

ALAN LOMAX (1915-2002)

A REMEMBRANCE

JOHN BISHOP

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes).
Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*



Fig. 1. Alan watching rushes from *The Land Where the Blues Began* in Mira's Café, Greenville Ms. 1978. Photo: John Bishop.

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, I 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 stood in profound relief to all the extremely varied Polynesian and Melanesian dancing I had been watching. I was thinking in choreometric terms while shooting. Choreometrics was Alan Lomax's monumental work to characterize dance styles and relate them to subsistence and social organization. It is not much discussed these days, and I was surprised how much its resonance continues to inform and guide current my 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. Someone who worked with Alan once said he resembled Casaubon, the mythology scholar in George Elliot's *Middlemarch* who caught people in the web of his enthusiasm and the greater-than-selfimportance of his work, and ultimately sucked the vitality out of them before they realized that the work would never be done. The fact that Alan is my wife's uncle, the brother of Bess Lomax Hawes whose worldview and mentorship profoundly influenced me, complicated my engagement with him. I know nobody else who so fits the description, "I am large, I contain multitudes"; so if I contradict myself, it is because my subject is large and contradictory.

Alan's first college roommate, Walter Goldschmidt, was astonished when Alan suddenly left the University of Texas. "He got whisked away...his father wanted him to go collect songs. It surprised me because Alan was part of that whole radical movement, (which is) anti-family—there's the element of slaying the father..." (Bishop 2001b).

It was the summer of 1933, and John Avery Lomax (Alan's father) was returning to the field after a ten-year hiatus. The first place he and Alan went was the Smither's Plantation in the Brazos Bottoms of Texas where a black tenant farmer named Blue recorded the following verse —

They get all the farmer makes
His clothes is full of patches and
his hat is full of holes
*Steppin' down, pullin' cotton
from the bottom bolls*

"When the record was over," Lomax later recalled, "we played it back and there was immense joy in this group because they felt they had communicated their problem to the big world. ... They knew (the machine) came from somewhere else and they wanted those people at the other end of the line to know what life was like for them. That's why they were singing for us; they wanted to get into the big network...that experience totally changed my life. I saw what I had to do. My job



Fig. 2. Alan with his sister Bess Hawes at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife 1976. Photo: John Bishop.

was to get as much of these views, these feelings, this unheard majority onto the center of the stage" (1978).

Shortly thereafter, John and Alan started the Library of Congress Folk Music Archive in Washington D.C. Two threads intertwined 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, phonograph records, and later, film and television. When his father, John Lomax, first began collecting cowboy songs in Texas, there was no practical or easy way to record performances. He wrote the text, made musical notations, and performed the songs himself in his lectures.

As recording fidelity improved and the machines became more portable, 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. In contrast, 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 more 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 soundtracks, and have counterparts in documentary cinematography.

More important than recording technique was Alan's intuition; he was gifted with exceptional taste in music. He could quickly find the best performers, the most important songs, and the most remarkable perfor-

mances. He was never able to explain it, and was irritated to be questioned on the subject. I suspect that in addition to responding to the music, Alan picked up kinesic clues from the audience that validated his perceptions.

During 1978 in Mississippi, after it became known that we were filming, performers would find us and play for Alan. He told me the worst ones come forward, the community pushes the better ones forward, and the phenomenal ones sulk in the background until you notice



Fig. 3. Alan typing. Photo: Courtesy Association for Cultural Equity.

them. A few days later, on the last day of the trip, we had been filming all day and most of the night, when Alan noticed a man with a guitar scowling at us. Alan asked him to sing, and Belton Sutherland sat down and gave

us two songs. We had never heard of him before and never heard of him after, but his rough guitar and expectorated lyric—*kill the old grey mule, burn down a white man's barn*—is one of the most emotional moments in the film *The Land Where the Blues Began*.

Once Alan found something or someone he liked, he was relentless in capturing it to best advantage. He told me about recording the United Sacred Harp Musical Association Singing Convention in Fyffe, Alabama, in 1959. The small wooden church was acoustically live and echoic which would distort the massed vocals. He

my own difficulties and sentiment very frankly and naively, just as I would with my friends, the response is always wonderful. People can understand it in connection with their own life problems because they are similar if not exactly the same, especially in folk cultures. When you confide, you get confidence back” (Thompson 1953:85).

Alan told me another story about filming at the 1966 Newport Folk Festival. He had rented a bar and hired blues players from the festival to play and be filmed. (Stuart Cody, who later became a fixture in the Boston



Fig. 3. Newport 1963—Alan Lomax, Bess Lomax Hawes, Pete Seeger at the 1963 Newport Folk Festival. Photo: Jim Marshall.

asked everyone to bring old rugs and quilts which he and the congregation tacked up on the walls and piled in corners to dampen the echoes. People did it because they sensed he cared about presenting them well: “I found that by my own recent experience, that if I confide

documentary scene, did sound.) Howling Wolf just wanted to do his part and leave. Alan kept putting Wolf off, and he became increasingly angry and dismissive of the other players. By the time Alan put him on, he was in a rage and all that emotion flowed into the music. Wolf

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gave ten times the performance he would have if he had been handled with the kid gloves required for more fragile musicians. This footage was finally edited and released in 1996 as *Devil Got My Woman* (Vestapol 13049).

Many times when I worked with Alan, he referred to performers as Homeric, in the sense that they were the bards of their community, the carriers of particular values and traditions. At some point in Mississippi when I was filming, it dawned on me that Alan played Homer; he was not only a scholarly recorder, but a myth-maker. We were not engaged in a survey, but a quest for people of knowledge and virtuosity in whom the essence of a culture was distilled. Our job was not to make a record of their existence, but to ennoble them, and give them a stage from which to speak with all the power, beauty, pain, and triumph of the generations that informed them.

Roger Abrahams argues that Alan's father "authored the legend of the ballad-mongering adventurer and placed himself firmly at it's center.... Working within the direction set out by Mark Twain, George Washington Cable, and Joel Chandler Harris, he recorded and presented vernacular creativity: first of the cowboys, then of the former slaves who often filled the prisons of the south, and finally of the working stiffs throughout North America: sailors, sod busters, lumberjacks and miners" (Abrahams 2000).

Alan expanded on this archetype in creating his own public persona, an identity that enabled him to work outside both the mainstreams of academia and the commercial music industry. He was a man on a mission, a heroic quest more than a career path. Mass media and the globalization of culture were to him a sinister cloud that obliterated the accomplishments of humankind, and the only antidote

was the diverse voices of common people. He would storm the walls to make them heard. Like Don Quixote, he responded to the cultural universe as it should be, rather than as it was. While filming for the Mississippi PBS affiliate, he would introduce us as "the people's

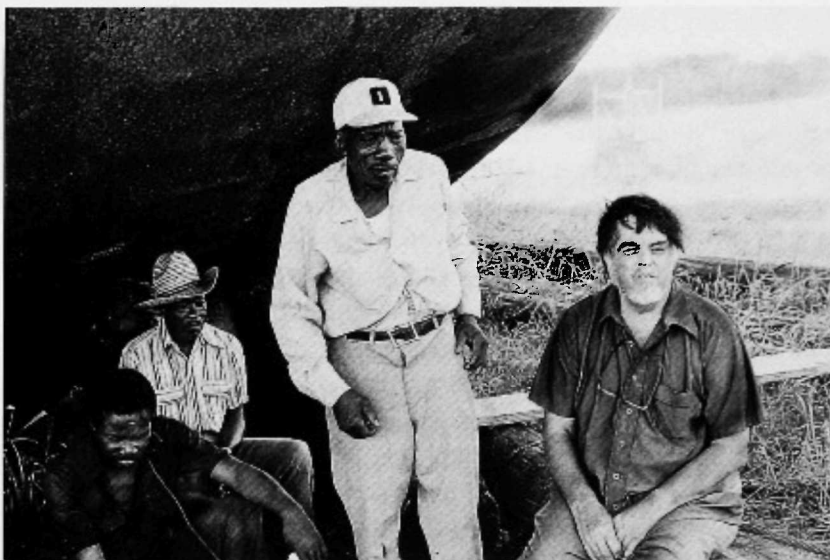


Fig. 4. Joe Savage, William S. Hart, Walter Brown and Alan Lomax filming on the levee for *The Land Where the Blues Began*. Photo by John Bishop

Fig. 5. Filming for *The Land Where the Blues Began*. Photo by Worth Long.



television station." Invariably this elicited snickers from the crew who knew the agency that employed them was

as elitist an organization as ever existed. But Alan always acted as if PBS were the democratic and pluralistic voice of the American people, as it should have been. He lived as a knight errant—he never amassed a fortune, always folding his proceeds back into more research and fieldwork.

Arguably his most successful presentation of traditional music is in his audio recordings—their quality, range, and presentation. Edmund Carpenter spoke of an anthropology in the first half of the last century in which people struggled to find the best forms to translate and preserve cultural experience without distortion (Bishop and Prins 2002). Alan tried everything. He wrote prolifically, was an accomplished still photographer, presented concerts, wrote a musical (*Big Rock Candy Mountain*) based on folk music, and performed folk songs with a skiffle band, always striving to present the feeling and meaning of traditional music and narrative. His fascination with film goes way back. In 1941, he was recording a fiddle contest in Kingsport, Tennessee, where he ran into another college roommate, Jerry Weisner (who eventually became president of MIT). Jerry was recording sound for a 35mm film that Richard Leacock and Geza Karpathy were shooting. Alan joined them for some time and this is the first experience he had shooting film in the field (Bishop 2001b).¹

In 1950, the thirty five year old Alan left the U.S. to record for, compile and edit the thirty hour *Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music* LP series. But the combination of fieldwork opportunities in Europe and the hostile politics of McCarthyism at home kept him there until 1958. He spent the time collecting folk music in the British Isles, Spain and Italy, supporting himself largely by making radio shows for the BBC. Television was just beginning in England and in June 1953, he hosted an eight part series, *Song Hunter: Alan Lomax*: “Lomax certainly deserves credit for creating the first television series in the U.K. in which source singers and traditional folk songs were featured front and center” (Gregory 2002). (In 1990, after decades of perseverance, he succeeded in producing a six-part series of traditional American music, *American Patchwork*, for PBS.)

The film *Oss Oss Wee Oss* came out of a field trip he made to Cornwall in 1953, with Jean Ritchie, her husband George Pickow, and Peter Kennedy (with whom Alan had been collaborating on his recordings in the British Isles). Ritchie and Pickow had a movie

camera and high-quality portable tape recorder, and Kennedy suggested using this gear to film the Padstow Mayday ceremonies. Alan wrote a script on site and directed (Gregory 2002).²

By the time Alan returned to the United States, he was already advanced in his ideas for a global cross-cultural study of song. He had written a paper, “Folk Song Style,” that developed his idea that music was not just a matter of personal aesthetics, but rather reflected the deep structures of society. Goldschmidt had not seen Alan since his precipitous departure from the University of Texas in 1933 but they found each other in the bar at the American Anthropology Association meetings in 1958. A professor of anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles, Goldschmidt was the editor of *American Anthropologist* and he published the paper, which moved Alan’s area of inquiry into anthropology (Bishop 2001b). In a loft in Greenwich Village, Alan and friends began sorting through his vast collection of world music. Working with the ideas articulated in his *American Anthropologist* paper, they laid the groundwork for what became the Cantometrics Project, which he conceived as “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” (Lomax & Grauer 1968).

In developing cantometrics, Alan worked with musicologists Victor Grauer and Roswell Rudd, anthropologists Conrad Arensberg, Edwin Erickson, Barbara Ayres and Monika Vizedom, and computer programmer and statistician Norman Berkowitz. The first step was to develop descriptive tools for world music and find the filters and degrees of scrutiny that would allow it to 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 externally 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 George Murdock's Human Relations Area Files (begun as the Cross-Cultural Survey in 1937) and his *Ethnographic Atlas* (1967). The cantometrics computer program looked for correlations and clusterings of song style with subsistence and social organization.

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* (1967). This paper represented a milestone in the cantometrics research: Alan believed he 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.

Lomax always was, and will be remembered as a populist. Ordinary people—the people who made the music, for example—could grasp cantometrics. Frequently in later years 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.

When I graduated from college in 1968, I went to New York and called Alan. He was summering in Sag Harbor near the end of Long Island, and I went out to meet him for lunch. We swam in a cold pond colored dark brown from the tannin in years of fallen leaves at the bottom. 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 Alan showed examples of what he had been talking about. He introduced me to choreometrics, his extension of cantometrics into cross-cultural analysis of dance. Unlike other kinesic analysis, choreometrics looked at public behavior, deliberate 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 analyze social behavior in animals with whom we could not have a discussion.

I was already a documentary photographer; in Alan's office I got hooked on ethnographic film. The samples he collected, some exquisite and others of marginal quality, introduced me to a universe of cultures, and to ways of filming them that was overwhelming. His enthusiasm for filmmakers and what he perceived as their duty to acquire a world sample of human behavior inspired me. 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" (1968). (See Jablonko's paper in this issue.)

At the same time, he was highly critical of the shortcuts in commercial film and appealed with missionary zeal to emerging filmmakers in the biggest magazine devoted to independent film production. Lomax wrote:

"The exact recording and storage of sound on tape and vision on film makes available to the scientist, the layman, and the student a vast and, to most, a rather bewildering storehouse of information about the varied

ways of mankind. The interested person can hear music from every part of the world and from every level of culture on long-playing records. He can see the dances and watch the behavior of every branch of the human family through the visual media. Yet because there have been no systematic ways of analyzing and comparing all these experiences and then relating them to their social

culture and social structure was completely unclear, neither the layman nor the scientist could understand, even in the crudest way, how art and society might affect one another or vary together (1971).

Alan produced four films from the choreometric research (*Dance and Human History*, *Palm Play*, *Step*



Fig. 6. Alan in the field with stereo recorder 1959. Photo: Alan Galax.

and historical settings, this material has little use in either science, education, or the growth of international understanding.

Two reasons for this anomaly may be suggested. First of all, the usual methods for describing and critically evaluating music and rhythmic movement were devised for the European arts and have, therefore, proved inadequate for the analysis of the whole range of human expressive behavior. Second, since the nature of the relationships between patterns of expressive behavior and patterns of

Style, and *The Longest Trail*) and a set of audio training tapes for cantometrics. But he was most enthused about the concatenation of the media, data and correlations from both systems into an interactive computer package called the "Global Juke Box" (which currently exists only in prototype). Although it was personally identified with Alan, cantometrics and choreometrics are open systems to which new data can be added, erroneous data corrected, and new hypothesis tested.

The most important thing I learned from Alan Lomax 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. If there is a single thing that cantometrics 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.

NOTES

1. *Hear My Banjo Ring* was finished by Willard Van Dyke in 1946.
2. The film inspired a group of neo-pagans in Berkeley, California to recreate the ritual as their own Mayday observance, a practice that continues to the present and is the subject of a film in production by folklorist Sabina Magliocco.

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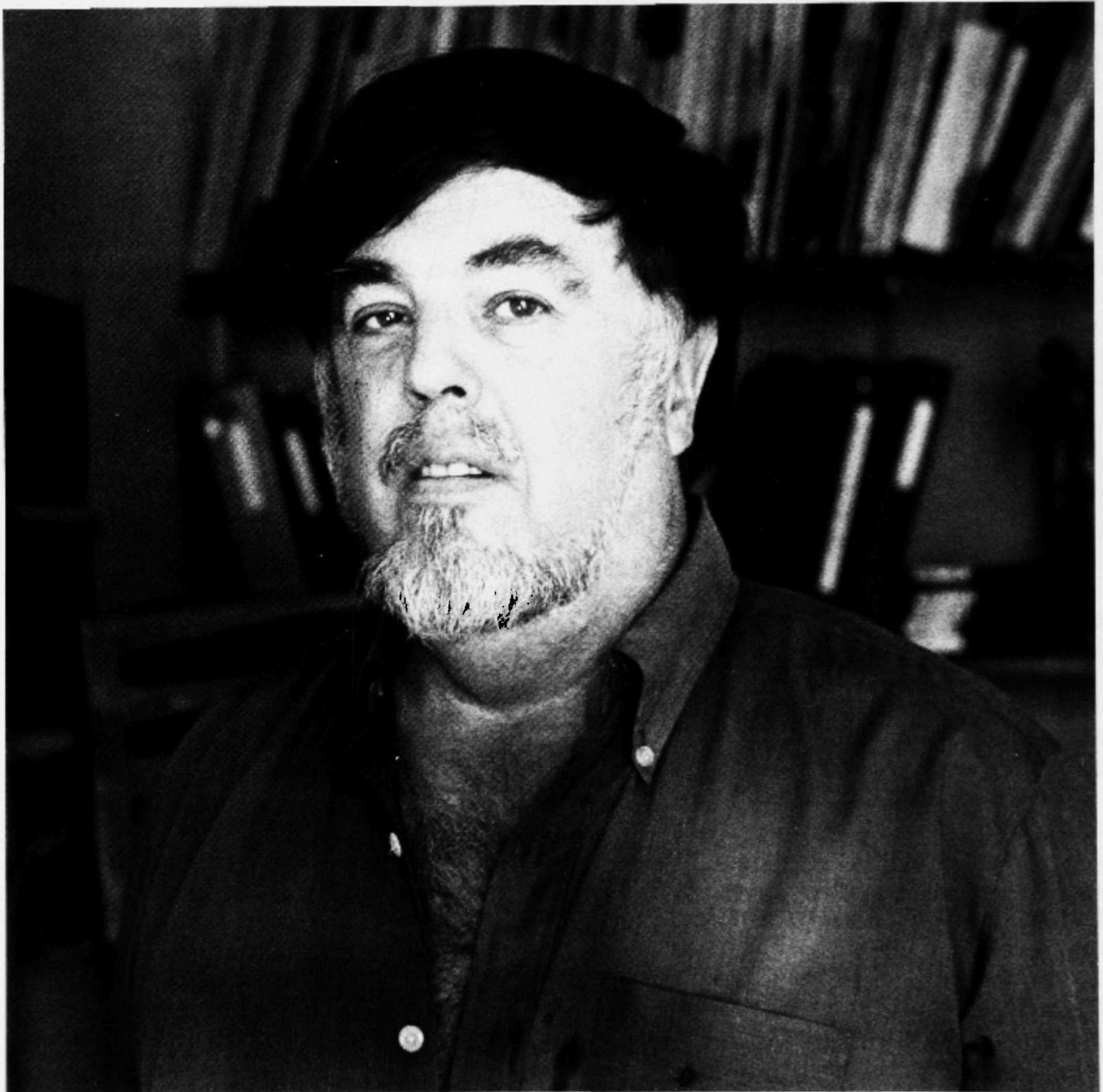


Fig. 7. Alan in his New York office, 1976. Photo: John Bishop..

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- Delta Blues/ Cajun Two Step: Music from Mississippi & Louisiana. Vestapol 13050.
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