trans atlantic cultures
Cultural Histories of the Atlantic World 18th–21st Centuries

ISSN 2739-6614
transatlantic-cultures.org



# The Transatlantic Ballad of Alan Lomax

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*Studying vocal performance styles during his time in Europe during the 1950s, the US ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax (1915-2002) transformed his regionalist approach to folk songs into a global framework. His "Cantometrics" and "Global Jukebox" projects show how a "reverse" transatlantic experiences can produce transnational maps of song and culture.*

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| PUBLISHED | June 20, 2023 |
| ORIGINAL LANGUAGE | English |
| TOPICS | Music |
| SPACES AND PLACES | South Atlantic · North Atlantic · Africa · Europe · Caribbean · South America · North America |
| PERIODS | The Consolidation of Mass Cultures |
| KEYWORDS | music, folklore, ethnomusicology, us, europe, 1950s, anthropology, global, social science, intellectual history |
| PERMANENT LINK | https://transatlantic-cultures.org/en/records/the-transatlantic-ballad-of-alan-lomax/ |

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> *I was a kind of musical Columbus in reverse.*
> *Alan Lomax, "Saga of a Folksong Hunter"* [32]

On September 24, 1950, United States folk song collector and documentarian Alan Lomax boarded the *SS Mauretania* and sailed for Europe. He was 35 years old. After almost 15 years documenting folk music in the United States, Lomax was keen by 1950 to escape the growing constraints of the anticommunist Red Scare as well as various personal issues. In his notebook, he wrote that he was setting off to become "a comrade of the world." [1] Born in Texas, he had started out as a folk song collector with his father, John Lomax, while Alan was a college student. Together they conducted field recording trips for the Library of Congress and the US federal government in the early 1930s. Alan continued to work for the Library's Archive of American Folk Song during the height of the New Deal led by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in response to the crisis of the Great Depression. Then Lomax turned to radio work to support the Allied war effort during World War II. Once in Europe after the war, Lomax's journeys would take him on intensive field recording trips. In the early 1950s, he traveled around England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. In the mid-1950s, he went to Spain and Italy. He also produced numerous radio documentary shows for the British Broadcasting Company and he oversaw the release of the first volumes in the *World Library of Folk and Primitive Music*, a project for Columbia Records that initially funded his Atlantic crossing. Lomax would not return to the United States until almost a decade later, in 1958.

Lomax's transatlantic experiences in the 1950s were crucial to his development of new ideas about folk music and its relationship to processes of cultural preservation and hybridization. His time in Europe inspired him to shift from the nation as the fundamental unit of analysis for music and cultural heritage to a blending of a regionalist approach with a worldwide system of musical expression. His "Cantometrics" project, initiated upon his return to the US, became an effort to codify his central insights. Lomax and a team of researchers listened to music samples and statistically analyzed them to formulate a systems analysis of comparative global song style. From his traversing of the Atlantic World, a vision of the whole world's singing emerged.

Rather than musical content, musical performance moved to the center of Lomax's thinking after his time in Europe. His core argument was that musical *delivery* rather repertoire, *how* people sang not what they sang, offered a fresh way of studying cultural continuity and change around the world over time. For Lomax, while the songs may change, remarkably long-lasting performance traits and their cultural information survived in the manner in which they were sung. These suggested to him that even as regional cultures spread and diffused, even as they clashed, collided, melded, merged, adjusted, creolized, and hybridized, they also carried ancient forces with them. Cultural continuities quite literally lodged themselves in the throats of singers, the muscle memory of instrument players, the aesthetic pleasures of listeners. As embodied modes of culture, singing and music making (and dancing, which Lomax also studied), became resources for all humankind as it confronted the ruptures, challenges, and trials—and also the opportunities—of modernity. The vestigial could be an asset for the novel, he thought, the archaic a tool for the future.



Alan Lomax recording music at the Palma Festival, Mallorca, Spain, June 1952. Photographer unidentified

**Source:** From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity

While Lomax's ideas remain controversial as social science, as cultural history they help us think more carefully about the significance of transatlantic history for the formation of global consciousness. As Jill Terry and Neil A. Wynn argue in their book *Transatlantic Roots Music: Folk, Blues, and National Identities*, "Alan Lomax's work as a folk collector/ethnographer offers an important window on transatlantic folk exchanges." [2] While other scholars have studied Lomax's documentary work for the BBC and Columbia Records, the ways in which he inspired the skiffle movement in England, and the close relationships he forged with musicians and folklorists in the United Kingdom, fewer have considered how Lomax's transatlantic jaunt led to his global theories of music and its social meanings. [3] Lomax's Atlantic World experiences helped him forge a transnational conceptualization of traditional musical expression.

To be sure, Lomax's own European sojourn was located within the post-World War II expansion of both US hard and soft power, but while he was a patriotic American, he was also an internationalist thinker. Most of all, Lomax wanted to work in service of regional and local peoples whose cultural heritages could be enriched, he believed, by an effort to fit them into a coherent global model. Long before the term became trendy, he began to call for the pursuit of worldwide cultural "equity." [4]



Alan Lomax examines a roll of film with unidentified man and woman, Albarracin, Teruel, Aragon, Spain, October 1954. Photographer unidentified

**Source:** From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity

## Regional folklore, global systems

Lomax was already thinking about the "transatlantic" and the "regional" even before he departed the US in 1950. With his mind on the World War unfolding on the European continent in the 1940s, Lomax collaborated with broadcasters at the BBC on a show called *Transatlantic Call*, an innovative radio program that used interviews and song to build connections between citizens of the United Kingdom and the United States. [5] Even prior to World War II, Lomax was curious about regions within and against nation-states. With Sidney Robertson Cowell, he published *American Folk Song and Folklore: A Regional Bibliography* in 1942. [6] With his work on the *World Library of Folk and Primitive Music* series for Columbia Records in Europe, the national rather than the regional moved to the center, but soon enough Lomax was more focused again on regions and their relationship to global flows of music and culture. Conducting fieldwork in parts of Scotland, England, Ireland, Spain, and Italy in the 1950s, Lomax began to hear performance traits that linked local values and customs to global circulations of sound and social systems.



Alan Lomax with unidentified man Yebra de Basa, Huesca, Aragon, Spain, December 1952. Photographer unidentified

**Source:** From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity



Alan Lomax with vendemia workers at the grape harvest, Moncalvo, Monferrato, Piedmont, Italy, October 1954. Photographer: Diego Carpitella

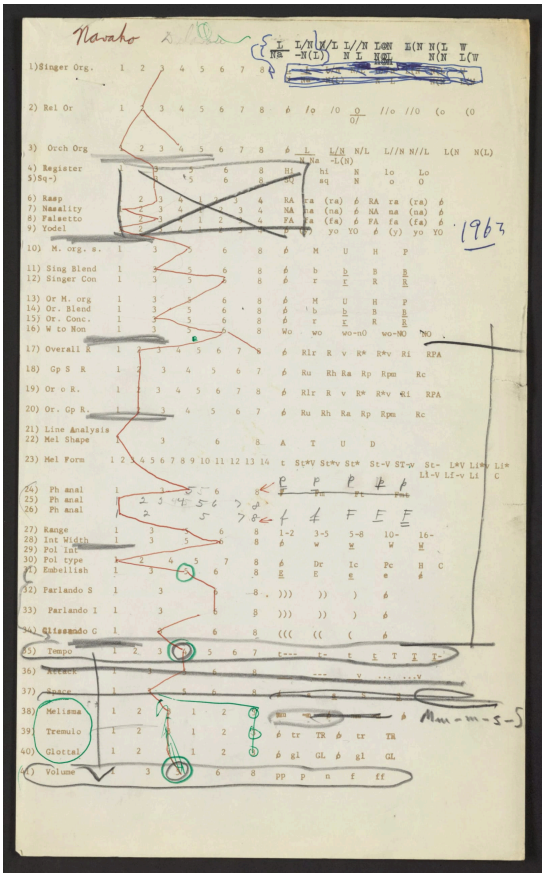
**Source:** From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity

His time in Europe was crucial to Lomax's later turn, in the 1960s, to systems theory as an approach for making sense of regions as they fit together into an overall global life. Beginning to map out this future direction of his research, Lomax wrote to US musicologist Charles Seeger (father of Pete Seeger) in 1955, "My idea is that there are a small number of musical styles in the world, and that these musical styles are based on certain physiological and psychological mechanisms, culturally transmitted and changing only when the entire emotional direction of the culture changes." For Lomax, the music people liked to make connected fundamentally to the ways in which they lived their lives. He wrote:

> *Musical style, in my concept, is a grouping of basic musical habits which include the final material of music, such as melody, rhythm, chords, and instruments, but more important than these, certain physical, psychological, and social characteristics which are basic and formative. Among these are the degree in which monody, homophony, or polyphony is present; the vocal timbre and the way which the voice is produced; the body position, body movement and expression of the face while singing are other determine the degree in which music is a community product or an individual product; the normal singing pitch and especially the singing pitch of the male, especially significant being the number of bass singers in the given culture; the type of dance connected with the music; the content of the text; and finally, the motion of the songs.* [33]

In Lomax's thinking, musical performance traits correlated to cultural traits. Of course, Lomax admitted that "all sorts of historical factors come into play." Yet he concluded that "I feel fairly certain that the group of social traits mentioned above are the determinants of the musical habits which lie below the formal musical material and which limit them and give them their special lyrical color." [7] For Lomax, music performance styles correlated to deeply entrenched social mores.

He would adjust and refine these ideas over time, but Lomax's key idea was that if he could measure the ways in which musical performance styles were similar and dissimilar from each other regionally, he could then describe not only singing styles, but also their social significance globally. Eventually his Cantometrics project used thirty-seven criteria to code over 5,000 songs, aiming for about ten representative songs from over 1000 cultures. This, he contended, allowed him to compare musical aesthetics around the world. He then connected his musical data to George Murdock's Human Relations Area Files and his Ethnographic Atlas. Now, he argued, one could track embedded social functions through their correlated aesthetic expressions; at the same time, one could look for cultural diffusions as people moved, migrated, or were forcible transported from their homes.




A coding sheet for Navaho song, from the 1962 trials for Alan Lomax's Cantometrics project

**Source:** From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity

Lomax's theories gathered momentum during his time in Europe and they were cemented into place when he returned to the United States in the late 1950s to study with linguists, anthropologists, and psychologists such as Ray Birdwhistell. These scholars were interested in what they called kinesics and metacommunication, by which they meant the repetitive, paralinguistic communicative acts that

surrounded the semantics of language. Facial gestures, body language, and other repeated expressive activities, Birdwhistell and others believed, established stable channels for the communication of content. Indeed, they were often more important for transmitting information, ideas, and meaning than content itself. Their ideas aligned with Lomax's own fascination with singing as a conveyer of meaning beyond the content of what was being sung. Their approach confirmed what he had experienced in the field when he recorded folk music in North America and then across the European continent.



Alan Lomax inspecting recording machine in marble quarry with unidentified man, Carrara, Massa-Carrara, Tuscany, Italy, December 1954. Photographer: Diego Carpitella.

**Source:** From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity

Lomax noticed persistent, durable performative styles in his samplings. These he called "redundant." He did not mean the term negatively. Redundancy denoted, rather, the trace of potent intangible cultural heritage in ways of singing. As Lomax wrote, "when the Pygmies hoot 'My Darling Clementine,'" or "when the Cherokee Indians chant 'Rock of Ages,'" or "when the Kentucky mountaineer moans the Negro blues, or when Beethoven sets Scots bagpipe tunes for the symphony orchestra—when, that is, a tune moves from one style region to another, it is often distorted out of recognition by the new performance framework." [8] In other words, for Lomax, when the Bambenga, Bambuti, or Batwa peoples sang "My Darling Clementine," a classic American folk song that had started life as a nineteenth-century commercial and popular hit during the California Gold Rush of the 1840s, or when other groups took up new musical material from elsewhere, they made it their own stylistically. The content might come from afar, but the performance style brought it home.

moved around in just this way. Percy Montross is credited with writing the hit song of the 1840s by adapting a Spanish ballad melody sung by Mexican miners with words from an earlier song titled "Down by the River Liv'd a Maiden." He simplified the melodic and harmonic composition to fit the emerging commercial sheet music formats of his time. When the Pygmies sang it decades later, their performative ideals of polyphony, rasp, yodeling, hocketing, and overlapping entrance and exit of voices were not "lost and gone forever" (to borrow a lyric from the song itself). Rather, "Clementine" resurfaced from its Americanthat remained surprisingly contiguous and fixed to locales and regions and particular culture groups even as repertoire circulated and traveled the world.

Once back across the Atlantic in the United States from Europe in the early 1960s, and having studied with Birdwhistell and other scholars of metalinguistics, Lomax received a Rockefeller Foundation grant to pursue his Cantometrics research. He continued to draw on his own transatlantic personal and professional experiences. "I do not know how this system of stylistic analysis will work out in other parts of the world," he wrote in 1959 as he began to develop the Cantometrics project, but "it seems to me that it considerably clarifies the picture in the areas I know intimately—Britain, Italy, Spain, the West Indies, and the United States." [9] For Lomax, the Atlantic World was the place from which he attempted to hear the whole world. In this context, the regional and global became more crucial than the national. His first published song collection upon his return from Europe was not focused on a nation, but rather was titled The Folk Songs of North America (see archival materials for the book in the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity).

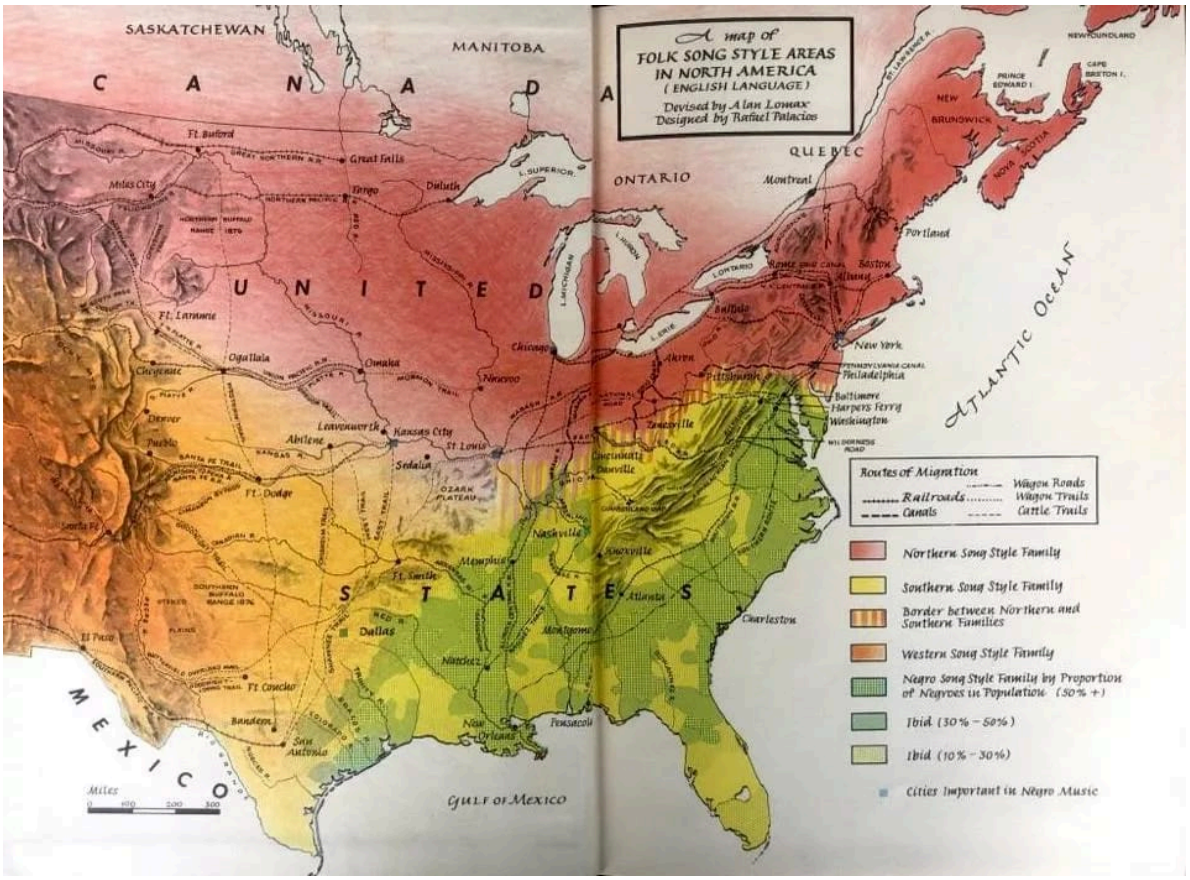
*The Folk Songs of North America* included 317 songs, with characterizations both of how they fit into local settings and how flows of song and culture cut across vast geographies, particularly across the Atlantic. [10] At the front and back of the book were maps that did not erase nation-states but nonetheless emphasized how folk song's regionality could not be reduced to countries defined as political entities; instead, Lomax concentrated on the intriguing interaction of persistent regional styles and circulating forces of hybridization.

"The map sings," Lomax declared, writing:

> *The chanteys surge along the rocky Atlantic seaboard, across the Great Lakes and round the moon-curve of the Gulf of Mexico. The paddling songs of the French-Canadians ring out along the Saint Lawrence and west past the Rockies. Beside them, from Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and new England, the ballads, straight and tall as spruce, march towards the West. Inland from the Sea Islands, slave melodies sweep across the whole South from the Carolinas to Texas. And out on the shadows of the Smoky and Blue Ridge mountains the old ballads, lonesome love songs, and hoedowns echo through the upland South into the hills of Arkansas and Oklahoma. There in the Ozarks the Northern and Southern song families swap tunes and make a marriage.*

Continuing his geographic survey of traditions hybridizing, Lomax wrote of Texas Cowboys "singing Northern ballads with a Southern accent." He described "new roads and steel rails" emerging in the "Southern backwoods" to "the growl and thunder of Negro chants of labor—the axe songs, the hammer songs, and the railroad songs" which then "blend with the lonesome hollers of levee camps muleskinners to create the blues." These then, to Lomax, "roll down the Mississippi to New Orleans, where the Creoles mix the musical gumbo of jazz... add Spanish pepper and French sauce and blue notes to the rowdy tantara of their reconstruction-happy brass bands..." [11]

Here Lomax describes a geography of alteration, circulation, and adjustment. Yet he did not dismiss the power of continuity. Instead, Lomax argued that "each group of settlers in the New World tried to establish a musical community like the one they had left in Europe." So too, "West Africa spread over domains in the New World." Musical cultures persisted, Lomax believed, from these origin points, but nothing stayed pure or held fast. Instead, to Lomax, the "best songs and dances" that emerged "were hybrids of hybrids, mixtures of mixtures." [12]




A Map of Folk Song Style Areas in North America (English Language), devised by Alan Lomax, designed by Rafael Palacios. From the frontispiece of Alan Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America *(Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960)

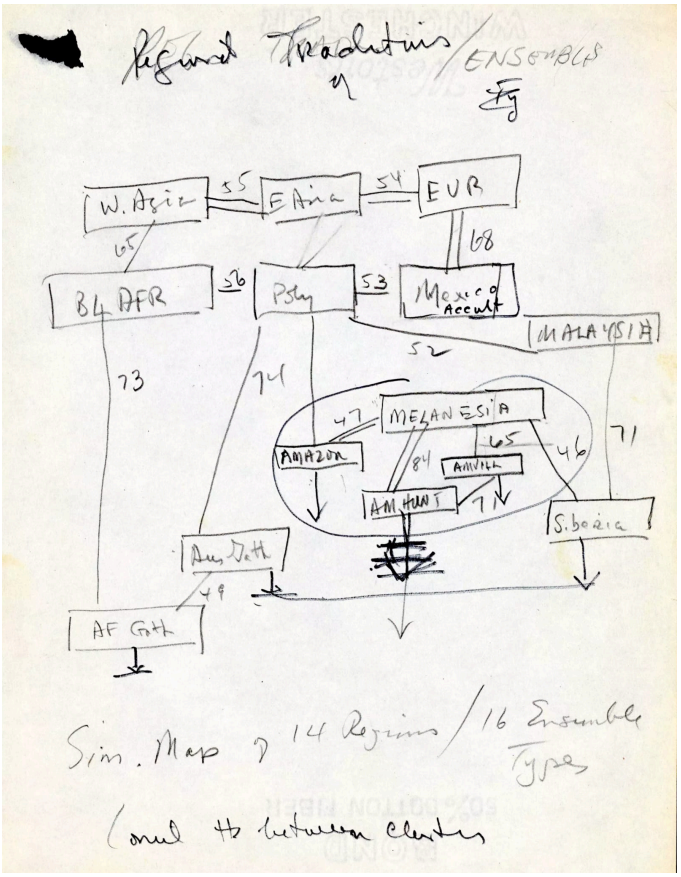
**Source:** Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity

Lomax wrote quite romantically of the regional folk styles of North America, but as the 1960s unfolded, his engagement with linguists such as Birdwhistell, his Rockefeller Fellowship, and maybe most crucially his European years across the Atlantic redirected him more fully toward the data-driven, statistical approach of Cantometrics. Now Lomax sought not only to characterize regional and global flows of folk music qualitatively, but also to quantify, code, and statistically analyze them. He hoped to prove his impressions from his fieldwork in the lab, as it were, of postwar social science.

To be sure, his social scientific theories, like his earlier romanticizations of folk music, were problematic. They replicated in scholarship a kind of US-oriented understanding of region, nation, and world at perhaps the height of American global power after World War II. Yet Lomax's concepts were also exhilarating for the ways in which he sought to measure singing as a means of cultural circulations that at once retained deep traditions, but also propelled tradition forward into modernity. Listening intently to

the voices of myriad singers and seeking to line up song style with social values in particular settings, Lomax emerged from his Atlantic crossing with a sophisticated system for tracing both the dynamism—and just as crucially the enduring presence—of human expression across time and space.

Although he never completely abandoned political nation-state boundaries for understanding music and culture, Lomax increasingly circumvented these units of analysis for an anthropological planetary anthropological sound map in which regional aesthetic ideals of sonic performance unlocked patterns of intensely persistent, localized musical practices and values that also, if tracked properly, circulated around the globe and came into combination with other local musical styles and aesthetics of performance. So too, musical performance revealed embedded factors of cultural meaning and even social organization within particular groups. Here was an attempt to square competing anthropological debates of the mid-twentieth century about whether culture "diffused" across the world or whether culture was "functional," arising from what it was used for in particular settings. With Cantometrics, Lomax wanted to have his diffusionist cake and eat his functionalist one too. He believed singing could reveal both functional social structures and diffusions of culture across time and place.




Alan Lomax's early sketch to map world music ensemble styles for the Cantometrics project, ca. mid-1960s

**Source:** From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity

Whether as a measure of embedded social function or geographic cultural diffusion, Cantometrics seems most of all to have been about singing as a means of connecting back to wells of cultural heritage that provided important padding for encounters with new social settings. In voices singing, Lomax thought he heard ancient modes of producing sound forged over millennia—and with them long-term cultural

customs, values, beliefs, and practices; but he also contended that he could correlate how singing styles corresponded to contemporaneous social practices. It was a tricky combination, and Lomax tried to do so much that many dismissed his findings. His theories struck them as too grandiose. Moreover, they were too clunky in their reliance on a few sample selections to stand in for complex cultural practices in various regions and locales. Worse yet, for a person committed to the value of all cultures, Lomax's theories were oddly shot through with the biases and stereotypes of older anthropological assumptions about cultural hierarchies of race and region. Cantometrics was never particularly accepted as a compelling theory of music, culture, and society.

Yet it is too easy to get caught up in these debates, important as they are. When we shift to a cultural historical examination of Lomax's Cantometrics, its transatlantic origins emerge more clearly and remind us of the key role of the Atlantic World in mediations of the very concepts of the regional, the national, and the global. Lomax's work in England at the BBC and his immersion in ethnographic and recording efforts in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and particularly Spain and Italy during the 1950s stand at the center of his pivot to a regional-global framework.

One hears this, for instance, in Lomax's radio productions for the BBC during the 1950s. He often circled back to his own memories of Texas, the US South, and the US West to position his perceptions of the new folk song styles he encountered on the other side of the Atlantic. Here was not merely a search for the origins of American culture in Europe, but also a kind of reverse engineering, a mapping of American culture onto Europe. Lomax, like the singers he was studying and theorizing, made his own regional place of upbringing the starting point for his engagement with musics on the other side of the Atlantic ocean. The 1951 radio essay *I Heard Scotland Singing*the cows I'm used to in Texas are sort of melancholy animals, resigned to a miserable food-producing existence, but these shiny black Aberdeen Angus cattle go skipping over the dew like young goats." He went on to remark, "In fact, I kept thinking they were goats when I saw the black dots go scurrying across those green meadows. The songs too are slow-gaited and nourishing, strong and simple and sweet like a gentle musical cow mooing in the evening." [13] Even in 1951, Lomax was already beginning to use his reverse transatlantic consciousness to evoke what he heard as strong cultural traditions of song as they connected to his own upbringing—and from there to think about the connections between regional lifeworlds and ocean-spanning musical performance styles. Lomax would continue to do this throughout his time in Europe during the 1950s.

In his 1955 series on Italian folk music, forthe work songs, but these we reserve for a later program, keeping steadily to our interest in what an Alabama friend once termed '*ain't* working songs.'" [14] For Lomax, his US experiences studying regional folk music styles informed his transatlantic studies of European folk song. The personal journey shaded into the professional one, the regionalist orientation of his upbringing in his early years undergirded his later research and thinking after he crossed the Atlantic.



Young boy with guitar on shore in unidentified location, Italy, July 1954. Photographer: Alan Lomax.

**Source:** From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity.

All episodes of *Folk Music of Italy from March 7, 1955 to June 13, 1955* are online here

## Culture, continuity, sexuality

Nonetheless, as Lomax continued on to the Cantometrics project after his time in Europe, he sought to clear away his personal perspective. In the role of social scientist, he wanted to hear and describe the structures of regional musical styles as they got encoded in singers' very bodies—lodged in their throats, and then captured on audio recordings. What was home? How did singing capture a sense of it? "From the point of view of its social function," Lomax would eventually argue, "the primary effect of music is to give the listener a feeling of security." [15] Of course, singers could reach for strangeness, difference, and leap across cultural boundaries through musical experimentation or through encounters with the musics of other peoples, but overall music was, for him, an "art so deeply rooted in the security patterns of the community" that it was not typically "subject to rapid change." Instead, "musical style appears to be one of the most conservative of culture traits." To Lomax, "Religion, language, even many aspects of social structure change; an entirely new set of tunes or rhythms or harmonic patterns may be introduced; but, in its overall character, a musical style will remain intact." [16]



Alan Lomax recording Zambra in the Sacromonte neighborhood of Granada, Spain, September 1952. Photographer unidentified.

**Source:** From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity

Alan Lomax's 1952-1953 Spanish field recordings can be heard online here

Lomax's thinking reminds us that while the field of Atlantic World studies often focuses almost exclusively on change, continuity is worthy of attention too, particularly across the Atlantic World. Most of all for Lomax, it was the interplay between change and continuity that was important to examine. Even prior to his time in Europe, he was seeking to seize folklore and tradition from its racist and hyper-nationalist use by Nazis and other fascist regimes. As he admitted in notes for a 1948 lecture presentation at Café Society in New York, delivered just a few years before his departure for Europe, "In Italy, in Japan, and especially in Germany, fascist leaders used folklore to whip up the enthusiasm of their people for aggressive war." Folklore was "transformed into a weapon against the people." But, reflective of the New Deal and Popular Front milieu of the 1930s in which he came of age, Lomax was thinking of folk song as a force for diverse modes of democracy rather than a romanticized *volk* culture that could undergird authoritarian obsessions with purity.

Lomax drew upon his regionalist orientation to emphasize difference and the adaptive capacities that manifested in folk song even as he grew ever more curious about continuities and consistencies across transnational time and space. "The fact is," he insisted, "folklore has little, if any, connection with political boundaries or racist abstractions." Instead, to Lomax, "the evidence of folklore indicates that some folklore patterns are world-wide in their currency, that the human imagination is everywhere that a charming story

or melody skips blithely by political and linguistic boundaries and adapts itself to the cultural acceptances of its new home." [?] Folk song style did not stop at national borders. It followed other orders. Positioned in local experiences, it moved at global scales.

To Lomax's ear, part of why folk music escaped total domination by the fascistic forces of governmental nation-state power was that it involved more than just overt politics. It operated at much more elemental levels. In Lomax's Cantometrics, singing connected especially to sexuality as a social force. Performance qualities such as tightness of the throat or whether there was more solo or choral singing seemed, "in the material I know the best," Lomax wrote, "to vary with the erotic pattern traditional in the area" and they had the most to do "with the position of women in the culture, with the treatment of children...." [18] Lomax strived to collect data across the world to test his hypothesis, but he admitted that it was his transatlantic experience that led him to explore the question of singing style and patterns of sexual freedom and control.



Unidentified guitarist, mandolin player, and man, Italy, July 1954.
Photographer: Alan Lomax

**Source:** From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity

In particular, observing the regional musical and cultural differences between Northern and Southern Spain as well as Northern and Southern Italy during his mid-1950s field recording trips, he thought he discerned singing styles whose tightened vocal cords, strident piercing tone, and tendency for more solo singing struck Lomax as correlating with more patriarchal cultures in those regions. As Lomax put it, "In 1953 while making high-fidelity recordings of folk singing in every province of Spain, I observed Spanish performance style varied in terms of the severity of prohibitions against feminine premarital intercourse." For Lomax, "in Southern Spain, where sexual sanctions were Oriental in their stringency, a piercing, high-pitched, squeezed, narrow delivery was cultivated which made choral performance all but impossible."

Meanwhile, "North of the Pyrenees, among the Basques, Gallegos, and Asturias, where sexual sanctions were mild and contact between the sexes easy and relaxed, there was a strong preference for well-blended choirs singing in open and low-pitched voices." [19]

Lomax concluded that "in every case which I had an opportunity to examine, there is a positive correlation between the musical style and the sexual mores of the communities." [20] Influenced by one of his mentors, Margaret Mead, but also shaped by his time in Europe, Lomax came to believe that singing potentially served as a way to measure patriarchal structures in particular cultural settings—and, just as crucially, patriarchal strictures. So too, perhaps it registered protest, or at least frustration and dissatisfaction with these norms.

More than 1,300 black-and-white photographs illustrate Alan Lomax and Diego Carpitella's journey through Italy in 1954 and 1955

These ideas were controversial at the time—and continue to be so. They reflected Lomax's Orientalism, to use Edward Said's term, which is to say the ways in which he characterized global culture around stereotypical characteristics of the East. Yet they also reveal Lomax's effort to think about how music and culture linked regions—and even the very muscles of individual bodies—both to entrenched cultural norms and also to larger global flows and circulations that might put pressure on those norms. Lomax was seeking to blend together functionalist theories about music performance with diffusion theories, and maybe also to find a way, from his own movement across the Atlantic to Europe, to make sense of how music communicated regional cultural practices and how it might even transform those practices as cultures came into contact with each other.

Lomax was not a feminist in any conventional sense, but he did focus attentively on women's place in regional cultures and societies as a crucial factor. "So far as I can determine," he wrote years later, "from the music that I have worked with myself, the determining factors seem to be:

> *— the sexual pattern in the society, especially the position of women, and this is interesting since women tend to be the rememberers of songs, the main song audience even though the singers are men. — how children are raised. — other sources of security, that vary from culture to culture.* [34]



Alan Lomax with unidentified women, San Giorgio, Udine, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Italy, September 1954. Photographer: Diego Carpitella.

**Source:** From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity



Unidentified woman singing with microphone, Italy, July 1954.
Photographer: Alan Lomax.

**Source:** From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity

For Lomax, writing in the 1960s, building on his work in Europe during the 1950s, responding to the ideas of Mead and other anthropologists and social scientists, singing style moved the focus from political economy to its basis in domestic life, sexuality, memory, and communal practices. Singing style functioned as an expressive representation of sexual mores—most of all patriarchal control. This was its functionalist dimension in specific regions around the world. But singing style also captured an undercurrent of female anger at these conditions. To him, you could hear the discontentment (or approval in other social situations) being, quite literally, voiced.

## Noticing African Diasporic traditions

If Lomax was attentive to gender, he also was attentive to race. He rejected the position held by many US musicologists of his time that because African Americans performed musical texts such as European-based Christian religious spirituals, all trace of their African heritage had vanished. He thought these other scholars were listening to the wrong thing: repertoire rather than performance. Once the way people performed move to the center, it was obvious just how durable African modes of music had been.

Drawing upon his Cantometrics statistical research, Lomax argued that his numbers revealed how "Afro-American style is virtually identical with that of the African heartland. It's two closest cogeners are Equatorial Bantu, at 85% similarity, and Guinea Coast, at 84% similarity." As Lomax put it, "This conclusion contrasts strongly with that of many other recent studies of the subject." While other "analyses compare printed versions of the melodies and the poetic texts of Negro and white spirituals" [underline in

original], Lomax himself shifted the focus to style. "If these two features," he wrote of melodies and texts, "are examined out of the context of performance, available on recordings, many American Negro songs seem to be adaptations of white hymns or folk spirituals." That, Lomax explained, caused folksong collectors such as George Pullen Jackson, "to argue "that there was not one shred of originality in the American Negro spirituals, that all were derived from white models."

To Lomax, they were dead wrong. "Cantometric analysis," he wrote, "points conclusively in another direction—that the main traditions of Afro-American song, especially those of the old-time congregational spiritual, are derived from the main African song style model." For Lomax, "European song style did influence the African tradition in America in regard to melodic form and, of course, textual content. But in most other respects, Afro-American song has hewed to the main dynamic line of the principal African tradition. As we have shown, this tradition is perhaps the most stable and the most ancient and in many ways the most highly developed of the musical languages of mankind." While many whose ancestors had survived the Middle Passage were well aware of the persistence of African traditions in their lives, Lomax was among the few outside scholars to identify and document transatlantic circulations coming out of Africa and to celebrate them. Moreover, he heard these traditions as nothing less than "the most highly developed of the musical languages of mankind." [21]



Alan Lomax and possibly Raphael Hurtault and others listening to audio recording playback, La Plaine, Saint Patrick Parish, Dominica, June 1962. Photographer: Antoinette Marchand.

**Source:** From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity

Lomax's position on the value and persistence of African musical and cultural practices in the Americas linked back to his earliest folk music fieldwork in the US South and Caribbean. As he wrote of the African American singers imprisoned on rural penitentiary work farms in the US South, whom Lomax heard on

his first field recording trip with his father in 1933, "when they opened their mouths, out came this flame of beauty. This sound which matched anything I'd ever heard from Beethoven, Brahms, or Dvořák. They sang with beautiful harmony, with enormous volume, with total affection." For Lomax, "I had to face that here were the people that everyone else regard as the dregs of society, dangerous human beings, brutalized, and from them came the music which I thought was the finest thing I'd ever hear come out of my country." [22]

After fieldwork with Zora Neale Hurston in Florida and Mary Elizabeth Barnacle in the US South and the Bahamas, Lomax believed that they had heard music "probably as nearly like those in Africa as any you can find in the Western hemisphere." [23] His sense of the presence and value of Diasporic African music in the Americas ran deep.

By the 1960s, after his European years, Lomax imagined the power of this particular musical tradition at the global scale. He did so both in terms of time and space, positing that in folk singing style one could hear the lasting reach of Diasporic African traditions across the Atlantic World. In Lomax's Cantometrics theorizations, perhaps we glimpse one intellectual link between scholarship such as Melville Herskovits' *The Myth of the Negro Past*, which rejected the notion that Africans in the New World had lost their cultural traditions, and the work of later scholars such as Paul Gilroy, who contended that Africans were at the cutting edge of modernity in the "Black Atlantic." Lomax tried to design a system of analysis that caught both aspects—the persistence of the potent traditions of singing and music in Africa and the ways in which those of African descent adjusted to the crises of colonialism, slavery, and white supremacy—and tried to make the most, Gilroy argued, of the opportunities for modern liberation that arose, paradoxically, from the pain of displacement.

Writing about the broad sweep of both African and European singing styles, Lomax ultimately argued that Cantometrics brought to the surface the stability of African traditions across historical time as they "diffused" across geographic space to the Americas. So too, one could hear how certain European styles had endured. Both African and European both tracked back to the colonial era in Lomax's theory, that moment of migration and enslavement in which Europe and Africa fully collided in the New World. To Lomax's ear, and so too in his statistical analyses, archetypal singing styles registered continuities of the African and European. As he wrote, "The two models proposed, the Afro- and the Euro-American, are not new developments."

**VIDEO**

View online: https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2004004.ms390201/?st=gallery

Alan Lomax draft of Homogeneity of African-New World Musical Style, 1970.

**Source:** From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity

Rather, in Lomax's Cantometrics "computer similarity program," his use of computers to statistically analyze song styles, he noticed that "comparison of their profiles to those from all other world areas shows that the Afro-American is closest to the African and the Yankee is closest to the northwestern European profile." To him this suggested "that these are colonial singing styles, extensions into the New World of well-established patterns of performance." [24] The Atlantic World had transmitted the singing styles to the

Americas, bringing them in contact with each other. The singing styles persisted, even as they were altered in the brine of Atlantic Ocean migrations and dislocations. In song, Europeans and Africans connected back to where they came from in order to sing about new conditions and experiences.

To Lomax, singing styles conserved the continuities below the surface changes of transatlantic history. As he explained to other Americans later in his career when demonstrating his Cantometrics system of analysis, "Song styles can trace the movement of people—the great diaspora of slavery brought the music of black Africa to our shores—out of its mixture with European music came a new music that has swept the world—a blend so perfect that its roots have been hidden till recently—Cantometrics helped to uncover these roots." Then Lomax offered an example:

> *One little known black style is the free-rhythmed work call—the song of the oppressed farm worker loaded down by taxes—You hear this wailing solo cry all through the whole orient—here is an African example from Senegal—here is a Mississippi levee holler which catches it almost phrase for phrase—solo, free-rhythmed, ornamented---this ancient Afro-Asian style became the source of the blues...both in Africa and in Mississippi—here the bard made poignant and satirical verses, a free rhythm melodic style, using the stringed instrument to comment on his song in polyrhythmic but independent obstinate style—first a Mississippi singer, then an African bard—then a Mississippi singer—almost as if they were asking and answering questions the one at the beginning, the other at the end of the African Diaspora into the New World—a song-trace that Cantometrics makes easy.* [7]

**AUDIO RECORDING**

View online: https://tracs-prod.s3.rbx.io.cloud.ovh.net/assets/records/the-transatlantic-ballad-of-alan-lomax/resources/11_lomax-offers-additional-examples-of-the-african-diasporic-call-and-response-on-a-cantometrics-demonstration-tape-recorded-in-1980.mp3

Lomax offers additional examples of the African Diasporic call-and-response on a Cantometrics Demonstration Tape, recorded in 1980

**Source:** Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity

Obviously, this story was not easy for those who endured the Middle Passage, but Lomax's point was that if one tuned in to the style of performance, one could hear the story of the transatlantic circulation itself, the transmission among everyday people coming through traumas with expressive resources in place. African musical practices were contiguous with American practices, "almost as if they were asking and answering questions the one at the beginning, the other at the end of the African Diaspora into the New World." [7]

## "As a people live, so do they sing"

In Lomax's work, singing vocalized tectonic cultural forces. Or one might say, just as easily, that cultural forces ported themselves far and wide through the vocal cords of singers' throats. Contexts changed, but musical performance maintained old ways. As Lomax put it, "An Andalusian gypsy finds it difficult to sing well in his flamenco style unless he is in a bar with wine on the table, money promised, women to clap and dance the rhythms, and fans to shout encouragement." Music took place in particular settings. Yet it could also travel. "A melody hummed at work in an olive grove," Lomax explained, "conjures up this experience

to his imagination." [26] The location might be different, but a singer could bring home with him or her. Musical performance style retained emotional, social, and cultural values, preserving regional practices so that they could be carried anywhere someone could sing to reconnect with them.

For Lomax, it was ultimately the physical dimensions of singing—its iterative muscle memory—that was crucial to the cultural and communicative capacities of music as a cultural force. "The high redundancy level of song has many consequences," Lomax wrote later in his career, summing up his discoveries during his time in Europe. "Song is essentially louder and more arresting than speech. It shouts across social space and across human time as well, since its formal patterns are both emphatic and easy to remember." For Lomax, "In song, groups of people easily phonate together and in coordination—a very rare speech event which adds to the social weight of the statement. Song, like other forms of folklore, establishes and maintains group consensus about a multitude of human concerns across time." [27]

Tracing song performance styles allowed Lomax, then, to at once capture "pan-human possibilities," yet also pay attention to the particulars. [28] As he began to map out a global vision of song styles, he did not seek to render it utterly static. While singing style itself may be redundant, Lomax did not imagine it as beyond historical or social (or economic or political) forces. Rather, he wrote, new "communication models, once found, are not discarded—they merely assume subordinate functions." Change was incorporated into continuities. "The structure of performance style," Lomax believed from his studies, "does indeed seem to symbolize and reinforce main adaptive modes cross-culturally." It allowed one to hear "the dynamic relationship between the expressive and the adaptive modes" among humans. Singing, in short, connected people back to cultural heritage, but it also registered encounters with new styles of singing and ways of living. [29]

**VIDEO**

View online: https://archive.culturalequity.org/film-and-video/miscellaneous/demonstration-video-global-jukebox-1998

A demo video for the Global Jukebox, 1998

**Source:** Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity

For Lomax, his research became a "deeply moving experience to realize that every branch of the human family of which we have record has so nicely expressed itself and its situation." His sense of regional richness of musical expression, forged in his early years of folksong collecting in the South, elaborated through his transatlantic experiences in Europe, brought into social science through his work on Cantometrics, now gave rise to a planetary, universalist credo. As Lomax wrote, "no matter how naked a people, no matter how hopeless or aimless or tormented it seems to be, its song style fits. Everywhere man the pattern maker and pattern perceiver has been at work, molding all behavior into forms appropriate to his situation. Thus, the principle of suitability, the aesthetic factor, becomes the main stabilizer, if not the main dynamic factor, at work in human history." [30] This was "the gist of Cantometrics," which for Lomax was "a way of thinking about music that I hope will help to define and keep alive man's diverse musical cultures." [31] He believed, putting it succinctly, that, "As a people live, so do they sing." From his own transatlantic journey and how it produced his "Cantometrics" analysis and "Global Jukebox," one might say the same of Lomax himself: as he lived, so too he sang.




Global Jukebox website, 2023

**Source:** The Global Jukebox website. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity

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