 1938 recording of "When I First Came to Traverse Town"; the new version mentions the people and places of Traverse City today. "Little Sleepy Bear" uses pop music to tell the legend of Sleeping Bear.

"This project will help the students connect to their history using their own words through songs and art," said Bill Watson, SEEDS's after school program director. "They have had this time to learn about the history of the places they live and celebrate it."

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