Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997

Reviewed by Benjamin J. Harbert

Following the death of Alan Lomax in 2002, an onslaught of literature has scrutinized his life's work with the fervor of an IRS auditor (Gordon 2002; Work et al. 2005). Rather than engage in the politics of defense or critique, Ronald D. Cohen's collection of Lomax's shorter writings offers an eclectic portrait of one of America's most controversial—albeit most venerable—folk music scholars, fieldworkers, and advocates. The sixty-three year span of writings offers a grand context that stretches from Roosevelt's New Deal, McCarthy-era blacklisting, the Civil Rights movement, and emerging multimedia technologies. What is most striking is our opportunity to follow Lomax's passionate, articulate writing about music, unwavering in its insight and intensity from his teenage years through his developing and ever-changing career. For ethnomusicologists wary of an association with the ill-fated Cantometrics project (a multi-disciplinary, comparative research program that Lomax initiated in 1961 correlating folksong styles and social values), this collection offers a selection more fair to Lomax's prolific contribution to our understanding of music.

The book divides these shorter writings into five chronological and somewhat topical parts. Each part has a biographical introduction justly contributed by a diverse group of authors: ethnomusicologist Gage Averill, Alan Lomax Archive archivist Matthew Barton, historian Ronald D. Cohen, folklorist Ed Kahn, and ethnomusicologist Andrew L. Kaye. Unfortunately, the minimally edited Lomax selections do not explicitly state their origins. One must hunt through the introduction or appendix to find the detailed publication information. A 23-minute Alan Lomax Anthology CD sampler from Rounder Records accompanies the book, containing 11 tracks of Lomax's commentary, excerpts from his radio programs, and his field recordings. A track listing in the back of the book cites the pages that give further explanation and context the well-digitized recordings.

The first part of the book houses Lomax's writings from 1934-1950. For most writers, the early period would contain more biographical context as an unpublishable, nascent style and direction fermented. Lomax, however, begins his writing career as a prolific and sought-out writer. At age eighteen, he rivaled his 65-year-old father in documenting and disseminating American traditional music. Through this set of writings, we see Lomax quickly emerge as a collector, popularizer, performer, theoretician, and political activist. This collection of writings ranges from book excerpts to journal articles. Lomax is already handling an eclectic range of interests: his song collecting in southern prisons, his Haitian fieldwork, and his cooperation with the Roosevelts in the White House.

These early writings from Our Singing Country, Vogue magazine, and radio presentations show Lomax as the ever-dramatic character that he was. His writing style is poetic and romantic; however, his subject seems less folk music than the act of collecting. His work for Decca records and pioneering discography of traditional music exemplify Lomax's verve for preservation and exploration. In this early period, Lomax's juvenescence stands for a youthful vitality in the study of traditional music—a discipline formed less from discipline and more from passion. To characterize Lomax as a dilettante zealot would be to miss the point. Lomax's training under musicologists Curt Sachs and Charles Seeger, anthropologist Melville Herzkovits, and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston gave Lomax's zeal weight and trenchancy.

In part two (1949-1960), Lomax expands his horizons to the ambitious project of documenting the world's music. We learn that this shifting focus is in part a result of Lomax's evasion of McCarthyism. Relocating to England, Lomax begins traveling to Spain and Italy, making pioneering quality recordings of their traditional music. The advent of the LP fueled Lomax's documentary mission. While much of Lomax's writing in this period still romantically describes the fieldworker, his tone changes to that of an advocate. Lomax describes the advocate scientist as a necessary figure who could help preserve the expression oral tradition and, by extension, the health of civilization. It is also during this period that Lomax tightens his theories on traditional music. In his treatment of aesthetics, meaning, and social utility of folk music, we see the ingredients for his Cantometrics project—an analytical system that measures song style and its connections to social phenomena across geographic boundaries.

The third section covers Lomax's writings upon his return to the United States. He returned to the 1960s urban folk revival in full swing and assumed the role of an eccentric royalty of American folk music. Announcing the birth of bluegrass, acknowledging the urban "folknik," and nodding his head to the importance of rock and roll were against the grain of the traditionalists and the precedent of romantic nostalgia set by Lomax's father. This writing

introduces the contrary voice of Lomax in defense of a broader understanding of traditional music and community. Retaining his place in the pantheon of folk authorities, Lomax published The Folk Songs of North America, another tome in the series of Lomax anthologies of American folk song. His scholarly article “Folk Song Style” originally published in American Anthropologist (from the last section) echoes through “The Good and the Beautiful in Folksong.” Always balancing science with advocacy, Lomax’s writing reflects his unwavering support of the emerging Civil Rights movement.

If there were an academic equivalent to the “outsider artist,” Lomax’s highly criticized Cantometrics project would have earned him the title of “outsider academic.” The Columbia University-based team absorbed much of Lomax’s attention for decades. His writings from this era are often considered curios of ethnomusicology. Defeating Cantometrics’ anachronistic reputation, Gage Averill prefaces Lomax’s writing by describing Cantometrics as a visionary and ambitious study that sought to return the study of folk music to performance. Unfortunately, the determinism and ethnocentrism proved fatal to Lomax’s efforts. Nevertheless, reading Cantometrics and Choreometrics with Averill’s sympathetic characterization is rewarding and revealing, reminding us of ethnomusicology’s temperamental aversion to grand comparative studies. The last two selections in part four concern civil justice, “Appeal for Cultural Equity” and the role of film in ethnography, “Cinema, Science, and Cultural Renewal.” While these two topics seem mixed with Cantometrics as an accident of chronology, they help diffuse the unmerited claims that Lomax must have been an outmoded bigot.

The final part of this collection covers Lomax’s writings from 1978 to 1995. His diverse roles as researcher, popular advocate, fieldworker, theoretician, filmmaker, lecturer, television producer, performer, and multimedia designer produce an equally diverse range of subject matter. His ripened prose is still poetic and inspiring as it described his Global Jukebox multimedia project, Jelly Roll Morton, musical creolization of the American South, fieldwork in the West Indies, and the ballad singer Jennie Devlin.

In Lomax’s writing we metaphorically see ourselves and the emerging discipline of ethnomusicology—as young, maturing, exuberant, and attentively focused on the pulse of music and culture. His balance of science and advocacy finds expression in the fluid writing absent of any semantic tiptoeing around the term “applied ethnomusicology.” Insightful and inspiring, Lomax deserves the attention that Cohen offers both for ethnomusicologists and thoughtful citizens.

References

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