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# The historical influence of white listeners' aural perspectives on African American hollers

*Lorenzo Vanelli*

Lorenzo Vanelli is a PhD student at the University of Bologna, Italy. His research focuses on the African American holler tradition in the Jim Crow era, in order to propose a definition of the techniques and complexities of the genre while accounting for the opacity of the available resources. In 2016 and 2017 he worked as a researcher in Morocco on Gnawa music, as part of the DRUM project, co-ordinated by Professor Domenico Staiti. In 2018 he worked as a visiting scholar at the University of Columbia, New York, on the historical and contemporary relationships between music and the US prison system.

## Abstract

The history of the documentation of African American hollers, a genre of songs used until the 1960s, comprises complex and unbalanced power relationships between performers and listeners. It is possible to outline some information about these relationships by studying the documentation produced by the listeners, comprising their personal account of the situation that led to the listening experience itself. These relationships shaped the first accounts of the genre, which in turn informed the projects that later researchers developed to record these holler traditions, and supported narratives about the songs and performers. The outcome was that white listeners' aural perspectives on African American hollers produced generic and problematic discussions and limited diversity in the archived materials, thus hindering our ability today to look back and try to challenge the narratives on the genre.

# Introduction

Hollers were a genre of solo-singing renditions of short poetic compositions, sung only by African American men and women in the south of the United States until the middle of the last century. Two examples which demonstrate in their differences of style and content how wide the spectrum of hollers can be are [Henry Ratcliff, \(Look for me in\) Louisiana \(1959\)](#),

[footnote] [1] Alan Lomax Archives, NYC, catalogued as T883, Track 8. [/footnote]

and [Stewart W.D. 'Bama', Levee camp Holler \(1947\)](#).

[footnote] [2] Alan Lomax Archives, NYC, catalogued as T803, Track 3. [/footnote]

(Many more recordings of hollers, along with their reference information, are freely available on the [Association for Cultural Equity \(ACE\) website](#).)

[footnote] [3] All three links in this section to the ACE website were last accessed on 6 April 2019. [/footnote]

Musicologists have mainly considered these songs as examples of musical antecedents of the blues or suggested comparisons with African music practices. None of the hypotheses proposed on the subject have been proved yet: researchers documented hollers only after the birth of the blues,

[footnote] [4] The currently available documentation on hollers was produced through different means and in different formats: through the production of an audio recording, through lyrics transcription in notation, by taking some personal notes about the interaction with the singers, by taking pictures of the singers, or a combination of these methods. [/footnote]

and the opacity of information (or lack thereof) about African Americans' private or secular music practices during slavery makes it impossible to trace their legacy with precision to Africa. A way to address the subject could be to go through comparative studies between hollers and specific musical traditions from areas involved in the slave trade in Africa, but we would still first need a deeper understanding of how hollers were composed. What techniques did the singers apply? How did the techniques complement each other? What kind of music materials were used and/or produced in the process? Until we achieve a step forward in the musical analysis of the holler genre *per se*, any kind of comparative discourse is based on nothing more than supposition.

Today, post-modern musicological perspectives on hollers have gone as far as viewing them not as a genre that we could distinguish from others based on a precise definition, but as a generic sum of disconnected practices, from which musicians 'borrowed' techniques to enhance their style. The very existence of a genre is

questioned without even starting a deeper discussion about the documentation sources.

These perspectives (the discussions about their relation to Africa or to the blues, and the dismissal of hollers as a genre) derive from the institutionalisation of observations made by white listeners and are based on faulty listening practices. Some of the earliest imperfect listening experiences of hollers became canonical after scholars repeatedly quoted them to support their discourse on African American music. These listening experiences then also became preconceptions that guided the hands of the researchers who collected documentation on hollers. This, in turn, reinforced the preconceptions themselves and negatively affected our ability (or capability) to open a proper discussion on the matter.

[footnote] [5] My argument takes inspiration from the work of critical race studies scholars, including Aaron N. Oforlea, Shobana Shankar, Tamara Lizette Brown and Baruti N. Kopano among others, who have shed light on the misrepresentation of African Americans' cultural production in the work of white academics. [/footnote]

## One exemplar case: the legacy of Charles Peabody's observations in 1903

One of the most quoted earlier sources referenced in hollers literature is a brief article written by Charles Peabody in 1903. A professional archaeologist, during the first years of the century Peabody was working on an excavation project of a mound in Coahoma Country, in the northern region of Mississippi, with the aid of local African American workers who dug up the terrain and moved debris from the site with mules and carts. Although busy in their archaeological work, Peabody and his fellow researchers took some interest in the work and leisure songs of 'the true sons of the torrid zones' as they 'had some opportunity to observe the Negroes and their way at close range.'

[footnote] [6] Peabody, 1903, p. 148. [/footnote]

In the course of his amused observations, the author jotted down 'notes, suggestions for future study in classification, and incidents of interest in the recollecting, possibly in the telling' of the African American workers' songs. Peabody classified the music he heard under:

*three heads: the songs sung by our men when at work digging or wheeling on the mound, unaccompanied; the songs of the same men at quarters or on the march, with guitar accompaniment; and the songs, unaccompanied, of the indigenous Negroes, –*

*indigenous opposed to our men imported from Clarksdale, fifteen miles distant.*

[footnote] [7] Peabody, 1903, p. 148. [/footnote]

The part of the article that is most quoted in relation to hollers is a passage where Peabody gives us information regarding the 'autochthonous music':

*Our best model for the study of this was a diligent Negro living near called by our men 'Five Dollars' (suggestive of craps), and by us 'Haman's Man,' from his persistent following from sunrise to sunset of the mule of that name.*

[footnote] [8] Peabody, 1903 p. 151. [/footnote]

Passing over the racist and objectifying overtones in Peabody's use of language, the description of Five Dollars' music has been quoted as direct and reliable information about holler practices. Although he clarified that it was 'hard to give an exact account' of the intricacies of the music, Peabody affirmed that:

*directions intoned to [the mule] melted into strains of apparently genuine African music, sometimes with words, sometimes without. Long phrases there were without apparent measured rhythm, singularly hard to copy in notes. When such sung by him and by others could be reduced to form, a few motives were made to appear, and these copied out were usually quite simple, based for the most part on the major or minor triad.*

[footnote] [9] Peabody, 1903, p. 151. [/footnote]

After some samples of those 'hymns' transcribed in notation, he added:

*the best single recollection I have of this music is one evening when a negress was singing her baby to sleep in her cabin just above our tents. [...] Her song was to me quite impossible to copy, weird in interval and strange in rhythm, peculiarly beautiful.*

[footnote] [10] Peabody, 1903, p. 152. [/footnote]

Here we have, in one single take, and in the first published and most quoted listening experience of hollers, all the problems that afflicted the scholarly view on the subject. The author suggests a generic reference to Africa, recognises his inability to give an account of the complex time, intonation and structural formulas used to control the performance, attempts nevertheless to reduce that complexity to notated

transcription, and ends up exoticising the singers. Above all, the author is convinced of being able to penetrate African Americans' opaque expression during the Jim Crow Years

[footnote] [11] The Jim Crow Era goes approximately from the Civil War, when slavery was abolished, to the period after the Second World War, when the Civil Rights movements were able to put an end to segregation. This period was characterised by the construction of a layered system of racist and unequal laws that greatly disfavoured African Americans and promoted or permitted physical and psychological violence against them. This historical period is named after Jim Crow, a fictional character at the centre of many minstrel show stories and songs, and characterised as the sum of many of the racist assumptions against African Americans. For more information on the complexities of this period, a good starting point is Blackmon (2008). [/footnote]

by 'observation', and of his entitlement to represent it.

The legacy of this short article is evident in the scholarly view on the hollers.

[footnote] [12] For more information, see Vanelli, 2018. [/footnote]

One example of this legacy can be read in the way Alan Lomax wrote, while redacting a few pages as a reference manual for the researchers who would accompany him in the 1941 and 1942 field recording trip with Fisk University:

[footnote] [13] The vademecum prepared by Lomax for the Fisk University researchers can be found in the <i style="mso-bidi-font-style: normal;">Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection</i>, folder 2, archived at the Library of Congress, Washington D.C. [/footnote]

[...]

## 2. Work Songs

*a. rhythmic songs of the road gang, chain gang from Parchman [prison], etc.*

*b. rhythmic songs of the older generation such as paddling, ax cutting, cotton picking, corn husking, etc.*

*c. railroad section gang, and extra gang songs.*

*d. Levee camp songs, corn songs, mule-skinning songs, etc.  
(These songs are generally in the form of moans, are very free rhythmically, as opposed to the above)*

At the time hollers were not referred to by one single word, and taken broadly they are referred to in the point (d). As we can see, even if Alan Lomax had heard hollers before (as he surely did when he accompanied his father, the folklorist John Lomax, during a research trip to the southern states in 1939), he still categorized them as rhythmically free, which is technically a non-definition that stems from the inability of the researcher to give an account of the complex rhythm used to structure the flow of hollers. This, in turn, reflects the continuity with Peabody's observations: they were both putting their own categorizing perspective on the genre without having understood it.

Another more recent and direct example of how Peabody's article became well known in the field of African American music studies can be found in *Africa and the Blues* by Gerhard Kubik:

*[..] secular song forms, hollers and lullabies 'weird in intervals and strange in rhythm' (as stated by Harvard archaeologist Charles Peabody in 1903), whose melodic materials eventually contributed to the genesis of the blues.*

*[footnote] [14] Kubik, 1999, p. 103. [/footnote]*

Interestingly enough, it seems that the scholars who referred to this article as documentation on hollers failed to notice the part where the author gave some real and reliable information on a song form that the singers themselves will later define as part of the holler genre. In the article (Peabody, 1903, p. 149) the author goes on a long digression on the 'distichs and improvisations in rhythm more or less phrased sung to an intoning more or less approaching melody'. The evident inability of the author to get the pulse of the music he was listening to is again evident, but the lyrics of the extemporaneous renditions of short poetic forms quoted here by Peabody return often in later documentation on hollers, and their poetic structure suggests closeness, if not identity, with the holler tradition. It should not be particularly surprising that later scholars blatantly missed this passage, as the analysis of hollers has relied mainly on bibliographical references rather than on the study of the available documentation, where this connection would become clear.

## An 'accurate picture' of African American folklore

A number of folklorists combed the southern states between the two world wars and up until the sixties, looking for traditional music forms to record and archive. Howard

Odum in the 1910s, Lawrence Gellert from the twenties to the forties, David Cohn in the twenties, John Lomax until the end of the thirties, his son Alan taking up after him, Herbert Halpert in the thirties, Harry Oster and Harold Courlander in the fifties and Bruce Jackson in the sixties: with different methods but similar objectives, all of these researchers collected a wealth of documentation on African American music, including hollers. Their work and the archived materials they produced stand today as both monumental and problematic. Monumental, because the amount and variety of music samples they collected is a testament to the depth and complexity of the history of African American music. Problematic, because the methods and epistemologies that guided their research often failed to recognise the layers of opacity that marked negotiations across the race lines in the segregated Jim Crow south. These white researchers often worked with the singers as if complete and objective understanding was achievable, where instead the conditions of the exchange hindered both the capacity of the singers to expose their perspective, and the ability of the interviewers to grasp it.

[footnote] [15] On this subject see, for example, Oforlea, 2012. [/footnote]

One of the many facets of this unbalanced negotiation between white researchers and African American singers was the ability of the former to choose when, where and what to document as relevant about the music practices of the latter. One of the things that all these research projects have in common is that they were at least partially conducted inside southern prisons. The motivation for looking for folklore materials inside institutions of violent oppression was first expressed by Odum (1926, pp. 71–73), who wrote:

*if one wishes to obtain anything like an accurate picture of the workaday Negro he will surely find his best setting in the chain gang, prison, or in the situation of the ever-fleeing fugitive [...] For these prison and road songs, policeman and sheriff epics, jail and chain gang ballads constitute an eloquent cross-section of the whole field of Negro songs.*

This quote clearly demonstrates how the researchers were working towards an impossibly objective description of hollers. Their objectifying approach is explicit in the choice of words about the 'accurate picture' and the 'eloquent cross-section', and hints at the reason behind the researchers' decision to look for music inside prisons: to gain access to what they saw as untapped treasure troves of folklore classics.

On top of the choice of location for the research, once in contact with the singers, the politics that guided the hands of the researchers in choosing when to turn on the

recording machine were based on their take on what they believed to be representative of the subject of music folklore. From this point of view, the composition and variety of the archived materials is tied to the selectiveness of their research practices, based on their pre-formed conceptualisation of the materials.

An important source of information on the subject is the *Southern Recording Trip Fieldnotes*,

[footnote] [16] The *Southern Recording Trip Fieldnotes* are freely accessible on the website of the Library of Congress, at the address (last consulted 30 September 2018), <https://www.loc.gov/item/lomaxbib000855/> [footnote]

written by John Lomax and colleagues during their 1939 research in the southern states. These field notes tell the story of the difficulties of the research, the complexities of the relationship between the researchers, the singers, and the institutions that supported or limited the development of the research project, and also of the choices that they had to make during the selection and collection of folklore documentation in general, and hollers in particular. The *Fieldnotes* are then a fundamental document on the methodology of the researcher and his associates, containing summaries of the daily activities, references to places visited, to the individuals encountered, the settings behind the recordings, and the exchanges with the singers. They are also an extremely valuable source of information on hollers recordings, as Lomax has been the researcher who recorded the highest number of this genre of songs.

## John Lomax's *Fieldnotes*: choosy habits, power relationships, opaque negotiations

Reading the *Fieldnotes*, two elements stand out and help us get a better sense of the research dynamics that informed the production of John Lomax's collection.

The first one is the selectiveness applied by Lomax. He was strictly interested in folkloric materials: the older, the better. He clearly communicated it with his interlocutors:

*[April 15–17, West Columbia and Clemens State Farm, Brazoria Country, Texas]: After suggestions from Mr. Lomax as to what*



*kind of music he wished to record, musicians and singers volunteered or were pushed forward by their companions*

*[April 23, Ramsey State Farm, Otey, Texas]: This trip was fruitless. The old crowd had scattered, the new boys sang less fewer of the old songs and in performance imitated radio artists. We did not set up the machine. We found about the same situation in Darrington Farm some thirty miles away, – few singers and these not interested in old songs or the old manner of singing.*

*[..] Iron Head broke into a group's singing of some popular music-hall ditty, 'No he don't want that kind o' stuff. This kindly what he's after', and he started off on an old-time spiritual.*

*[May 20–21, Cummins State Farm, near Varner, Arkansas]: Through the bars, Mr. Lomax explained to the boys the purpose of his trip and what kind of songs he wished to record. He asked for volunteers. After several rejections, a big fellow timidly offered a children's song, which proved good enough to start on anyway.*

*[..] a big fellow, one of the quartet who had sung a lined hymn, offered to sing John Henry hesitatingly 'I don't reckon you'd want John Henry, would you? I guess you already got that.' Mr. Lomax asked for a sample of his version; this head-rider, Arthur Bell, had sung only three lines [..] when Mr. Lomax called excitedly, 'Wait there! Get you a hammer ready, and start back at the beginning.' Obediently and quietly, Arthur picked up a 'billy', [..] tried it out on the barrack bars, nodded, and at Mr. Lomax's 'Ready', started in again [..] an interesting version of John Henry, which appears in full in *Our Singing Country*.*

*[May 23–25, State Farms, Parchman, Mississippi]: They were all more willing, but they had very few interesting songs of which we did not already have more interesting versions.*

These notes show how John Lomax operated in the field by selecting the materials to record based on his decision of whether or not they fitted his idea of 'old' materials. The facts that he was an experienced researcher with years of practice in the field, and that producing a recording was a complicated and taxing task, do not change the results:

the composition of the content of the archive illuminates Lomax's own projection on the subjects, but does not coincide with the totality of expressive traditions he encountered. It is also important to note how the musicians he interviewed reacted to the researcher's disposition, sometimes by themselves selecting what to offer for recording to appeal to Lomax's interests. This relationship created a double layer of opacity in the materials produced: one constructed by the researcher's gaze, which rested only on the objects that interested him, and the other put up by the singers, who offered to that gaze only a portion of their knowledge.

The *Fieldnotes* give us also an idea of how the relationships with the authorities shaped the context of Lomax's research. John Lomax was already a well-known researcher in the field of music folklore when he embarked on the '39 trip: just to give an example, President Theodore Roosevelt himself had only words of praise for him when he wrote the introduction to his book *Cowboy Songs and other Frontier Ballads* from 1910. When he embarked on the research trip, he was backed up by the Library of Congress, commissioning the recordings for the archives, and had political contacts all over the south. Lomax also clearly benefitted from being a white man from Texas, as shown in his ability to have pleasant exchanges with authorities and move without many constraints through the southern states at the height of the Jim Crow era:

*[May 20–21, Cummins State Farm, near Varner, Arkansas]: Mr. Lomax's conference with the office was only long enough to explain his mission, and present his letter of introduction from the Governor of Texas, get permission to proceed and get necessary information about the location of camps and the names of some of the captains. Captain Acklin, who, it seems was in general charge of the Negro farm workers, offered us a bed for the night and breakfast. We went at once to Camp #6, [...] There we found Captain Allen in charge, who [...] recognized Mr. Lomax at once. Cap'n Allen had formerly been in charge of a camp near Little Rock where Mr. Lomax had recorded previously. [...] On this occasion Captain Allen seemed glad to see somebody from Texas and his family also seemed glad of a diversion.*

*[May 21, Cummins State Farm – Negro Women's Camp]: After lunch in the home of Captain Miller, [...] we returned to Camp #1 [...] Midafternoon we packed up to move on; finding Supt. Reed at home, we received his permission to interview the Negro women who were housed in the rear of the superintendent's residence under the supervision of Mrs. Reed.*

*[May 22 State Farm, Camp #9, near Arkansas City, Arkansas]: Captain Burt Clayton, in charge of the camp and his wife were very gracious, inviting us to dinner and extending the noon rest period so that the boys might sing for Mr. Lomax.*

The benefits granted to Lomax by his skin colour and southern upbringing had the secondary effect of automatically building a stronger connection between him and the authorities, which had repercussions on how the research was framed and conducted. The relationship with the authorities did not stop at the request of permission to interview the prisoners or at the eventual security and logistics support: many 'captains'

[footnote] [17] In this context 'captain' and 'boss' were the informal titles given to the guards and supervisors by the singers. It should be noted that the use of these generic words instead of identifiable names when referring to the guards was one of the methods that the singers could resort to when they wanted to avoid being held accountable for what they sung. [/footnote]

participated actively by pointing out camps

[footnote] [18] In US prisons the population is normally split into different areas or buildings, which in the case of State Farms were often called 'camps'. [/footnote]

or specific individuals whom the researcher should interview for songs, and were often present during the recording sessions:

*[April 23, Ramsey State Farm, Otey, Texas]: we drove to the Central State Farm near Sugarland. The Captain had a good dinner served us and assisted Mr. Lomax in trying to locate singers. [...] Our next stop was at Camp Four of the Ramsey State Farm [...] With the help of the Captain and some of his guards we located some singers, who were admitted one by one or by small groups into a small office where the recording machine was set up. One of these groups included Columbus Christopher, Alexander Hamilton and George Washington, who sang for us under guard, behind three sets of locks.*

*[May 20–21, Cummins State Farm, near Varner, Arkansas]: After a bountiful supper we, the Lomaxes, the Allens and some guests adjourned to the Negro barracks. By the aid of kerosene lamps and flash-lights we set up the machine. [...] The Captain had been generous in letting us stay past nine o'clock. It was Saturday night and the boys could catch up with their sleep the next day.*

*[May 21, Cummins State Farm, Camp #1, Verner, Arkansas]:  
Sunday, we talked to Captain Miller who had charge of the Negro barracks of Camp #1 nearby. Trusties sat on guard with guns ready in case of a break. Other trusties helped get the men together. [..]The boys seemed fond of their immediate supervisor, Captain Miller, and requested that we let him have a six-inch record of their songs of his choosing. The sons of Capt. Acklin and of Capt. Miller were interested spectators.*

We have no way to assess to what extent the intervention or physical presence of the authorities in charge of the very institutions responsible for the imprisonment of the singers influenced the negotiation that occurred during the recordings. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that the impact was relevant. The singers might have actively refrained from singing about certain topics, as all the parties involved knew that the recordings would then go to Washington D.C. to be archived as a lasting representation of the prison institution. At the same time, when the authorities referred individuals or groups to the researchers, they automatically obliged them to record something. Some of the singers were physically brought to Lomax in chains. The singers were then stuck in a tight spot, between the risk of being held accountable for what they sung, and the inability to withdraw from singing. No wonder then that Lomax sometimes thought that the 'Singers were not plentiful or enthusiastic'.

[footnote] [19] From *Fieldnotes*, May 23–25, State Farms, Parchman, Mississippi. [/footnote]

From this point of view, even if Lomax's connections helped him get around and make contact with the singers, at the same time they hindered the ability of the musicians to have a meaningful interaction with him. It should come as no surprise then that, even after having repeatedly visited a number of southern prisons, parts of a system that Blackmon defined as 'Slavery by another name' (2008), Lomax came back with the conviction that 'no instance of physical brutality in all my experiences have come under my personal notice', except for the incident that, to be fair, he condemned, where the singers were brought to him for the interview chained together with others.

[footnote] [20] From the *Letter to the Governor Burnet R. Maybank*, contained in the *Fieldnotes* [/footnote]

## The politics of archived knowledge

The case of the research by John Lomax tells us something about the way our understanding of spirituals, worksongs and hollers is shaped by the politics that informed the production of the documentation. On those recordings subsequent narratives, musicological and non-musicological, were and are built. None of the complexities of the exchange that happened between the researcher and the singers is evident in the recording. Still, they are there: in the opacity of the content, and in the way the documents, although produced in a complicated context of unequal negotiation, are meant to represent the singers and their art.

The documentation carries the burden of the Jim Crow context in the relationship of power that presided over its creation, but also of Lomax's listening habits. He was ultimately the one who decided whether to record a song, and he did so by relying on his experience. In the act of choosing what was more appropriate to be documented, he unwittingly operated like a censor. The effects of this selectiveness transferred over to the composition of the archived materials, and from there to the academic studies that relied on that documentation as sources for proposing narratives on African American music.

In relation to the study of the hollers genre, this had two major impacts. The first is about the variety of the songs collected. From the fragments of information in the *Fieldnotes* we get to know that Lomax preferred not to record a song twice unless there were major changes in the lyrics. But what if there were major changes in the music techniques implied? Or even minor changes? The elaboration of the details of a performance is one of the most important elements in popular music, as it shows the singer's competences and preferences, while pointing out the eventual spaces for idiolect expression within a recognisable tradition. In my research on the subject I was able to locate 112 recordings of hollers, and they are all different: no second version of the same one by another singer.

In a similar way, the preference of the researchers to collect only materials previously unrecorded limited the opportunity to have different takes of the same song by the same singer. Of the 112 hollers recordings that I located, only eight of them have been recorded in more than one version. This means that for the other 104 we only have access to one, very brief sample (the average duration of hollers recordings is around two minutes), thus limiting our ability to get deeper into the analysis of the music techniques used by the singers.

The second fundamental element is a matter of the politics of representation. Even if the connection has never been explained in full detail, scholars referred to the holler genre, alongside worksongs and spirituals, as some of the components that gave birth

to the blues, one of the most well-known American music genres worldwide. By force of iterated references, hollers achieved a relative relevance in the history of the development of African American music. As I was collecting and analysing the available recordings to suggest a better description of the technical features of the genre, the opacity of the documentation and the story of how the recordings were produced constantly reminded me of the issues that could arise from scholarly misrepresentation. If the objective of my work was to bring back into focus the hollers' singers and the complexity of their art, the ideal result would be that their names could finally achieve some deserved level of recognition for the historical relevance of their cultural production.

After two years of research on the subject I started to notice something odd about the materials that I had found: all the singers were men. Then I stumbled across a recording of a holler by Mattie May Thomas, an African American woman. I believe that the process of how I came to realise the existence of women's hollers is quite telling in itself. At that point in my research, I had already consulted the archives for recordings directly referenced, tagged or named as hollers. This had given me some numerically relevant results, but no sign of holler practices by women. The recording I found was instead in a randomly generated compilation of 'prison blues songs' on Spotify, and the song *Dangerous Blues* by Mattie May Thomas,

[footnote] [21] The recording was made in 1939 in Parchman Farm by John Lomax and is archived at the Library of Congress as AFS 3082 A3. [/footnote]

was clearly a holler. By following the categorisation system used by others to archive materials I had missed recordings that had not been archived as hollers because they weren't recognised as part of the genre. After all, a proper definition of what a holler is has yet to be fully discussed.

In an article from 2013 Shobana Shankar wrote:

*The fact that these women have remained largely invisible, despite their public performances for men who became eminent figures in musicology, suggests a great deal about layers of inequality and silences – racial and gendered – in the very projects that aimed to reveal and record the Delta Blues.*

[footnote] [22] Shankar, 2013, p. 184. [/footnote]

This newfound notion prompted me to look back in the archives, this time listening one by one to all the recordings produced in those years by the researchers.

[footnote] [23] The new streaming techniques to access recorded materials implemented by the Folklife Center at the Library of Congress made this operation

incredibly fast and effective, and I am grateful for the Center's support of my inquiry.  
[/footnote]

The results were relevant: the number of hollers recordings I could refer to became three times bigger, and I started to find other documents by African American women.

I believe that the problem in this case was that when the documentation was archived, the hollers genre was defined as something related to the origins of the blues, and the listening habits of the archivists prompted them to place the women's production in the generic category of 'blues' recordings, failing to recognise them as examples of a distinct music form. Again, in the words of Shankar (2013, p. 184), 'Scholars of music understand well the gendering of blues as masculine', and this led to the failure to recognise the women's production as samples of a genre that was thought of as being at the origins of the blues.

My second look at the archived materials also gave two other relevant results. The first result is about the complexity of the women's musical production. As I was working on an interpretation of the techniques and features that could distinguish hollers production from contiguous music forms, I was well aware that the classification I was going to suggest, if taken in a normative way, could prompt subjective distinctions between practices that were instead fluidly interconnected. For this reason I constantly strove to highlight the recordings that would fall on the borders of my own definition: songs where the singers expressed lyrical content forms and used techniques mainly found in hollers, but mixed and matched materials and methods from other genres too. These recordings are extremely valuable because they demonstrate the vitality of the genre and the ability of the singers to find new and different uses for hollers techniques.

Quite tellingly, the number of recordings by African American women that fell on the borders of the classification I was proposing outnumbered by three to one those that my definition would outline as hollers in a more strict and traditional sense, leading me to agree with Shankar's observation (2013, p. 198) that in 'Parchman women's music [...] diversity defied easy simplification'. This is even acknowledged in John Lomax's *Fieldnotes*:

*[May 21, Cummins State Farm, Negro Women's Camp]: Some of the songs offered, we felt sure, came from the radio or from the phonograph, but in most cases these girls had changed them and improvised them to suit their own fancy and to make them their own.*

The second result of my deeper look at the archived materials was in terms of the different proportion of hollers recordings by women and by men. Of the 112 documents of hollers that represent the genre in its stricter sense, only six are from women.

[footnote] [24] In this count I am considering multiple versions of the same holler as one item. [/footnote]

This proportion of course is not caused by women's inability to produce hollers. On the contrary, the most complex holler recording I found was by a woman, Bessie Tucker, who in 1928 and 1929 recorded in various sessions a number of songs which are all based on the same music structure, with the same materials and techniques, but different lyrical subjects. If we consider these recordings as one single holler conjugated into different versions to express different topics, Tucker's holler is three times longer than the second longest recording of a holler that I found, and 21 times the average duration of the other recordings.

So why is the number of documents by women so thin? I believe the answer to lie in the perspectives that guided the researchers to look for folklore materials mainly inside prisons and levee camps. The prison population in the southern states was for the greatest part composed of men:

*The biennial prison report for 1935 noted that the prison's entire population nearly turned completely over every two years. Out of nearly 3,500 prisoners at Parchman in 1935, just 26 were women. During the Depression years, the women prisoners numbered between 20 and 60, a fraction of the total, which rose from about 3,000 to as many as 6,000.*

[footnote] [25] Shankar, 2013, p. 188. [/footnote]

In the context of these figures, the proportion of six to 106 hollers by women and men is a few times higher than that of the proportion of men to women in the prison population. If we take into account also the number of documents that fall on the borders of the genre, women were able to produce proportionally much more documentation than men about the holler genre. But, because the researchers focused mainly on the prison context, where men vastly outnumbered women, or, as Shankar expressively puts it (2013, p. 198), because of the 'love affair that had emerged between the down-and-out male prisoner and the musicologists', the composition of the archives regarding the hollers genre suffers in diversity, greatly limiting our ability today to properly assess women's contribution to the history of African American music.



## Conclusion

Holler literature has suffered from the continuous reference to earlier listening experiences that were not based on, or expressed with, scientifically acceptable methods. The repeated reference to these experiences reinforced their value in the academic field, until they became canonical as part of the accepted view of the genre's forms and practices, even against the evidences of later holler direct documentation.

These perspectives also had an influence in shaping the aural expectations of the researchers who produced documentation on hollers, guiding their choices in the selection of the materials as well as in the choice of the places to look for this and other traditional genres. As the reports from John Lomax's *Fieldnotes* show, the political, social and historical context within which the researchers worked had a vast impact on the unbalanced negotiation between them and the singers whose music production they wanted to portray with their research. These reports, detailing the issues of power relationships and suggesting the layers of opacity in the singers' performances, give us fundamental information to interpret how the researchers came to experience what the singers decided to offer them when they were obliged to, and what they decided to take away from it. This information also make us aware of how these power relationships continued to influence the narratives around the holler genre, the singers, and the history of African American music in general.

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[footnote] [26] *The Experience of Listening to Music: Methodologies, Identities, Histories* has been Open Access funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), grant AH/J013986/1, <https://ledbooks.org/proceedings2019> The collection has been peer reviewed, edited by David Rowland and Helen Barlow, and subsequently prepared for online publication by the Knowledge Media Institute (KMi) of The Open University. Published by: The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA. Copyright © The Open University. First published: July 2019. ISBN: 9781473028647. PDFs displaying some of the content from the online collection is available from <https://ledbooks.org/proceedings2019/getting-the-best-from-this-website/> You can experience the online publication as it was originally designed at <https://ledbooks.org/proceedings2019> View copyright information relating to the publication here: <https://ledbooks.org/proceedings2019/copyright> [/footnote]

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