

Alan Lomax as Builder and User of Ethnographic Film Archives

by John Bishop
Department of World Arts and Cultures
University of California at Los Angeles

For **Visual Origins Conference**, IWF, Göttingen 2001

Abstract: It is more fun to shoot film than to edit film, and more fun to build an archive than to use one. In the early 1960s, Alan Lomax, who was already established as a major field collector of music, embarked on a cross-cultural study of musical style. His premise was that the redundant and public presentation of music embedded elements that identified and characterized the culture of the performers. When he extended his inquiry into stylistic elements of movement and dance, he stated “We regard the vast, endlessly provocative, prejudice-laden, existing sea of documentary footage as the richest and most unequivocal storehouse of information about humanity.” He found assembling a sample of film clips of world dance to be a daunting problem and spent years hounding film archives and individual producers for footage of dance to use in his Choreometrics study. In the process he made the most extensive use of existing film archives in an ethnographic research project, encouraged rigor in shooting and preservation of outtakes among ethnographic filmmakers, and demonstrated through his work the value of ethnographic film collections.

Do I Contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,
I am large, I contain multitudes.

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

After two weeks in New Caledonia last year, filming the Pacific Arts Festival, I wearied of spear brandishing young men posturing fiercely at me. As the burly line advanced on the camera, my colonial gaze found it more irritating than intimidating. One day, at a small venue outside Noumea, local cultural organizations of non-Pacific Islanders also performed. The ethnic Chinese dragon dancers, who were half the size of their Polynesian counterparts, moved so fast and nimbly, with such complex use of space, that their movement style contrasted profoundly with all the extremely varied Pacific Island dancing I had been watching. And I thought, the Chinese will always outfox the Polynesians because neither the islanders’ movement style nor their social complexity can stand up to the multi-dimensionality of the ethnic Chinese. It was a terrible thought for an anthropologist to entertain, and a flippant appeal to the logic of Choreometrics. But it reminded me that in addition to his pioneering work in visual anthropology, Alan Lomax’s great research project continues to inform and guide current and future work.

I feel awkward writing about Alan Lomax. We enjoyed moments of brilliant collaboration and periods of tension and distrust. At times he encouraged me and

pushed me to work boldly, and then undercut my confidence. He envied my youth and I hungered for his breadth of experience and gift for synthesis. Nothing was ever simple. Another person who worked with Alan said he resembled Casaubon, the mythology scholar in **Middlemarch** who caught people in the web of his enthusiasm and the greater-than-self importance of his work, and ultimately sucked the vitality out of them before they realized that the work would never be done. The fact that he is my wife's uncle, the brother of Bess Lomax Hawes whose worldview and mentorship profoundly influenced me, complicated my engagement with Alan. I know nobody else who so fits the description, "I am large, I contain multitudes." and if I contradict myself, it is because my subject is large and contradictory.

The most important thing that I learned from Alan was that the expressive arts of ordinary people have beauty and integrity equal to that of classical and courtly traditions, and in media terms require the same respect and technical attention. When his father, John A. Lomax began collecting cowboy songs in Texas, there was no way to record performances. He wrote the text, made musical notations, and performed the songs in his lectures. When recording became possible, he and Alan started the Library of Congress Folk Music Archive. This led to two intertwined threads in Alan's work—bringing the best recording technology to people where they live and work, and simultaneously preserving the recordings in an archive while making them available to the public on radio and phonographs records.

As recording technologies became more portable and high fidelity, two philosophies of recording evolved—*You are there*, and *They are here*. Most commercial music strives for the feeling that the musicians are in the listening space. Field recordings take the listener to where the musicians are. Many of Alan's recordings evoke the physical and social space in which they were made, and feel like documentary films. This elusive quality suggests that what is real about documentary recordings are the subliminal elements, the grace notes that come from the moment. Perhaps making a good recording means responding to things of which you are not consciously aware. These nuances also contribute to good film sound tracks, and have counterparts in documentary cinematography.

Alan collected extensively in the Southern United States, both black and white traditions, and in the Caribbean before moving to England in the 1950s. For the next ten years he produced radio shows for BBC and collected extensively in Italy, Spain, and the British Isles, and curated a series of albums of world music that set his collections in a global context. Returning to NY in 1960, a feeling nagged him that music wasn't just a matter of personal aesthetics, but rather that the way a society makes music reflects its deep structures.

He worked with Victor Grauer and Roswell Rudd (musicologists), Conrad Arensberg, Edwin Erickson, Barbara Ayres and Monika Vizedom (anthropologists), and Norman Berkowitz (computer programmer and statistician) to develop **Cantometrics** – "a method for systematically and holistically describing the general features of accompanied or unaccompanied song. With the cantometric system the listener can evaluate a song performance in ways that supplement the conventional measures of melody, rhythm, and harmony."¹

The first step was to develop descriptive tools for world music, and find the filters and degrees of scrutiny that would allow it be sorted and categorized. He described

things like the organization of the singing group, degree of blend, degree of rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic complexity, type of accompaniment, and qualities of ornamentation. They sought qualities that lay people, not musical experts, could perceive and code. Some measures were abandoned because they were not consistent from observer to observer. The scaling was consensus tested with university classes to ascertain that the scales were reflective of something real and not just an artifact of collaboration.

Never shy of technology, Alan realized that the amount of data required of cross-cultural comparison was too big for hand calculation. He used the emerging statistics of multi-variant factor analysis, a tool made possible by computers—big room sized ones that crunched through long boxes of punch cards. The only comparable database of social and subsistence descriptions was the Murdock Ethnographic Atlas and the Human Relations Area Files; with them, Alan's computer runs looked for correlations and clusterings of song style with subsistence and social style.

I met Alan in 1966 as Cantometrics was bearing fruit. He sent me to Greenwich Village to listen to Fats Domino while he put finishing touches on *The Good and the Beautiful in Folksong*, a paper he was presenting the next day, which would later be published in **Journal of American Folklore**. This paper represented a milestone in the Cantometrics research; Alan had the data to confidently state what he had long suspected, that what people consider good and beautiful in their expressive arts relates directly to what makes their economy and society thrive. I was only twenty and appallingly unsophisticated, but several things immediately impressed me. Alan always was, and will be a populist. Ordinary people, the people who made the music, for example, could grasp Cantometrics. Many times I saw him talking with musicians from around the world who performed at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife each summer, discussing what was unique about their musical heritage, and how it fit into the music of the rest of the world. The descriptions did not imply hierarchy or value; they resonated with and added to the musicians' appreciation of their own work. For the audience confronted with the sweep of world music, the observational rigor of Cantometrics enhanced the pleasurable quality of listening and afforded an entry into appreciating the most unfamiliar music.

The 1960s saw a profound change in imaging technologies and sensibilities—sync sound without a cable between recorder and camera, zoom lenses, clear reflex viewfinders, faster film, silent cameras, directional condenser microphones, *cinema verite* and direct cinema. For the social scientist, the procedures of filmmaking were less obtrusive and the promise of an objective recording suitable for later analysis seemed within reach.

When I graduated from college in 1968, I went to New York without much plan in mind and called Alan Lomax. He was summering in Sag Harbor near the end of Long Island, and I went out for lunch. We swam in a cold pond colored dark brown from the tannin in years of fallen leaves at the bottom. And as we floated he told me about kinesics and how through detailed film analysis of a few seconds of footage, William Condon could show a flow of micro-synched communication between people, a subconscious matrix on which a small amount of cognitive information moved. And he told me about Ray Birdwhistell and how people communicate without words, how much determination of status and power happens before the first word is spoken. I emerged from the pond tannin etched and shy. These dimensions of human behavior were

hidden and not to be considered in social interaction, but once alerted, the signs were everywhere.

A few days later we met again in Manhattan and he showed examples of what he had been talking about, and introduced me to Choreometrics, his extension of Cantometrics into cross cultural analysis of dance. Unlike other kinesic analysis, Choreometrics looked at deliberate public behavior, performances of what people wanted to display of themselves. And the screen through which he examined this behavior was not the hidden micro dimension, not even the cognitive dimension of meaning and intent, but the generalized dimension of movement shape and interaction freely displayed in space. I was attracted to film analysis because my wife (to be) was studying primate behavior, and film provided a way to describe and evaluate social behavior in animals with whom we could not have a discussion. (I have since come to feel that the same is true for people. You can tell a great deal about what is happening by watching film, sometimes more than by asking people what they did or are doing.)

Compared to working with audio recordings, working with film samples proved daunting. The available sample was neither as large nor as varied as the music sample, and duplicating a film clip was expensive. And while ethnomusicologists shared their audio recordings, and records could be purchased, filmmakers guarded their footage because it represented a substantial investment, and they were leery of how it would be used out of their control. For several years, Alan and Forrestine Paulay traveled around the world visiting archives (including Göttingen), collectors, and filmmakers to get copies of sequences for analysis. (Some of the footage was also cleared for use in the four films made about Choreometrics, **Dance and Human History**, **Palm Play**, **Step Style**, and **The Longest Trail**.)

Working with other people's footage, particularly in ways they never intended, challenges the best editors, and Alan is a person of strong opinions. He quickly tuned into the biases of camera persons and editors and how their cultural values were reflected in what they allowed themselves to see (or in the case of editors, to show). He was frequently frustrated that dance footage was cut up, looked only at the feet, had inappropriate non-sync music, and he had a missionary zeal about telling filmmakers what to avoid. But more importantly, he valued the data contained in footage. As he wrote with Irmgard Bartenieff, and Forrestine Paulay in *Dance Style and Culture* –

“We regard the vast, endlessly provocative, prejudice-laden, existing sea of documentary footage as the richest and most unequivocal storehouse of information about humanity. We do not agonize over its limitations or those of the persons who shot or edited it. We come to it with an observational approach like that used by the ordinary person in everyday life, which enables him to differentiate constantly between different classes of visual experience and to behave appropriately in relation to these varieties of experience.”²

The footage quest for his own research ran parallel to another concern-- the world was changing fast and its variety of cultures needed salvage records made or they would be lost forever. He promoted the funding of existing archives, the creation of new ones, and conscientious filming of the most fragile cultures. He participated in the Belmont Conference on Anthropological Film in autumn of 1970. The National Science Foundation, the Smithsonian Institution and the Program in Ethnographic Film (from the American Anthropology Association) sponsored this pivotal moment in American Visual

Anthropology. Among the 26 participants were John Adair, Conrad Arensberg, Timothy Asch, Asen Balikci, Edmund Carpenter, Carleton Gajdusek, Robert Gardner, Walter Goldschmidt, Richard Hawkins, Karl Heider, John Hitchcock, John Marshall, Margaret Mead, Ralph Rinzler, Jay Ruby, and Sol Worth. The participants constituted themselves as the Board of Directors and founding members of the Anthropological Film Research Institute (AFRI). This led directly to the founding of the National Anthropology Film Center at the Smithsonian Institution in 1975, which became the Human Studies Film Archives in 1981.

One of AFRI's concerns was assuring the research quality of ethnographic film coverage. Alan said that filmmakers should be required to take Choreometric training before going to the field, but no such course existed. When we prepared to film **The Land Where the Blues Began** in 1978, Alan and I spent several days watching films and talking about coverage, but not about Choreometrics. Although it came up occasionally in the field that he wished I had mastery of Choreometrics, more often he called on me to work my own magic. This tension between phenomenological specificity and artistic visualization underlies all documentary shooting. Much the way atomic particles have both speed and velocity and you cannot measure one without destroying the other, there is a quantum dimension in ethnographic shooting that oscillates between precise observation and visual poetry. I feel that this contributes to the wealth of subliminal information in footage. Although the camera operator is targeting something when he casts his net, he also captures everything else that flows by. So that while the window is narrow, it resonates with the surrounding time and space.

I expected Alan to be a techno wizard in the field, knowing exactly where to put the mike and how to coax the best out of his recorder. He listened and tried a few mike positions, but his energy paid attention to the performer. That is Alan's secret to doing fieldwork. He engages people and makes them feel that the song they are singing is the most important thing in the world, that it can change the world. All of him responds to them and they give back. For those who know him in other contexts, his self-effacement in the field is difficult to imagine, but that is the magic dimension in his recordings.

Doing this on film is problematic; a camera makes too many of its own demands, but the human connection is as important as focus, exposure and framing. The act of shooting leaves no room for theory. Spending time looking before you shoot, whether a few minutes or weeks can help you readjust your body flow into that of the subject. The vocabulary of Choreometrics helps you look for big patterns, attend to who is in the foreground and who is a supporting player, what parts of the body are being used, the relative cohesive of the group, and the use of space. Just as Alan responds as a person when recording, the camera must find its way into the social space and flow with the dynamics of the occasion. What ends up on the screen is what happens between the cinematographer and the subject, just as in Alan's field recordings, the product is actually the exchange between Alan and the subject.

If there is a single thing that Choreometrics and Choreometrics has given me as an ethnographic filmmaker it is the appreciation of why people move and interact differently from culture to culture, how to perceive and describe the difference, and how not to be alienated by body language that is radically different from my own. It was influential to me and I think to other filmmakers in that it emphasized the values, pacing, and structures of life in the observed. Alan made us aware that we had to adjust our camerawork away from the egocentric and culturally specific way we look, to perceive

and respond to the movement and interactive style of the subject. The other things I have learned from Alan are that the human dimension in field recording and cinematography is enormously more important than the technical. And that the work we do matters; our films, photographs and recordings validate people, give them a voice, and contribute to the positive perception of plurality in the world.

Alan will always be remembered for his field recordings, and we should all leave such a legacy. His Choreometrics work has not been eclipsed as much as ignored by visual anthropology. Collecting the film sample, analyzing the footage, running the computer programs and evaluating the correlations represents a monumental effort in an anthropological tradition that valued comparative analysis and accepted generalization. Unfortunately this work came to fruition as the field was undergoing a sea change and became suspicious of cross-cultural comparisons and concerned about simplification of expressive culture. When anthropology divided into quantitative and interpretative factions, the quantitativist practitioners who might be expected to admire his precise observations and rigorous analysis were horrified at his expansive interpretations and extrapolated results. The interpretativists distrusted any system that reduced the magic of art to patterns that revealed themselves through computer analysis. Ironically, the filmed and videotaped sample of ethnographic dance has grown exponentially in the last thirty years making it possible now to test the underlying assumptions of the Choreometrics system and answer the many questions about art and culture that it raises.

Choreometrics is ripe for re-examination. Today's much broader sample of world dance not only will augment the database, but lead to refinements in the underlying model. Those who object to Alan's interpretations, which are based on mid-century concepts of culture, may reinterpret existing and new correlations with contemporary paradigms. The original dance sample represented a narrow slice of time, thereby implying that movement style was unchanging. The current availability of comparative footage over 30 additional years can answer questions about the stability of performance style, at least over the span of the 20th century. In time his work will either be revived or independently redone.

¹Lomax, Alan, & Grauer, Victor, *The Cantometrics Coding Book, Folksong Style And Culture* ed. Alan Lomax, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington DC 1968.

² Lomax, Alan, Bartenieff, Irgard, & Paulay, Forrestine *The Choreometric Coding Book, Folksong Style And Culture* ed. Alan Lomax, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington DC 1968.