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[ALAN LOMAX](#)

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PREFACE

My father was a creature of early morning ideas, which seemed to bloom directly from his nighttime dreams. One long-ago dawn during my self-conscious preteen years, as we gazed at the approaching horizon of Greece from the bow of our ship, he broke into my thoughts with a bizarre performance. Exaggeratedly mouthing the words and squeezing his features around every vowel he declaimed the first verses of "Barbara Allen". "Don't you see," he urged breathlessly. "This how sung poetry conveys the emotions that are too strong for normal communication " I've just thought of this!" Oblivious of the other passengers around us, he proceeded to a further, all-too-vivid demonstration of how vowels sounds are accentuated, prolonged, and intoned in song, producing the effect of highly dramatized speech. What I had witnessed was the seed of Phonotactics, a study of phonology that dovetailed with Cantometrics, Choreometrics, and a series of other analyses dealing with the major channels of human communication in a trans-cultural framework.

This complex, ramified, and as it now appears, remarkably cohesive body of work extending through multiple modes of human behavior, beginning with phonology and folk song style and extending through dance, has never been presented as a whole. Indeed, several of its constituent studies were not published and are therefore unknown. Over the years I was enlisted as a worker bee in The Project "as its circle of creators and contributors called this decades-long opus "but my most constant role was as interlocutor. As my own training in anthropology and folklore practice progressed the schema of Alan's theories about performance style fell into place and made more and more sense, yet I remained unclear about how they had evolved and how they tied into one another, and I surmised that I was not alone in this.

When the task of looking after of Alan's archive fell to me, I resolved that I would resurrect the work he held to be his most important contribution. The intriguing discoveries and connections made by Nancy Johnson as she processed the mass of research papers, and by Ellen Harold as she summarized and indexed the recorded conferences between Alan and his colleagues, as well as the chronology that emerged from both, made it possible to consider writing an in-depth monograph. For the *Finding Aid* that would accompany the research collection to the Library of Congress there was need of a unified description of the performance style project's foundations, goals, methods and outcomes. Although I am no Hercules I could not resist the challenge of wrestling with this many-headed beast.

Performance style research was both blessed and cursed in coming into being on a wave of exciting new discoveries in human communications, and in being then overtaken by a climate in which research in ethnomusicology, folklore, and anthropology was drifting away from comparativist, evolutionary methods. Although valid criticisms were raised upon its publication, the project remains a remarkable achievement. It stands as a unique attempt to apply robust and productive organizing principles to an overwhelming variety of human expressive forms and processes — principles derived from the examination of hundreds of examples.

Looking at the work now, going back as it does to more than fifty years ago to a time when statistical methods in the social sciences were in their infancy and when recordings and films of folk performances were hard to come by, it would be natural to assume that its time had passed. However, nothing remotely like this has since been attempted. Lomax had been mulling over these ideas since his early days in the field, and it is difficult to grasp the years of preparation and unremitting effort that went into their realization. When one looks at the behind the scenes evidence one finds that the project was the fruit of years of searching out and reviewing recorded and filmed data; of weighing and selecting variables; of trial and error in statistical analyses; and of intensive colloquies with scientists and scholars. The project's methodologies drew upon the foremost expertise of the period in musicology, dance analysis, ethnology and cross-cultural anthropology, various branches of linguistics and para-communications, statistics, physiology, psychiatry and psychology, and computer programming. Exhaustive research went into the selection and scaling of the several hundred variables used; into the construction of a geographic and ethnographic framework based on the studies of George Murdock and other cross-cultural anthropologists; into statistical design; and into sampling and testing methods. One of the best minds of twentieth century anthropology, Conrad Arensberg, co-directed the project for over 25 years, piloting its conceptual framework, methodology, and its basis in ethnology.

The researcher and historian of science wishing to delve into this subject anew ought to begin

with a clear conception of the level of analysis to which the performance style studies were pitched. Likewise, to avoid needless backtracking, he or she should be aware of the criteria originally used in making the myriad judgments of selection and method and the compromises and difficult decisions that were part of the original process. Recent evidence coming from genetic anthropology, archeology, and evolutionary musicology and renewed interest in the performance style studies make the ensuing clarification all the more necessary — especially since uses of the data thus far have been based on an incomplete understanding of the original work.

Here the reader will find a brief summary of performance style research, followed by a project history detailing the development of Lomax's concept of style and how Lomax and Arensberg applied it. The section on Cantometrics provides a more intimate view of the genesis of that study, and details the process of creating and implementing the coding system. There follow more concise descriptions of the Choreometrics, Parlometrics, the Urban Strain, and the other performance style studies, as well as of the Global Jukebox, the Teaching Tools, and the Research Collection, and a publications list. This is meant to be a pulling together of all the threads — events, ideas, people, processes, and outcomes — but even a cursory look in the files reminds one that it is still a superficial account. What it is not is a full appraisal of this work in light of the evolution of musicology, anthropology, and comparable scientific research — that is an undertaking for someone more able and more qualified than myself. For those interested in the rich source materials, the compiled and annotated project papers and computer files may be consulted at the **American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress** (<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/lomax/>) and at ACE.

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