

**Ronald D. Cohen, ed. 2003. *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings 1934-1997*, with introductory essays by Gage Averill, Mathew Barton, Ronald D. Cohen, Ed Kahn, and Andrew Kaye. New York, London: Routledge.**

Ronald Cohen's collection is exemplary and everything a volume of selected essays by a single author should be. As such, taken as a collection, these writings draw upon Alan Lomax's multi-faceted and multi-dimensional career. Lomax here is many things—a collector, a traveler, ethnomusicologist, archivist, folklorist, humanist, writer, fabulist, performer, promoter, and academic (of sorts). But above all, Lomax was an enthusiast—an enthusiast of what today we might otherwise call the experience of world music. However, in that now-problematic term there lurks an issue that is somehow more than semantic. World music, for good or ill, is now virtually indistinguishable from spongy and exploitive new age aesthetics. *Starbuck's* has replaced Lomax as the foremost champion of the blues and other world music, and somehow Michael Flatley has emerged as representative, at least in a populist sense, of Celtic folklore. This is not necessarily bad. But it does mean that something within contemporary culture has shifted; and as a consequence, it has become increasingly difficult to discern the ethnographic from the otherwise jingoist refrains of popular culture.

Cohen's *Selected Writings* reveals this unsettling shift. In the future, a scholar may well ask the question how and why late twentieth-century America evolved from a political culture of progressive if naïve populism to a nation overwhelmed by corporatism, desperately confused by its own history, global dominion, democratic tradition, and hyper-patriotic nationalism. It is unlikely they will look to the career of Alan Lomax for answers, when it seems far more obvious to reflect upon the events of September 11, 2001—but perhaps they should.

The volume is divided into five sections, reflecting different aspects of Lomax's twin endeavors—populist writer and scholar. Section one brings together, for example, essays on collection before 1950, section II, travels in Europe, III his reflections on the Folk Revival of the 1960s and his contributions therein, and IV, quasi-academic works dealing with Lomax's theoretical models, cantometrics, and choreometrics. A section of final writings, including a preface to the 1993 edition of Lomax's influential study of Jelly Roll Morton and a reflective magazine piece "The Global Jukebox," rounds out the work and yokes the implicit themes of the collection together. As well, each section is prefaced by an introduction outlining Lomax's achievements in that given area.

Of these, all of which are informative and well-balanced summations, the strongest is perhaps the section by the ethnomusicologist Gage Averill, who writes principally on Lomax's theoretical works, specifically his methodologies known as cantometrics and choreometrics. As Averill observes, here rests the folklorist's greatest achievement and perhaps his greatest failure. At best, the Lomax models represent an earnest attempt to bring a workable methodology, the evolving field of comparative musicology, and a systematic method of comparing the social and cultural value of music and dance across cultures. However, Lomax's model for study, which involved a set of questions the answers to which could be reduced to an IBM punch card and thereby quantified, was arguably an immediate failure; and his quest for objective appreciation of cultural value was, as Averill points out, deflated at practically the moment of publication. Nonetheless, there is something touching about the work. It represents a vestigial modernism, an attempt to employ the monolithic to the local, to grapple with geography for the vantage point of the social progressive. It's nice that he tried, you might say, because it is precisely the kind of grand gesture which the academic world has self-avowedly left behind. And at any rate, we might correlatively ask if there is a theoretical model for anything in the humanities, whether it is Schenkarian reductivism in the realm of music theory or post-structuralism in the literary realm, which ultimately has not failed? In fact, given that the entire edifice of critical theory in the humanities appears on the brink collapse these days, it would seem Lomax's cantometrics was no greater or lesser a failure than, say, post-war liberalism.

Therein lies the ghost or a set of ghosts in this volume. As the reader drifts through the various stages of Lomax's long and distinguished career, with its highs and lows, ranging from the adrenalin-like excitement of first hearing the blues in the depression-era south to negotiating legal wrangles and complex grant endowments in post-war America, it is a little hard not to think of him as a Swiftian figure, traveling in the twentieth-century, sometimes a giant, sometimes a porcelain doll, but always a man at large, curious

about the world. However, the failure of this analogy is its conclusion. Unlike Gulliver, Lomax does not end his career among the *houyhnhnms*, a misanthrope; but instead, he worked productively until his eightieth year, in a sense still among the Laputians, always a believer in the ameliorative potential of folk culture for America and the world. Lomax seems to have understood what Gulliver did not—that this world is about change. In his work with the Smithsonian and the now-forgotten but highly influential president of Columbia Records, Goddard Lieberson, Lomax remains a kind of visionary. While he may at times have believed that he was capturing music and folklore just before the moment of its vanishing, what he may instead have been up to, as a traveler, observer, and scribe, was capturing moments of social change.

His anxiety concerning the role of technology in ethnographic work, specifically his promotion of tape-recording technology and the long-playing record, re-surfaces here and there in several articles. For the collector, as Lomax explains in so many words, the use of recording technology is simply a matter of pragmatic expedience. However, he also meditated upon the two-edged potentials of this technology. On the one hand, the technological improvements which Lomax both witnessed and utilized revolutionized (if that is not too strong a word) ethnographic study. On the other hand, modern recording technologies are not benign; and they have seemed just as likely to crush human tradition beneath unforeseen agendas as capture those traditions in archival incongruity. Lomax, a left-leaning progressive, simply wished with well-meaning optimism that the good would simply outweigh the bad. Like many intellectuals of his generation, one could argue that Lomax mistook his own optimism for vigilance and realized his error only when it was too late to give it voice with a clear conscience.

Lomax has not passed from this world without criticism, to be sure. Pop music writer Dave Marsh has challenged his memory in a series of newspaper and Internet pieces, accusing Lomax of plagiarism, copyright theft, and even bigotry. Of Lomax, Marsh writes acidly, “we celebrate the milkman more than the milk.” It may be so. But it is also fascinating, I think, that we now witness in Marsh the final turning of 1960s idealism against its radical heritage, exploited creepily in the interstices of cyberspace without so much as a second thought. What collapses here is not so much the career and accomplishments of an earnest but humanly flawed observer, but rather crippling modernist notions of authenticity and objectivity, the sophomoric produce of a generation which somehow fused Bob Dylan, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Ayn Rand, and post-colonial Puritanism into late-twentieth century Republicanism, Wal-Mart/SUV/me-generation materialism, and postmodern relativism. In Marsh, you could say, we are invited to celebrate the rantings of a celebrant of fetishistic popular culture. That *can't* be a good thing.

Somehow, I think, it all comes back to the blues. In summation, it may not matter what device, grant, or copyright Lomax exploited in the act of collecting. In the act of writing and remembrance, I think Lomax showed as much the flourish of the novelist's creative eye as the musician's ear. What matters and lives in his essays is the simple joyous fact that he lived for the thrilling experience of human expression—moments we now cynically label “cultural” and place in a hierarchy which somehow leads us up the ladder from Robert Johnson to Elvis to Eminem and 50 Cent. Like it or not, in Lomax the songs of the fields, prisons, and speakeasies of the United States, and the towns and hamlets of the world, from the 1930s through to the 1950s, are remembered not just as embodiments of traditions which would later produce a commodified present tense, but what they simply were—songs in a different and changing time.

**David Montgomery**