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# RIP, Mack McCormick. The man who unplugged Dylan.

He recorded Lightnin' Hopkins. And was one of America's great musicologists.

By Alex LaRotta, for the Houston Chronicle

November 24, 2015

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Photo: Carlos Antonio Rios, Houston Chronicle

**IMAGE 5 OF 5**

October 7, 1986: "Mack" McCormick with soe jazz album covers and a homemade cane fife.

*Folklorist Mack McCormick, a Houston resident and arguably America's greatest musicologist, [died of esophageal cancer](#) on Nov. 18. He was 85.*

*This [story about McCormick](#) appeared earlier this year in *Gray Matters*.*

This summer marks the fiftieth anniversary of the so-called "Electric Dylan" incident at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival — the moment when 24-year-old Bob Dylan abandoned folk music to play his first-ever amplified set, and was reportedly booed by festivalgoers — and even, as story has it, was later "unplugged" by festival organizers. The incident became a rock'n'roll legend.

But as with most popular rock narratives, truth and fiction are liberally swapped and blurred. Yes, Dylan was unplugged at one point, but not during his performance. And

yes: Some of the non-electric purists in the crowd were upset with Dylan's rock pandering (you can check out this performance — jeers, cheers, and all — on YouTube), but it was a mixed reaction at best. The legend is just that: a legend.

Little known to most familiar with the tale, however, is how a young folklorist from Houston was the only one (then or now) who ever held that dubious distinction of actually "unplugging" Bob Dylan. Robert "Mack" McCormick was himself a rising American folklorist (or at least, as "rising" as you could be in the obscure world of '60s folk revivalism) when Alan Lomax — one of the great field collectors of American music — asked him that year to participate in the Newport Folk Festival.



Photo: Ed Valdez, Houston Chronicle

Robert "Mack" McCormick in January 1962.

Lomax asked McCormick to bring a Texas prison gang to sing "prison work songs" at the four-day fest. Apparently, this request didn't fly with Texas Attorney General Waggoner Carr, so McCormick settled on the next best thing: Texas ex-convicts. McCormick assembled a group of ex-cons quickly — he was already familiar with some of them from making recordings in Texas prisons — and drove them himself from rural southeast Texas to Newport, Rhode Island. Loaded in the car, alongside the ex-cons, he also had a heap of wood and axes — prison stage props. That was McCormick's level of devotion.

Now, as it really went down, Dylan and his electric backing band, the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, were rehearsing on stage shortly before McCormick's group — the day's opening act — was set to perform. Dylan had shown up late for his rehearsal slot, reportedly took his time and ignored McCormick's request to yield the stage.

McCormick was anxious to let his group practice. After all, the men had never sung or performed together, let alone for a mostly white, young, college-folk crowd. Frustrated, McCormick took matters into his own hands.

"I was trying to tell Dylan, we need the stage," McCormick told *Texas Monthly* writer Michael Hall. "He continued to ignore me, so I went over to the junction box and pulled out the cords. Then he listened."

McCormick, maybe one of the last of the line of the old-school 20th-century song collectors and folklorists, still remains intensely dedicated to his craft ('60s pop-rock singers be damned). It was the low-down country ballads, hobo ditties, field hollers, moaning country blues, yodels, corridos, gospel shouts, prison songs, and other vernacular stylings and folkloric expressions of Texas and the greater American South — the bedrock of American folk music — that for decades motivated him to document and preserve this country's subterranean culture. He's recorded and produced countless recordings of Texas (and some non-Texas) songsters and bluesmen.

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**RIP, Mack McCormick. The man who unplugged Dylan.**

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Those even faintly familiar with the blues will recognize one of them: Third Ward's own Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins. McCormick recorded Hopkins' revival records of the early 1960s. And he also field recordings of lesser-known greats such as Peg Leg Will, one of the most important jazz pianists in the Fourth Ward.

After a career spanning six decades, McCormick still lives in Houston, where he keeps a legendary archive of blues and jazz documents, writings, photos, and ephemera. He's reluctant to share it with the public — which, of course, only burnishes the legend.

In a city notorious for its amnesia, and in studying music that could have faded without a trace, "Mack" McCormick serves as a counterweight to forgetting. He recorded our history, our music. His work is our collective memory.

*Alex LaRotta is a first-generation Colombian-American and native Houstonian. A deejay as well as a history Ph.D student at the University of Houston, he plans a dissertation on the history of Texas soul.*

*Bookmark Gray Matters. It's low-down country ballads, hobo ditties, field hollers, moaning country blues, yodels, corridos, gospel shouts, prison songs, and other vernacular stylings and folkloric expressions of Texas and the greater American South.*