

Distinguished Alumni Award – 2016

Christian Strachwitz '51

Born Count Christian Alexander Maria Graf Strachwitz von Gross-Zauche und Camminetz on July 1, 1931, in the German province of Silesia, southeast of Berlin, you spent your early years witnessing firsthand the buildup and ultimate demise of the Nazi regime in World War II. The son of an aristocratic farming family, you developed an interest in American pop music that began with 78 rpm discs brought back by your mother from her visits to your great aunts in the US (sisters of your late maternal grandmother, who was an American).

Fleeing from the approaching Russian Army, which would have killed your family or deported them to Siberia early in 1945, your family first settled with an uncle near Brunswick (British-controlled West Germany), where you heard your first Armed Forces radio broadcasts of swing music and became hooked. You then emigrated in 1947 to the United States, where you moved in with one of your great aunts in Reno, Nevada.

It was when you came to Cate School later in 1947 that your interest in Swing, Country music, and New Orleans jazz blossomed. Able to pick up a powerful radio signal of clear channels (XERB out of Rosarito Beach, Mexico) that played mostly American Country or Hillbilly music, as well as a nearby station in Santa Paula that occasionally played Mexican music, you found yourself focused more on music than on your studies while at Cate. Mr. Parson, your senior-year English teacher, went as far as to write, “You should read more during your spare time. More time should be spent on books; less time on radio.” As your English teacher, Mr. Martin, wrote during your sophomore year, “I wish that his attention could be focused on some topic other than jazz music, but that may come.” Funny enough, that day never would come, and it was this same Mr. Martin whom you would fondly recall inviting you to his apartment so the two of you could listen together to jazz artists like Eddie Condon and Jelly Roll Morton. My classmate and best friend, Bill Melon, suggested we go into Carpinteria to see the film “New Orleans,” which featured Louis Armstrong, the entire Kid Ory band, as well as Billie Holiday! Your future at this point was already clear (even if not to you) as your fascination with Country and African-American music genres continued to grow and you began collecting hillbilly, blues, and jazz discs in earnest with your limited allowance.

Graduating from Cate in 1951, you were accepted into Pomona College, in Claremont, CA. Music, not school, continued to be your primary interest. Many long drives -- occasionally even solo bus rides for an R&B show at the Olympic Auditorium, but mostly with your friend Frank Demond -- into Los Angeles to listen to live jazz at clubs like the Beverly Cavern to hear George Lewis' New Orleans Jazz Band, as well as Sunday night trips to listen to the choir at St. Paul's Baptist Church in downtown Los Angeles, contributed to your “washing out” of Pomona College.

You bid adieu to Southern California and enrolled instead at the University of California, Berkeley in 1952, where you continued your fascination with music. A member of Berkeley's Big Game Committee, you earned a reputation for picking crowd-pleasing performers, namely the George Lewis Band.

Already an American citizen, you were drafted into the U.S. Army in 1954, and stationed, coincidentally, back in Austria and Germany. There you listened to a lot of jazz and Dixieland music, which, prior to the advent of rock-and-roll, was the musical choice for rebellious youth. You

concluded your service in 1956 and, with the assistance of the G.I. Bill, returned to Berkeley, where in 1958 you received your Bachelor's degree in political science followed by a degree in secondary education.

You began teaching (mainly German) at Los Gatos and Saratoga High Schools in California in 1958; in the summer of 1959 you took your first bus trip to Houston, Texas to meet one of your heroes, Lightning Hopkins, who had been discovered by your friend Sam Charters, who had informed you that Lightning lived in that city. In the summer of 1960, having acquired your first tape recorder, you drove with fellow record collector Bob Pinson to Texas with the hope of recording Lightning Hopkins, but instead with the help of local historian and folklorist Mack McCormick you found local songster Mance Lipscomb in Navasota and went on to meet with British blues scholar, Paul Oliver and his wife in Memphis, TN and established Arhoolie Records. As time and funds permitted, you began making cross country trips to Texas, Louisiana, and other southern states in search of musical folk heroes and eventually recording singers like Lightnin' Hopkins, Mance Lipscomb, "Whistling" Alex Moore, Melvin "Lil' Son" Jackson, Mercy Dee Walton, Flaco Jimenez, Big Mama Thornton, Clifton Chenier, and so many others. With relentless effort and skillful detective work, you tracked down these musicians, most of whom were only regionally known, to record them telling their stories and practicing their craft.

In 1962 you quit teaching and moved back to Berkeley with a firm commitment to preserve and document vernacular music, and to continue recording and acquiring other masters, under the Arhoolie label. Through your efforts traveling in the South, as well as your tireless acquisition of music collections, sometimes from labels like Swingtime that had gone bankrupt, Arhoolie's collection began to grow. Through most of the 1960's the company stayed true to the art and the artists, while scraping by financially. It was not until the Woodstock Festival in 1969 that the Arhoolie fortunes took a financial tick upward when one of the artists, Country Joe McDonald, was pulled onstage. The performance of his powerful anti-war protest song, "I feel Like I'm Fixing To Die Rag," of which you had made the first recording, ended up being a part of the Woodstock album and movie, which provided surprise and much-needed royalties for Arhoolie and for the artist.

In 1970, you moved Arhoolie to its current headquarters on San Pablo Avenue in El Cerrito, California. Through the 70s and 80s, while still continuing your pursuit and representation of various regional vernacular musicians' art and artists, you also turned your interest to Mexican music, which you had first heard while at Cate, collecting eventually a library of well over 150,000 recordings, the largest such collection in the world. This collection is now part of the Arhoolie Foundation's "Frontera Collection" since it focuses on the music of the border region between Mexico and Texas, which continues to be digitized and is made available through the UCLA digital library.

In 1995 you established The Arhoolie Foundation, with the mission to "document, preserve, present, and disseminate authentic traditional and regional vernacular music." You have been wide ranging in this effort, collecting catalogues of music from traditional regional Mexican, to zydeco, to Cajun, to blues, to Bluegrass, to jazz, to Hawaiian music, and have gained a reputation for respecting your artists. Today, the advisory board of the Arhoolie Foundation is made of names that include Bob Dylan, Bonnie Raitt, Steve Miller, and Linda Ronstadt. In 2013, a documentary was made titled *This Ain't No Mouse Music*; it chronicles at least some of the incredible effort that you have made to preserve music.

In 1993 you received the lifetime achievement award for preserving blues as part of the Blues Symposium held in Memphis, TN. In 1995 you (along with Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead) were

inducted into the NAIRD (National Association of Independent Record Distributors) Hall of Fame. In 1999 you were inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame. In 2000 you were honored by the National Endowment for the Arts with a lifetime award, the National Heritage Fellowship. At the 2016 Grammy's, you were awarded the Trustees Award.

In May of 2016, you announced that Arhoolie Records had been acquired by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, the nonprofit label of the national museum. More than 350 Arhoolie albums will be part of the Smithsonian Institution's collection, with many in the extensive catalog getting a new life in various formats. You stated, "I am very pleased that Arhoolie has found a new home at the Smithsonian, where they are committed to keeping everything in print and available to the public. Since I am not King Tut, I can't take my Arhoolie baby with me."

For your undying efforts in the arts and humanities, and for putting the interest of your artists and society above your own personal interests, we are honored to award you, Christian Strachwitz, Class of 1951, with Cate's Distinguished Alumni Award for 2016.