

Listening for the holler

Folk-singing and American history

LOU GLANDFIELD

John A. Lomax

ADVENTURES OF A BALLAD
HUNTER

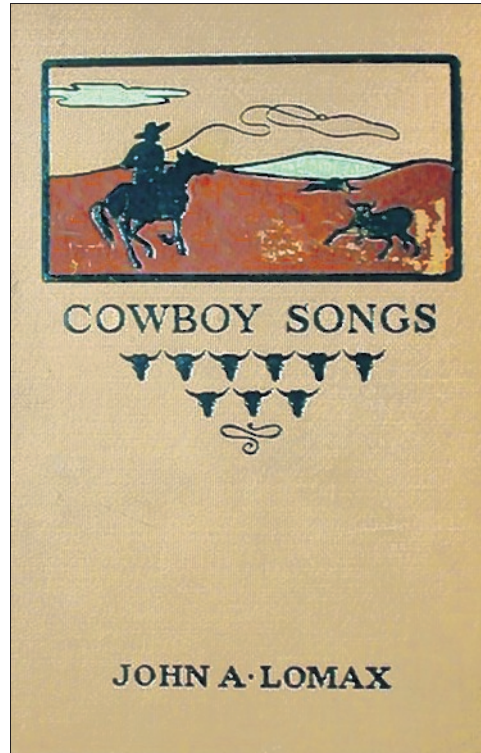
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John Lomax's autobiographical *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* first appeared in 1947, almost forty years after the publication of his pioneering *Cowboy Ballads*. The latter carried an endorsement from Theodore Roosevelt, who feared that native ballads were being "speedily killed by competition with the music hall songs". *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* is based on the expeditions Lomax made with his son Alan in the 1940s, in search of authentic American folk songs. They roamed the Deep South in a Ford Model T adapted to house a 350lb recording machine and two 75lb batteries. In Vicksburg, Mississippi, they were disappointed not to hear the riverboat roustabouts singing. "Not one river 'holler' did I hear", Lomax complained. "They never sing any more", the Captain told me. "They don't have life enough." The Lomaxes turned their attention to the penitentiaries, "in which the Negro workman is likely to speak his free mind". The book was an immediate success; movie rights were quickly optioned and plans made to cast Bing Crosby as John Lomax and Josh White as Lead Belly. The film was never made.

The language of this reissue of *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* reflects contemporary attitudes to race. Black vernacular speech is rendered throughout in the clichéd phonetic manner favoured by the writers of Negro spirituals and comic strips. "I'se the outsin'-est nigger on dis here plantation", one convict boasts. While Lomax takes obvious pride in what he takes to be his ease of associa-

tion with dangerous and desperate men, it is sometimes clear to the reader that these men saw him not merely as a welcome diversion from prison routine but as a potential liberator. They were doubtless bolstered in their hopes by the rumours which followed Lead Belly's celebrated release from Hunstville prison, Texas, in 1934. The story goes that the governor was so moved by Lead Belly's singing that he was persuaded to cut short his sentence. More probably, Lead Belly was due for parole anyway, and asked Lomax to take him on as a driver. Their association was short-lived: they quarrelled over money and never spoke again.

The Lomaxes were not always welcomed by the prison authorities. At Columbia, South Carolina, the warden challenged them to explain: "What the hell do you want with dirty songs?" Their impending visit had, moreover, nearly caused a riot. Among the prisoners, rumour had cast Lomax as a zealous and influential prison reformer from Washington who was coming to address their grievances. Lomax sometimes comes across as a curiously unworldly character. At Parch-



man Farm prison he was surprised to hear a "soft-voiced, kind-faced man" say that he regularly flogged prisoners, "the whites oftener than the Negroes, because the whites are harder to control". Visiting the infamous Angola State Farm, he found the "Captain" in his dining room holding court with "a bunch of comely colored girls", but appeared not to find anything untoward in it. The men at Angola proved to be a disappointment,

not being permitted to sing while at work. Some were reluctant to sing for the recording machine. Lomax complains that one singer "wouldn't let me can his voice" although he was happy to repeat the song indefinitely. "Often the men would have none of the horn." Lomax could be bullishly contentious. In *Cowboy Ballads*, he suggests that he "collected" "Home on the Range" from the singing of a "Negro Saloon keeper", even though he was aware that it included several stanzas of "My Western Home" (1872), a sentimental poem by Dr Brewster M Higley of Smith County, Kansas. The song's subsequent popularity led to Lomax assuming some responsibility for its success. "Yes, I know I did wrong but I corrected some unmetrical lines." In *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* he asserts that "the Rock Island song is found only in the Arkansas penitentiary". In fact, although later adapted and popularized by Lead Belly, the song's roots lay in a so-called "booster song" for the eponymous railroad and subsequently turns up in other guises, from the ribald to the pious.

It is hard to overstate the influence that the Lomaxes had on the subsequent interest in and development of North American song; equally, it is difficult for the modern reader to conceive of the disdain in which folk music was held hitherto. In the end few would disagree with Shirley Collins that *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* is "an essential part of American history".

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