

BESS LOMAX HAWES

Expressions of the creative genius of ordinary people, popularly known as folklore, have also inspired the creative genius of Bess Hawes. Daughter of the pioneer folklorist John A. Lomax and sister to field collector and theorist Alan Lomax, she was born in Texas where she sometimes accompanied her father on ballad-hunting expeditions. She later studied for a Bachelor of Arts degree at Bryn Mawr College and a Master of Arts degree in Folklore at the University of California in Berkeley.

During the 1940s, she became active in the folksong revival, singing with groups such as the Almanac Singers. She and her brother also began recording and sponsoring concerts by folk singers such as Leadbelly. Unlike academic folklorists of this period, the Lomaxes recognized the artistry of prisoners, itinerant workers, gospel singers, and African Americans.

In 1957 she began teaching folklore, ethnomusicology, and anthropology at a number of universities in California, eventually becoming Professor of Anthropology at California State University at Northridge. As author, she published with Georgia folksinger Bessie Smith Jones a groundbreaking book entitled Step It Down -- Games, Plays, Songs and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage (1972); this study marks a major shift toward a collaborative dialogue between the ethnographer and her sources. She also produced a pioneering series of films on traditional music and dance, including Pizza Pizza Daddy-O (1968), which was shown at the 1970 White House Conference on Children.

Bess Hawes' career as a public folklorist began in the mid 1970s when she served as Deputy Director for Preservation at the Smithsonian Institution. She organized the massive Festival of American Folklife during the 1976 American Bicentennial. She then became Director of the Folk Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts from 1977 to 1992 and proceeded to define and create the field of public folklore as we know it today. She helped to establish folklore programs in almost every state: the Folklife

Section of the North Carolina Arts Council is a splendid testament to this initiative. She created apprenticeship programs that now allow communities to preserve their own folk traditions, and she worked to award grants for exhibitions, films, festivals, and concerts throughout the country.

Not the least of her achievements is her long dedication to the assimilation of folk materials from all backgrounds of American culture. Her credo for many years has been simple and eloquent: "All God's children have folklore -- there are no ethnic or class requirements for inclusion in the club."

For one who has spent a lifetime studying, performing, preserving, teaching, and promoting the folk arts of the American people in all their rich diversity, we take special pride in conferring upon Bess Lomax Hawes this Doctor of Letters degree.