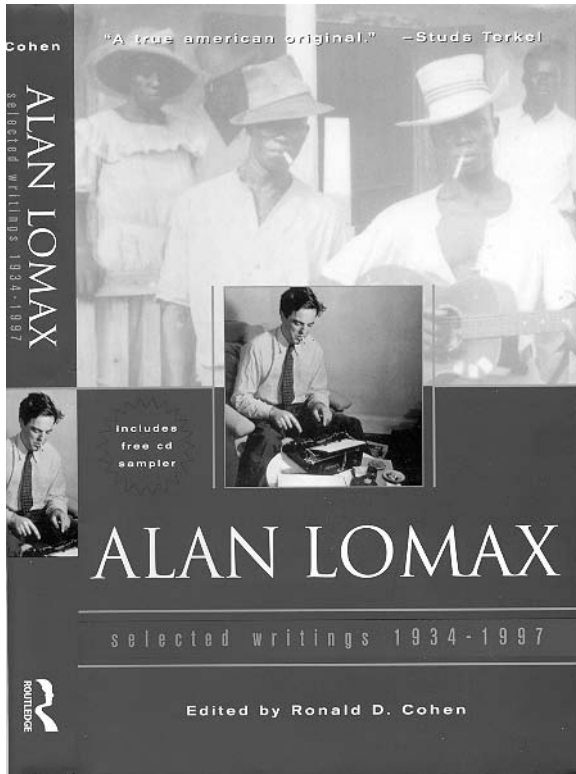


Reviews/Comptes-rendus

Books

Ronald D. Cohen, ed. *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997*

New York: Routledge, 2003. <www.routledge-ny.com>



Although often dogmatic and almost always controversial, Alan Lomax was a giant figure in the American folklore community, and he will be remembered as perhaps the most energetic and wide-ranging folksong collector of all time. This anthology of his occasional writings therefore hardly needs any justification. It will be of value to almost anyone interested in American folklore or in the folk music of the Deep South, the Appalachians, the Caribbean, the British Isles, Spain or Italy (the principal countries or regions in which Lomax pioneered collecting with a tape recorder). Editor Ron Cohen, a history professor at Indiana University, therefore deserves our thanks for conceiving and carrying out this project. The book conveniently reprints thirty-four of Lomax's articles, reviews and reminiscences from the entire spectrum of his career, beginning with "'Sinful' Songs of the Southern Negro" (originally published in *Southwest Review* in 1934) to a preface written for Katharine Newman's book on New England ballad singer Jennie Devlin. It is divided into five

main sections, each consisting of a group of Lomax's writings from that era, prefaced by a short introductory essay about that phase of Lomax's life. Cohen himself handles section three on "The Folk Revival (1960s)", but Ed Kahn is responsible for the first part titled "1934-1950: The Early Collecting Years", Andrew Kaye and Matthew Barton introduce "The 1950s: World Music", Gage Averill covers "Cantometrics and Cultural Equity: The Academic Years", and Matthew Barton guides us through Lomax's "Final Writings".

In short compass it is possible to refer to only a few of the highlights of the volume. Apart from "'Sinful Songs' of the Southern Negro" (still useful as a lively survey of the different kinds of secular black folk music in the southern states), the pieces reprinted in part one are mainly quite short: popular journalism or introductions to such early Lomax publications as *Our Singing Country*. The focus here is exclusively American, and one gets a good feel for the atmosphere of the New Deal and for the difficult circumstances under which Alan did his first collecting. One can even compare the evidence of these writings from the 1930s and 1940s with Lomax's own reminiscences of the Roosevelt era in an interview that he gave to Ralph Rinzler in December 1981.

We find some equally captivating examples of Alan's journalism in the second section on the 1950s, for example "Tribal Voices in Many Tongues" from the *Saturday Review of Literature* (a set of record reviews of African, Caribbean, South American and American indigenous music) and his *Melody Maker* pieces in praise of skiffle. But there is heavier stuff here too, in particular some of his earliest academic writing, including "Making Folklore Available" (his contribution to the 1950 International Folklore Conference) and two preliminary statements of his views on the relationship of singing style to social structures and mores. "Folk Song Style: Notes on a Systematic Approach to the Study of Folk Song" was a seminal article published in *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* in 1956, while "Folk Song Style: Musical Style and Social Context" summarized the preliminary conclusions he had come to after eight years of collecting in Europe and editing the *Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music* series of LP records. Both are quintessential Lomax. Several more scholarly articles in part four on "The Academic Years" allow the reader to explore further his ethnomusicological theories and provide an introduction to cantometrics and choreometrics

(Lomax's 'scientific' methods for studying vernacular song and popular dance respectively).

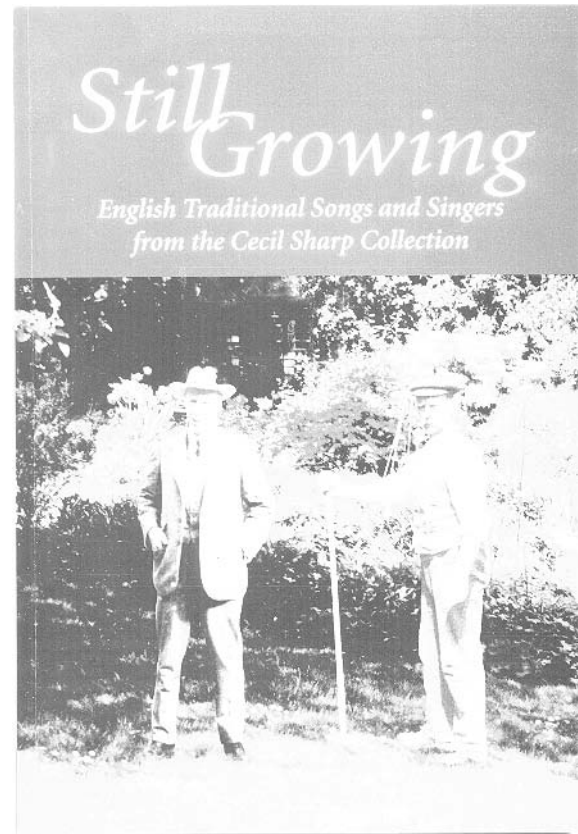
You might find some of these academic articles rather heavy going, but there are many entertaining shorter pieces to compensate. They include several culled by Cohen from *Sing Out!* and *Esquire* to illustrate Lomax's enthusiasms and dislikes in the 1960s (he was hostile to commercial 'pop folk' but enthusiastic about bluegrass and protest songs). His introductions to reprints of his books on Leadbelly and Jelly Roll Morton are here too, and are well worth re-reading. The last section on material from the 1990s is rather thin, although it does include a couple of reminiscences about recording trips in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and Alan's visionary grant proposal for the Global Jukebox project. All in all, there is much fascinating reading here. If by chance you don't know Lomax's work very well, this is a good place to start coming to terms with his personality, ideas, insights, and remarkable accomplishments.

Still Growing: English Traditional Songs and Singers from the Cecil Sharp Collection

London: EFDSS & Folk South West, 2003.

This is a songbook with a difference. It reprints the melody lines and words of fifty folksongs collected by Cecil Sharp in the South West of England during the 1900s. The versions are taken directly from the Sharp manuscripts, but you will not find very significant variations from the versions previously published in Maud Karpeles' omnibus edition of Sharp's English collecting. What *is* new is the approach taken to putting the book together. In one irritating way it is wilfully post-modernist: one looks in vain for a table of contents listing the songs in the order in which they appear in the publication (thankfully there is at least an alphabetical index at the back). Instead, the table of contents lists the singers in alphabetical order, and that reflects the organizational principle of the book. I don't object to featuring the singers rather than the songs, but it would, I submit, have been better to follow Sharp's bicycle journeys chronologically and geographically. That way the interesting material that has been gathered by Bob and Jacqueline Patten on the source singers could have been placed in a more meaningful social and historical context. Nonetheless, it remains one of the most valuable features of the book, richly complemented by numerous photographs taken by Sharp of his informants. David Atkinson's select bibliography on Sharp and folksong is very useful too, and Vic Gammon has contributed a lengthy and balanced introduction to Sharp and his work.

At the end he mentions two of Chris Bearman's brilliant articles – Bearman's work is at the cutting edge of Sharp scholarship and his PhD thesis, *The English Folk Music Movement 1898-1914* (Hull, 2001), is essential reading – but this publication hardly does justice to the impact of Bearman's demolition of the conventional wisdom about Sharp and the Edwardian folksong revival.



Still Growing is thus much more than a songbook, and I recommend it even if you have no intention of singing the songs yourself. Mind you, there are some wonderful melodies included here, from "Banks of Claudy" to "Van Dieman's Land" and including, of course, "The Seeds of Love" and "Still Growing". Missing are most of the forty-seven Child ballads collected in one form or another by Sharp, and one looks in vain for certain favourite folk-lyrics – what happened to "Dabbling in the Dew", "Hares on the Mountain", "High Germany", "The Keys of Canterbury", "Searching for Lambs" or "The Sweet Nightingale"? At one hundred and twenty pages, the book is quite slim and I would have thought that room could have been found for a few more songs. Still I'm grateful for what has been included, especially the photos and the singer biographies.

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