

Appeal for Cultural Equity

by Alan Lomax

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In our concern about the pollution of the biosphere we are overlooking what may be, in human terms, an even more serious problem. Man has a more indirect relation to nature than most other animals because his environmental tie is normally mediated by a cultural system. Since human adaptation has been largely cultural rather than biological, human sub-species are rather the product of shifts in learned culture patterns than in genetically inherited traits. It is the flexibility of these culture patterns — composed of technique, social organization, and communication — that has enabled the human species to flourish in every zone of the planet.

Man, the economist, has developed tools and techniques to exploit every environment. Man, the most sociable of animals, has proliferated endless schemes which nurture individuals from birth to old age. Man, the communicator, has improvised and elaborated system upon system of symboling to record, reinforce, and reify his inventions. Indeed, man's greatest achievement is in the sum of the lifestyles he has created to make this planet an agreeable and stimulating human habitat.

Today, this cultural variety lies under threat of extinction. A grey-out is in progress which, if it continues unchecked, will fill our human skies with the smog of the phoney and cut the families of men off from a vision of their own cultural constellations. A mismanaged, over-centralized electronic communication system is imposing a few standardized, mass-produced and cheapened cultures everywhere.

The danger inherent in the process is clear. Its folly, its unwanted waste is nowhere more evident than in the field of music. What is happening to the varied musics of mankind is symptomatic of the swift destruction of culture patterns all over the planet.

One can already sense the oppressive dullness and psychic distress of those areas where centralized music industries, exploiting the star system and controlling the communication system, put the local musician out of work and silence folk song, tribal ritual, local popular festivities and regional culture. It is ironic to note that during this century, when folklorists and musicologists were studying the varied traditions of the peoples of the earth, their rate of disappearance accelerated. This worries us all, but we have grown so accustomed to the dismal view of dead or dying cultures on the human landscape, that we have learned to dismiss this pollution of the human environment as inevitable, and even sensible, since it is wrongly assumed that the weak and unfit among musics and cultures are eliminated in this way.

Not only is such a doctrine anti-human; it is very bad science. It is false Darwinism applied to culture — especially to its expressive systems, such as music, language and art. Scientific study of cultures, notably of their languages and their musics, shows that all are equally



Tongkeu Phoumynavong, a Kmhmu musician and recent refugee from Laos, plays the mouth organ. Photo by Frank Proshan

expressive and equally communicative. They are also equally valuable: first, because they enrich the lives of the people who use them, people whose very morale is threatened when they are destroyed or impoverished; second, because each communicative system (whether verbal, visual, musical, or even culinary) holds important discoveries about the natural and human environment; and third, because each is a treasure of unknown potential, a collective creation in which some branch of the human species invested its genius across the centuries.

With the disappearance of each of these systems, the human species not only loses a way of viewing, thinking, and feeling but also a way of adjusting to some zone on the planet which fits it and makes it livable; not only that, but we throw away a system of interaction, of fantasy and symbolizing which, in the future, the human race may sorely need. The only way to halt this degradation of man's culture is to commit ourselves to the principle of cultural equity, as we have committed ourselves to the principles of political, social, and economic justice. As the reduction in the world's total of musical languages and dialects continues at an accelerating and bewildering pace, and their eventual total disappearance is accepted as inevitable, in what follows I will point to ways in which we can oppose this gloomy course.

Let me deal first with the matter of inevitability. Most people believe that folk and tribal cultures thrive on isolation, and that when this isolation is invaded by modern communications and transport systems, these cultures inevitably disappear. This "ain't necessarily so."



Gordon Tanner, a traditional fiddler from Dacula, Georgia, performs with his son, Phil Tanner, and his grandson. Photo courtesy Art and Margo Rosenbaum

Isolation can be as destructive of culture and musical development as it is of individual personality. We know of few primitive or folk cultures that have not been continuously in contact with a wide variety of other cultures. In fact, all local cultures are linked to their neighbors in large areal and regional sets. Moreover, those cultures in the past which grew at the crossroads of human migrations, or else at their terminal points, have usually been the richest. One thinks here for example of independent but cosmopolitan Athens, of the Central Valley of Mexico, of the Northwest coast of North America, the Indus Valley, the Sudan in Africa where black culture encountered Middle Eastern civilization across millenia – such a list would include most of the important generative culture centers of human history. I say then that cultures do not and never have flourished in isolation, but have flowered in sites that guaranteed their independence and at the same time permitted unforced acceptance of external influences.

During most of man's history contact between peoples did not usually mean that one culture swallowed up or destroyed another. Even in the days of classical empire, vassal states were generally permitted to continue in their own lifestyle, so long as they paid tribute to the imperial center. The total destruction of cultures is largely a modern phenomenon, the consequence of laissez-faire mercantilism, insatiably seeking to market all its products, to blanket the world not only with its manufacture, but with its religion, its literature and music, its educational and communication systems.

Non-European peoples have been made to feel that they have to buy "the whole package," if they are to keep face before the world. Westerners have imposed their lifestyle on their fellow humans in the name of spreading civilization or, more lately, as an essential concomitant of the benefits of industry. We must reject this view of civilization, just as we must now find ways of curbing a runaway industrial system which is polluting the whole planet. Indeed, industrial and

cultural pollution are two aspects of the same negative tendency.

It is generally believed that modern communication systems must inevitably destroy all local cultures. This is because these systems have largely been used for the benefit of the center and not as two-way streets. Today, artists everywhere are losing their local audiences, put out of countenance by electronic systems manipulated from without, rather than from within, their communities.

Electronic communication is intrinsically multi-channeled. A properly administered electronic system could carry every expressive dialect and language that we know of, so that each one might have a local system at its disposal for its own spokesmen. Thus, modern communication technology could become the prime force in man's struggle for cultural equity and against the pollution of the human environment.

All cultures need their fair share of the air time. When country folk or tribal peoples hear or view their own traditions in the big media, projected with the authority generally reserved for the output of large urban centers, and when they hear their traditions taught to their own children, something magical occurs. They see that their expressive style is as good as that of others, and, if they have equal communicational facilities, they will continue it. On my last field trip to the West Indies, I took along two huge stereo loudspeakers and, in every village where I worked, I put on a thunderous three-dimensional concert of the music of the place that I had recorded. The audiences were simply transported with pleasure. In one island, the principal yearly people's festival, discontinued for a decade, was revived the next year in all its richness.

The flowering of black orchestral music in New Orleans came because the black musicians found steady, high-paying jobs and prestige in the amusement district and thus had time to reorchestrate African style and then record this local music for export to the whole world.



Philadelphia-based house party and block party musicians. (Left to right: James Ford, Robert "Washboard Slim" Young, and Horace "Spoons" Williams.) Photo by Roland Freeman

Table 1: Song style traditions

1. **Circum-Pacific**
Siberian
Native American
Australian
Melanesian
2. **Tropical (African)**
African Gatherer
Black African
3. **Oceanic**
Proto-Melanesian
Malayo-Polynesian
4. **Eurasian**
Central Asian
East Asian
West Asian
European

The origin of the so-called “Nashville sound” is another case in point. Nashville was once the sleepy capital of the state of Tennessee. In the 1920s a Nashville radio station began to broadcast the music of the nearby Appalachian mountains between advertising announcements. These particular local audiences bought products so enthusiastically that other southern radio stations followed suit by employing local musicians. This provided the economic base for the development of a vigorous modern southern rural musical tradition. Today it has several indigenous forms of orchestration which match the storied folk orchestras of Spain and Central Europe in virtuosity. Nashville has become the music capital of the U.S. because the once scorned style it purveys — reedy-voiced solo ballads accompanied by string instruments — has always been a favored style of the majority of white working-class Americans. This extraordinary event was taking place while most American intellectuals were bewailing the demise of American folk music. The reason that this tradition survived was that talented local performers got time on the air to broadcast it to local and regional audiences.

Nashville and other such new folk culture capitals are, at present, exceptions and accidents, but it is our responsibility to create others. By giving every culture its equal time on the air and its equal local weight in the education systems, we can bring about similar results around the world. Instant communication systems and recording devices, in fact, make it possible for the oral traditions to reach their audience, to establish their libraries and museums, and to preserve and record their songs, tales, and dramas directly in sound and vision without writing and printing them in another medium. Over a loud-speaker the counterpoint of the Mbuti pygmies is just as effective as a choir singing Bach. Thus neither contact nor rapid communication need inevitably destroy local traditions. The question is one of decentralization. We must overcome our own cultural myopia and see to it that the unwritten, nonverbal traditions have the status and the space they deserve.

Another harmful idea from the recent European past which must be dealt with holds that there is something desirable about a national music — a music that corresponds to a political entity called a nation. In fact, state-supported national musics have generally stifled musical creativity rather than fostered it. It is true that professional urban musicians have invented and elaborated a marching music, a salon music, a theater music, and various popular song types, yet the price has been the death of the far more varied music-making of regional localities. Italy, a country I know well, has, in almost every valley, a local musical dialect of enormous interest, largely unknown to the rest of the country. These myriads of song traditions are being drowned by a well-intended national communications system which, in the name of national unity, broadcasts only the fine art and popular music of the large cities. Cut off from its roots, Italian pop music, of course, becomes every day more and more dependent on Tin Pan Alley.

Nations do not generate music. They can only consume it. Indeed, our new system of national consumption of music via national communications systems is depriving the musical creator of the thing he needs most next to money — a local, tribal or regional audience that he can sing directly for. I think it may be stated flatly that most creative developments in art have been the product of small communities or small independent coteries within large entities — like the Mighty Five in Russia, like the small Creole jazz combos of New Orleans.

Real musicians, real composers, need real people to listen to them,



Cajun musicians perform on Revon Reed's radio show in Mamou, Louisiana, a program which features live French music every Saturday morning. Photo by Robert Yellin



and this means people who understand and share the musical language that they are using. It seems reasonable, therefore, that if the human race is to have a rich and varied musical future, we must encourage the development of as many local musics as possible. This means money, time on the air, and time in the classroom.

Furthermore, we need a culturally sensitive way of defining and describing musical style territories and thus providing a clear, existential rationale for their continued development. During the past decade, a system of speedily analyzing and comparing of musical performances cross-culturally has been developed in the anthropology department at Columbia University. The system is called Cantometrics, a word which means the measure of song or song as a measure. The measures comprising Cantometrics are those that were found, in actual practice, to sort out the main styles of the whole of human song. The rating scales of Cantometrics give a wholistic overview of song performance: (a) the social organization of the performing group, including solo or leader dominance; (b) its musical organization, scoring level of vocal blend and the prominence of unison or of multiparted tonal and rhythmic organization; (c) textual elaboration; (d) melodic elaboration in terms of length and number of segments and features of ornamentation; (e) dynamics; (f) voice qualities.

More than 4,000 recorded examples from 350 cultures from every culture area were judged in this way. The computer assembled profiles of style from these 350 outlines, compared them, and clustered them into families, thus mapping world culture areas. It appears that ten plus regional song traditions account for a majority of world song styles. These regional style traditions are linked by close ties of similarity into 4 supra-continental style horizons (see Table 1).

When each of the stylistic zones is subjected to multi-factor analysis on its own – that is, when the musical profiles of its representative cultures are compared – we find a set of about 50 cultural territories that match in an amazing way those already known to anthropologists and ethnographers. From this finding we can draw two important conclusions for the defense of mankind's musical heritage. First, it is now clear that culture and song styles change together, that expressive style is firmly rooted in regional and a real culture developments, and

that it can be thought of in relation to the great regional human traditions.

Second, each of these style areas has clearcut geographical boundaries and thus, a general environmental character and distinctive socioeconomic problems. The people within these areas can see themselves as carriers of a certain expressive tradition and, sensing their genuine kinship with other cultures of the territory, can begin to develop the base lines for the local civilizations that are needed to protect their often underprivileged and undervoiced cultures. These discoveries compensate somewhat for the recent tendency of folklorists and anthropologists to emphasize the distinctions between neighboring and similar tribes and localities to the extent that neither natives nor experts could develop practical cultural politics. Local or tribal folkstyles should receive support and an equitable share of media time, not only on their own part, but as representatives of these larger regional traditions.

In traditional music, then, we can discover a testimony to man's endless creativity and a rationale for the advocacy of planetary cultural and expressive equity. We are impelled to a defense of the musics of the world as socially valuable because:

1. They serve as the human baseline for receiving and reshaping new ideas and new technologies to the varied lifestyles and environmental adaptations of world culture;
2. They perpetuate values in human systems which are only indirectly connected with level of productivity, and they give women and men — old and young — a sense of worth;
3. They form a reservoir of well-tested lifestyles out of which the species can construct the varied and flexible multi-cultural civilizations of the future; since they are living symbol systems, they have growth potentials of their own. As such they are the testing grounds for the social and expressive outcomes of human progress.

Practical men often regard these expressive systems as doomed and valueless. Yet, wherever the principle of cultural equity comes into play, these creative wellsprings begin to flow again. I cite only a few of the many examples known to me: the magnificent recrudescence of the many-faceted carnival in Trinidad as a result of the work of a devoted committee of folklorists backed by the Premier; the renaissance of Rumanian panpipe music when the new Socialist regime gave the last master of the panpipe a Chair in music at the Rumanian Academy of Music; the revival of the five-string banjo in my own country when a talented young man named Peter Seeger took up its popularization as his life's work; the pub singing movement of England which involved a generation of young people in traditional ballad singing; the recognition of Cajun and Creole music which has led to the renewal of Cajun language and culture in Louisiana. These and a host of other cases that might be mentioned show that even in this industrial age, folk traditions can come vigorously back to life, can raise community morale, and give birth to new forms if they have time and room to grow in their own communities. The work in this field must be done with tender and loving concern for both the folk artists and their heritages. This concern must be knowledgeable, both about the fit of each genre to its local context and about its roots in one or more of the great stylistic traditions of humankind. We have an overarching goal — the world of manifold civilizations animated by the vision of cultural equity.

Suggested reading

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