

# Between the Blues and Africa: Transformations of Narratives About African American Hollers

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## Abstract

Hollers, a genre of African American songs, have been under observation and discussion for over a century. Their complex rhythm, melody and structure have attracted the attention of many researchers, who advanced theories on their connection to the Blues, or to certain African traditions. Despite the wealth of documentation on the genre, those connections have yet to be properly proved, and the hollers themselves and their formal generalities still await a comprehensive description. In the article we will briefly resume the main theories about field hollers, locate them in the academic trends that saw their developments, and question their reliability by giving a closer look at the references they rely on. In the end, we will look at more recent academic productions, and at how certain methodological turns might give way to new perspectives on hollers.

***Tra il blues e l'Africa: trasformazioni del discorso intorno agli hollers afro-americani.*** Gli hollers, un genere di musica vocale afro-americana, sono stati oggetto di studio e discussione per più di un secolo. Le complessità degli hollers sui piani del ritmo, della melodia e della struttura hanno attirato l'attenzione di molti ricercatori, portandoli ad avanzare diverse teorie sulla loro connessione con il blues o con certe tradizioni africane. Nonostante l'esistenza di un cospicuo ammontare di documentazione sul genere, queste connessioni devono ancora essere dimostrate con precisione. Gli hollers stessi e le loro generalità formali sono ancora in attesa di una descrizione esauriente. Nell'articolo riassumeremo brevemente le principali teorie sugli hollers, le situeremo nelle tradizioni accademiche che ne hanno accompagnato lo sviluppo e ne discuteremo l'affidabilità verificandone le fonti. Infine riassumeremo alcune produzioni accademiche più recenti la cui metodologia di indagine può suggerire nuove prospettive di studio sull'argomento.

## 1. Introduction

Field hollers are a genre of songs sung by African American men and women in the south of the United States until the middle of the last century. Researchers have documented the use of hollers by African American singers from the beginning of the century until the 60s,<sup>1</sup> although the bulk of audio documentation on the genre comes from the thirties and forties. In those years, researchers were able to document the use of hollers as a means of communication used by African Americans inside contexts where their existence was put at risk: in State penitentiaries and levee camps. The life conditions that African Americans had to endure in those contexts were brutal, and their hollers reflect that.

Currently, the academic literature on hollers is composed of a series of small publications and quotes contained in more ample books about African American music. More specifically, hollers have been under investigation for more than a century, but only in relation to the blues, of which until recently were considered as being some kind of prototype, and in relation to Africa, as relics somehow survived through decades of slavery.

In this article we will review the major theories on hollers, through the voices of the scholars who used them as part of their discourse on African American music. We will see how those perspectives developed within certain traditions of academic studies, and we will try to assess their ability to give us a description of the field holler genre. We will mainly do this by addressing the reliability of the documentation and of the references given.

## 2. Sources and archives

The origins of the hollers genre, as much as its livelihood in the slavery era, are untraceable. We can advance some hypotheses, but the direct documentation is too thin and opaque to be reliable. This is also due to the fact that up until the end of the nineteenth century scholars were seldom interested in the music production (as well as any kind of cultural production) of African American people unless it took a form that was recognized as worthy of study.

In the first half of the last century folklorists visited the South in search of traditional materials (songs, narratives, poetries), with a particular focus on the cultural production of African Americans. As their research was backed up by institutions (libraries, universities), their official role as representatives probably hindered their ability to have access to (or to divulge) personal or critical informations, limiting the variety of the documen-

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<sup>1</sup> After the 60s the use of field hollers started to wane, and ultimately they disappeared. The last documentation regarding hollers comes from a series of videos by Alan Lomax in the seventies, but those videos contain only segments and samples of hollers. They can be found on the Youtube channel of the Alan Lomax's Association for Cultural Equity (see media and link section below).

tation produced. Still, this wave of interest in African American folklore produced a large amount of vital and direct documentation.

Having said that, only a scarce number of research projects produced documentation on hollers. Howard Washington Odum was the first to record hollers, using wax cylinders, in the 1910s.<sup>2</sup> Those recordings are now lost, but there still exist some traces in the volume *Phonophotography in Folk Music* (1928) by Milton Metfessel.

More hollers can be found in the documentation produced during the 1933 expedition, and in the ones that followed until 1939, by John and Ruby Lomax.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Lawrence Gellert was scouting the South for songs of protest, accumulating a considerable amount of materials, which is now deposited at the Library of the Indiana University in Bloomington.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, in the first half of the thirties David Cohn was looking for first hand materials for one of his publications,<sup>5</sup> and happened to interview and collect some documentation from the women incarcerated in the Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm. Among the documents<sup>6</sup> there are a few transcriptions of holler lyrics which, along with a few songs recorded by Herbert Halpert,<sup>7</sup> are the only sources that I have found about hollering practices by African American women.<sup>8</sup>

In 1941 and 1942 Alan Lomax went back to the same areas with a project co-produced with Fisk University (Work *et al.* 2005).<sup>9</sup> Alan Lomax then returned in '47 and '48 in the same states, and then again in '59.<sup>10</sup> The recordings from this last trip are striking for their superior audio quality. Then until the beginning of the sixties, two new expeditions, by Harry Oster in 1959<sup>11</sup> and by Harold Courlander<sup>12</sup> add another few useful audio documents.

<sup>2</sup> The results of Odum and Johnson's research has been published in the volumes *The Negro and his Songs* (1925) and *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926). In none of the two publications there is any reference to the chronology of the recordings, so we can only guess that they were done between 1910, after Odum's graduation, and 1925, when the first volume was published.

<sup>3</sup> The collection is housed at the Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>4</sup> *Lawrence Gellert Collection*, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. The story of how this collection came to be is complicated and not devoid of questionable passages, but its content is extremely relevant, and among the documents there are a high number of hollers. For more informations on the story of the collection, see Garabedian (2005).

<sup>5</sup> For more informations, see Shankar (2013).

<sup>6</sup> See *David L. Cohn Collection* (MUM00079). The Department of Archives and Special Collections, J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi.

<sup>7</sup> Beatrice Perry (1939) *I got a man on the wheeler*, AFS 03086 A01, and some tracks contained in *Field Recordings – Volume 8: Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi (1934-1947)*, Document Records, DOCD-5598, published in 1998.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that this lack of informations regarding African American women's holler practices is not tied to an actual scarcity of sources, but rather to the general disinterest of the researchers. In her article Shobana Shankar (2013) gives a brief and effective explanation of how the cultural and music production of Parchman women failed to be easily reduced to simplified generalizations, and was thus left to the margins of the main discourse about African American culture, or purposefully misinterpreted to make it fit into pre-ordinated categories.

<sup>9</sup> The collection is archived at the Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>10</sup> Both collections are archived in the Association for Cultural Equity, New York.

<sup>11</sup> Archived at the Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>12</sup> Smithsonian Archives, Washington D.C.

The total number of audio recordings that contain hollers amounts to more or less two hundred. Depending on how they are defined, the number could fluctuate. But how were these recordings used after they were collected and archived?

### 3. First impressions

The first listeners of field hollers encountered quite a few problems when trying to describe the genre. The technical instruments and concepts to produce acceptable analysis on those repertoires were not yet fully developed. Plus, those researchers lived in a segregated environment that influenced their listening experience, leading more often than not to equivocal interpretations.

A first general problem that we face when dealing with resources about field hollers is the indeterminacy of the nomenclature used to define them. Documentation that refers to the same singing genre here under discussion found its place inside archives under a wide variety of names (field hollers, hollers, arwhoolie, field calls, calls, corn songs, field songs, cornfield whoops, levee songs, mule driving songs, proto-blues, to quote the most common ones). The introduction of a system of tags for archival purposes is simplifying the situation, grouping them together under the generic nomenclature of “hollers”, thus producing even another level of confusion, as the name is used also to indicate the tradition of white southerners’ hollers, which are radically different in style, context of use, content and provenance.<sup>13</sup>

During the nineteenth century, the perspective of white listeners of African American music were often biased because informed by pre-representations or romanticized idealizations, which are reflected by the semantic of their descriptions. The mundane songs of African American people were described as «a rude chant. The whole effect of this music, if music it can be called, is as barbarous as if rendered in African forests at some heathen festival» (Southern 1976: 148). Even in Allen, Garrison and Ware’s collection of African American songs, after regretting the difficulties in retrieving a major amount of African American secular music, the authors noted: «It is very likely that if we had found it possible to get at more of their secular music, we should have come to another conclusion as to the proportion of the barbaric element» (Allen *et al.* 1867: vii).

Fetishization and oversimplification thus informed the first attempts at giving a description of the hollers. Pioneer was Charles Peabody, who was in fact an archaeologist, and who tried to describe the songs sung by the workers in one of his excavation sites in

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<sup>13</sup> In 1955 Willis Lawrence James published *The Romance of the Negro Folk Cry in America*, which is a clear example of how the indeterminacy in nomenclature could cause unnecessary confusion. In his study he grouped together, and then divided again following a classification based on the “function” of the sound event itself, extremely diverse objects like hunting calls, market cries, fishing calls, shouting methods to grab the attention of others, tension releasing cries, night signals, dancing signals, and hollers.

the South. The author wrote about his encounter with a man nicknamed Five Dollars, a mule driver re-named again by the author and his acquaintances as the “Haman’s man” (Peabody 1903: 151), Haman being the name of his mule. Apart from the astonishingly problematic humour implied in the inversion of possession suggested by the nickname that they bestowed upon the singer, the actual information about the songs sung are very sparse and generic. After judging the music produced by the workers as “African”, he described it as such: «Long phrases there were without apparent measured rhythm, singularly hard to copy in notes» (*ibidem*).

In 1928, Milton Metfessel and Carl Seashore invented an extremely promising new technique of analysis of musical repertoires, based on the possibility to transform audio tracks into visual bi-dimensional images of the melodic lines (Metfessel and Seashore 1928). The results obtained with the application of the method to the analysis of Odum’s recordings (comprising a couple of hollers) were so avant-garde, for that time, that they did not have any significant resonance in the academic world but on the long period. Today, the software that enhance musical analysis reproduce through automatic iterations the very same process that those researchers made manually. Even if the result of those studies is still astonishing today, Odum’s recordings were only used as pure, raw materials on which to experiment the method itself. The authors add next to no informations about their provenance, or about the interpreters.

Even if the academic discourse, in the next decades, slowly took some distance from those romanticized perspectives on African American music, still the lingering influence of those first observers informed the very reasons that moved many researchers to study field hollers. Those repertoires were not studied, discussed or recorded because they were thought of as interesting and important documentation by themselves, but because scholars were trying to give consistency to canonized views of African American music and folklore.

John Lomax operated a neat distinction between the materials that interested him and those that did not. The following quote from his field notes<sup>14</sup> clearly testifies to that.

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 at the Darrington Farm some thirty miles away – few singers and they were not interested in old songs or the old manner of singing.

The fact that producing a recording was a complex and taxing task does not change the fact that John Lomax approached the field with his mind already set on what he wanted to find. At the time, though, that was the norm. That kind of behaviour in folklore research became less frequent only when the recording techniques became simpler and

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<sup>14</sup> *Southern Recording Trip Fieldnotes*, 23 April 1939, deposited at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. as part of the archives of the *Southern Mosaic: the John and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip*.

cheaper. This selective method backlashed on the variety, proportion and composition of the materials produced. It also led to many recordings being *unicums* and thus limiting the chances of comparison between versions of the same material.

Similarly, Alan Lomax already had a clear idea of what he was going to find before embarking on his research in 1941, picking up where his father had left two years before. In the “field procedures” file deposited at the Library of Congress with the materials pertaining that expedition,<sup>15</sup> Lomax prepared for his assistants a general frame of the kind of music that they would expect to find:

2) Work Songs

- a) rhythmic songs of the road gang, chain gang from Parchman, 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).

That account speaks loud of the perspective that he had as a researcher on those materials. First, he’s starting from the idea that the items discussed at point (d) are rhythmically free *a priori*. Secondly, this section is put down as pertaining to a radically distinct genre of music from blues and jazz (to which another section altogether is destined), thus being one of the last researchers until recent years to refer to hollers as examples of a genre that held interesting value *per se*, and not just in relation to others.

#### 4. Relics from another continent

Charles Peabody already described his informant’s songs as “African”. He was not the first nor he would be the last one. Similarly to Peabody, in 1922 Thomas V. Talley recounted of having heard a certain amount of calls and responses from the fields without “peculiar significance”, «for whatever pleasure these negroes found in the cries», and suggested parallelisms with «the call of a song bird in the woods being answered by another», or reminiscences, «though not so musical», from the histories of the trip made by a missionary friend of his in the Congo (Talley 1922: 377).

Marshall Stearns, in 1956, recurred to the indeterminacy of the concept of “falsetto snap”, which he deemed as an absolutely unavoidable part of any holler (Stearns 1956: 10), to claim that the phenomenon is «common, of course, in West Africa and survives in the South today» (*ibidem*: 11).

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<sup>15</sup> Library of Congress, Washington D.C., *Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection*, folder 2.

[quoting Odum and Johnson] conclude that ‘the vocal cord must undergo a snap.’ This ‘snap’ is what Harold Courlander calls ‘the falsetto voice’, adding that it originated in West Africa. [...] traces of the cry or holler can be heard in most of jazz. It exists virtually intact in the work song, the shouting spiritual, and above all, the blues (*ibidem*: 101).

In 1963 Courlander published *Negro Folk Music USA* (1963), where he dedicated a whole chapter to the hollers. The author talked about the falsetto ‘snap’ but also about the function of the high volume with which the singers sung those hollers and calls, to communicate through wide distances. For the author a system of communication with those qualities showed similarities with those he heard in the rural areas of Nigeria that he visited, as well as in other parts of the world. In 1966, Courlander published a series of LP titled *Negro Folk Music of Alabama*, informed by his own research in the Southern states. In the liner notes the author focuses on single elements that, from his perspective, could tie those recordings to «many available recordings from West, Central and East Africa» (Courlander 1966).<sup>16</sup> Among these, the “humming style”, or in other words the tendency to prolong or, if needed, to add a bilabial consonant at the end of some words to obtain a “humming” prolonged effect. It is worthy of note the preference of the author to not get to hastily written conclusions:

The discussion of surviving non-European traits in American Negro singing is not intended to create the impression that this music is “African”, however. [...] The notation of African atavisms is intended only to point out the complicated and composite nature of American Negro music (*ibidem*).

It is then with Paul Oliver that the research on the African origins of certain elements integral to African American music started to dialogue with historical informations. In *Savannah Syncopators* (1970) Oliver suggested that scholars should focus their attention to the central-western area of the African continent, because of the influx of the Arab culture and because of the slave trade towards the American colonies.

Roberts (1972: 48) was the first to quote a recording when talking about the relation between Africa and hollers when he proposed a comparison between *Wild Ox Moan* by Vera Hall, recorded by Lomax,<sup>17</sup> and an Isongo lullaby (*ibidem*: 165). The comparison is only suggested, and not further discussed. Then, a few pages later, (*ibidem*: 179), he fabricated some holler lyrics and imagined how a possible way to develop them might lead to what he sees as blues lyrics, simply referring to the repetition of materials.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Liner notes to the Smithsonian Folkways LP FW04474. Interestingly enough, there seems to be no hint of doubt, on the author’s behalf, of how taking into account an area as vast as “West, Central and East Africa” could lead to relevant practical problems.

<sup>17</sup> The author does not tell which one of the many existing versions.

<sup>18</sup> Between the documentation that I collected I found zero hollers that contain the lyrics «going down the river before long», as per Robert’s text. Even admitting that there was a source with that same lyrics, the author forgot to mention which one it was, making it extremely difficult to validate its existence. Moreover, the lyrics development suggested by the author is simply not realistic. None of the hollers that I found repeats the same verse four times in a row. These are the reasons why I suggest that the lyrics were fabricated by the author.

In the following years, publications about blues history kept repeating those same notions. A perfect example is the brief paragraph that Evans dedicates to the subject (1974: 248):

The blues genre arose from the field hollers sung by black farmers working alone behind a mule and plow or chopping weeds with a hoe. Hollers were sung mainly to pass the time and to take the singer's mind off his rather tedious and uninteresting work. There was seldom any audience. Thus the singer could holler whatever thoughts might come across his mind as well as sing traditional lines and stanzas or set pieces that he had memorized. These hollers became blues when the singer later set them to an instrumental accompaniment.

Dauer (1979: 69) suggested a parallel between American bluesmen and African griots.<sup>19</sup> This is a perfect example of the fact that a certain idea of hollers already became canon: the author demonstrates the parallel by pointing out that the elements that constitute a griot's chant are howls and falsetto, which correspond to the traditional description accepted at that time of hollers.

In his last publications, Alan Lomax too gave his opinion on this research for the African origins of the hollers. In *The Land Where the Blues Began* (1992: 233), while referring to his research for his project Cantometrics,<sup>20</sup> the hollers were rapidly compared to songs in Western Africa, in the Great Lake Region between the Tutsi. The author claims them to be common in the reigns and empires of North Africa and in the Middle East, between the Wolof of Senegal and the Hausa Muslims from Nigeria.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the tradition of field singing that became the hollers had some relation with similar African practices, and that some of them might still be traced today. The problem is how this lineage is demonstrated: all of the aforementioned quotes were lacking in terms of the reliability of the documentation, the precision of reference to defined musical cultures (especially in regard to Africa), the quality of the comparison and analytical discussion. As a result, the precision and reliability of the connections between hollers practices and specific African traditions seldom matched the certainty with which scholars affirmed them (Vanelli 2013: 164-189).

It is clear that the narrative around the relation between hollers and Africa was slowly but steadily moving in the direction of higher levels of specification, thanks also to the contributions from research on the history of the Atlantic slave trade, which indirectly suggested researchers what African countries to focus on. Some researchers started to rely on their own personal and direct knowledge of African contexts when addressing African American music production. At the same time, scholars were starting to pin-

<sup>19</sup> In Western Africa, the griots are poets and singers that preserve and transmit the history of local groups through their songs, normally accompanying their singing with the use of cordophones.

<sup>20</sup> More information on Cantometrics, with relevant bibliography, can be found on the Association for Cultural Equity website (see Media and link section).



point observations on technical elements that underlined the complex and rich music structure of hollers, like the important and still valid observations about the “humming” sounds and syllable modifications by Courlander. Nevertheless, the discourses about hollers were biased by the lack of a better understanding of their specific traits.

None of the authors above referenced hollers recordings, or did so in a very generic way, without delving into further analyses. The only recording quoted in this field of research for African connections was *Wild Ox Moan*, which is, as per title, a moan, or love toast, not a holler. All hollers I collected are very personal songs where the singers sung about their individual perspectives. An indirect testimony to this is the bijective relation between interpreters and hollers in documentation. Even prolific singers like Leadbelly recorded only one holler.<sup>21</sup> Exceptions to this rule are so sparse that they confirm it.<sup>22</sup> This connection between a singer and his holler was so important that peers underlined it: see for example the reference to the man renowned because he was the one who «could sing Diamond Joe».<sup>23</sup> Instead, in *Wild Ox Moan* Vera Hall performed a moan that she probably didn't create,<sup>24</sup> where she assumed the point of view of a man wooing a woman.

Some of the connections suggested by the researchers, even when coming from personal experiences, did not stand on firm ground. The notion that in open fields, during long days of work, people would shout to communicate with others through distances, is not enough to demonstrate specific relation between geographical areas, like Courlander suggested. The parallel between bluesmen and griots by Dauer, without a proper analysis of musical repertoires, is simply unacceptable. Similarly, the reference to the falsetto “snap”, quoted by nearly all scholars as a typical feature of hollers, does not correspond to the reality of the documentation: among all the hollers I traced, only five of them contain falsetto passages or “snaps”.<sup>25</sup> Although these five recordings demonstrate the variety of singing techniques used in the genre, their relative rarity explains why the ‘snap’ shouldn't be seen as a defining feature of hollers, and thus couldn't be used as a parameter when making comparisons to African music.

<sup>21</sup> Huddie Leadbetter, 1935, *Ain' goin' down to de well no mo'*, AFS 00048 B, Library of Congress.

<sup>22</sup> The only one that I found so far was Steward W.D. “Bama”, an exceptionally skillful, smart and provocative singer who recorded *If she don't come on de big boat* in 1939 (AFS 02676 B02, Library of Congress) and *Levee Camp Holler* in 1947 (T803R03, Alan Lomax Association for Cultural Equity archives). Even in this case, the recordings are eight years apart from each other, and we could argue that during that period might have substituted the other.

<sup>23</sup> Reported in *Afro-American Blues and Game Songs* liner notes (Rounder CD 1513, Library of Congress, Archive of Folk Culture).

<sup>24</sup> From the informations on *Wild Ox Moan* (1948), T809R01, Association for Cultural Equity: «This song is thought to have been composed by Vera Hall's friend and mentor, Rich Amerson.»

<sup>25</sup> Library of Congress: *She brought my breakfast*, Jim Henry “Duck” Horne (1939) AFS 02688 A02; *Early in the mornin'*, Hollis “Fat Head” Washington (1939) AFS 02676 A02; *I left my woman in the backdoor cryin'*, Richardson James (1939) AFS 02717 B02; *I got a woman up the bayou*, William Ross “Po' chance” (1939) AFS 02676 B01. Archives of the Association for Cultural Equity: *Levee camp holler*, Stewart W.D. “Bama” (1947) T803R03.

## 5. Blues People<sup>26</sup>

Taking advantage of the rarefied descriptions of the genre, of its (apparent) evanescence in documentation, intrigued by the fact that they were sung only by African American people, and searching for clues as to the possible “origins” of one of the most popular African American music genres, many scholars looked at the hollers as one of the possible threads that ended up knotted together in the blues.

On the subject, Willis Lawrence James wrote that «field cries, or ‘corn field whoops’, signify either a loneliness of spirit, due to the isolation of the worker, or serve as a signal to someone nearby, or merely as a bit of self indulgence – about the same thing as singing to one’s self» (1955: 20), and that the «structure is based upon a series of Negro cries» (*ibidem*: 25).

In his 1956 book, Marshall Stearns quoted John W. Work and his enumeration of the elements that, from his point of view, demonstrate a clear connection between blues and hollers: «the excessive portamento, the slow time, the preference for the flattened third, the melancholy type of tune» (1956: 99). Then he gave three audio documents as examples: a not better specified *Arwhoolie* from the Archives of the Library of Congress,<sup>27</sup> of which he forgets to give any clearer archival reference, Leadbelly’s holler *Ain’t goin’ down to de well no more*, which one of the two existing versions is not given to know, and a recording by Chano Pozo from 1947, of which he forgets to mention the title. The analysis is so brief that it could be quoted entirely:

‘*Arwhoolie*’ is one of the most interesting since it employs falsetto, portamento, or sliding from note to note, and blue tonality; in fact, it is a blues without the rhythm and the European harmony. Leadbelly recorded a similar holler [title]. Identical melodic phrases occur on a 1947 recording by Chano Pozo, who belonged to a Nigerian cult in Havana. (*ibidem*: 101)

We already confronted the problem of the falsetto passages. The observation about the use of glissando movements is agreeable, although we could challenge the use of the idea of notes to describe the minute elements that compose hollers (Vanelli 2016). Furthermore, I think that we could agree that even if we seem to have a general idea of what a “blue tonality” is, we still would need to prove its efficacy to describe anything more than a generic sensation. If the author wanted to get more specific, he should have had to describe the structure of the scale, as there are a number of different ones used in blues. The definition of the audio recording as a «blues without the rhythm and

<sup>26</sup> The title of this paragraph quotes the famous classic by Amiri Baraka (1963), who clearly played on words, as the book focuses on the relations between the history of black people and the blues.

<sup>27</sup> From the description given, he is most probably talking about the *Arwhoolie* recorder by John Lomax in 1939. The singer is Thomas J. Marshall, student assistant of a catholic church. Informations taken from the liner notes of the LP *Negro Work Songs and Calls*, Library of Congress AFS L8 (1943).

the European harmony», without a description of what else of the blues remains in the recording leaves us perplexed at best. Furthermore, the juxtaposition with Leadbelly's recording is very superficial, as the two songs are very different in terms of their structure, their theme, and the music resources employed. Without a better indication of the title, I was not able to find the Chano Pozo's recording quoted (as he was quite a prolific musician), but after seeing the way the aforementioned discussion had taken place, I can't help but feel skeptical about the quality of this juxtaposition too.

A decade later, discussions on African American cultural production oftentimes took on more plainly visible political objectives. Scholars talking about the origins of the blues intended to demonstrate its relevance in the history of popular music and culture, thus contributing to the wider fight for the rights of all African American people.

In his 1963 publication where he inserted a whole chapter on field hollers, Harold Courlander suggested that «the ornamentations and free melodic and rhythmic elements heard in field calls may also be heard in prayers, moans, spirituals, blues, and solo work songs» (Courlander 1963: 88) and that “calls and cries are simply extracted out of the common storehouse of musical tradition” (*ibidem*).

In his 1963 publication *Blues People*, Amiri Baraka made way for a new topic about the birth of the Blues. Referring to hollers as “shouts”, in his volume (1963: 61, 63) he suggested that they were born from long repetitions of old American ballads: songs as a panacea for the solitude imposed on the workers by the subdivision of labor after the civil war. Six years later, the classic *The Story of the Blues* by Paul Oliver echoed Amiri Baraka's theories about the relation between blues and solitude, and (Oliver 1969: 18) postulated a gradual substitution from work songs to field hollers after the civil war, caused by the new division of labor.<sup>28</sup> After briefly giving voice to the possibility of the African origins of the music materials that inform field hollers and work songs, he described the hollers (*ibidem*: 25) as “freely structured and modal in character”. When musicians decided to apply the harmonic structure of ballads to these materials, then the first blues would have been born.

Dauer (1979: 11-13), after giving a resume of the typical descriptions of hollers in relation to blues, tried to open up a discussion about the metric of holler lyrics, and quoted the verses «I've got a boychild in Texas, he ought to be 'bout grown» as an example of simil-throaic verses. Dauer does not know, probably, that he stepped on a hornet's nest. The lyrics that he used as example, taken from an LP liner notes, not only do not correspond to any recording in the disk, but neither to any known recording deposited in any archive. Let's interrupt for a moment the historical reconstruction of the scholarly view of the hollers for a useful parenthesis on the subject, that may give us a better idea of the situation regarding holler documentation and handling.

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<sup>28</sup> It is not possible to demonstrate this idea because the existing documentation tells us that hollers and worksongs simply co-existed in the same periods, and that both gradually disappeared at the same time.

One of the difficulties in my research on hollers documentation has been the chronic lack of transcriptions of the audio recordings. In some cases, the holler had been published inside official LP publications, and the liner notes contained the lyrics. One of those apparently lucky cases was *I don't mind the weather* by Jim Henry (1937), recorded in Parchman, first track of the LP *Afroamerican Blues and Game Songs* published by the Library of Congress.<sup>29</sup> In the liner notes we find what are supposed to be the lyrics of the songs, and they start with the two verses used by Dauer in his example. The problem is that anyone who would try to listen to the actual recording contained in the LP would hear a very different incipit: «I don't mind the weather, *wob-haw*, if the wind don't blow». Song and title correspond, but the lyrics do not. The problem is multi-layered: we have a holler recording without transcriptions, lyrics without a holler recording, a publisher who did not double check the content of the publication, and an author convinced of being at work on holler lyrics without having even listened to the recording that they should refer to.

In general, the discussion about the origins of the blues had the positive effect of underlining the variety and relevance of southern regional music styles, while promoting the visibility of a wide array of otherwise less renowned or even forgotten African American musicians. But despite its importance in terms of the re-evaluation of the contribution of African American people to the history of American folk music, when the discourse touched on field hollers, it clearly relied on problematic oversimplifications. Gunther Shuller commented on this epidemic of hints about relations between hollers and the blues: «All very well and good, but it has never been recorded exactly how and when these assimilations came about» (1968: 34). And yet, a few pages later (*ibidem*: 36), he too chose to cut to the chase claiming that the blues was «a gradually emerging synthesis of field hollers, work songs, and prison songs», without further explanations or references.

The first main issue was, again, the lack of a clear identification of hollers characteristics, coupled with too sparse and generic references to actual documentation. To say that they were rhythmically free, or freely structured, or generically modal, or melancholic, or “extracted from the common storehouse of musical traditions”, did not add any information about what a holler actually was, how it was composed or used. Those non-descriptions contributed even less to the discourse about hollers circulation and eventual contact with other music styles, like the blues. Hence, the second main issue: this feeble conceptualization of hollers, paired with their slow but irreversible disappearance, left them open to being used as suggestive examples of pre-blues forms. The problem is that existing documentation is not enough to support this thesis, or at least, not in the consequential way that these scholars were trying to push forward. Hollers were first documented by Howard Odum in the 1910s, in the same years that the blues started to coagulate in a genre. Let's take for example Figure 1. Every blues music aficionado would

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<sup>29</sup> Library of Congress, AAFS L4.

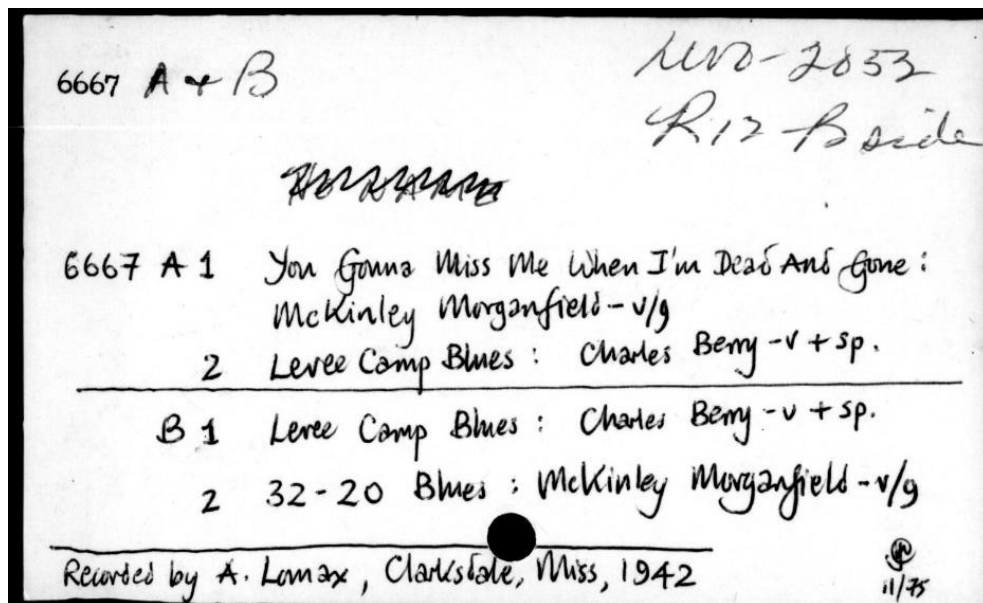


FIGURE 1. Archival reference for the recording by Alan Lomax (1942), 6667, side A + B, Library of Congress.

readily recognize the first and the last songs in the lists as two of the recordings from the legendary “discovery” of McKinley Morganfield, later known as Muddy Waters. In this image we are looking at a fragment of one of the first recording sessions of a man whose artistic endeavors had a tremendous echo on the history of music.<sup>30</sup> Right there, between those two fundamental recordings, Charles Berry, who accompanied Morganfield on the guitar in another session,<sup>31</sup> sung for Lomax two versions of his holler. A holler that he already recorded for Lomax, with some slight variations, under the title *Cornfield Holler*,<sup>32</sup> and that here he significantly renamed *Levee Camp Blues*. This is a pragmatic example of the fact that blues and field hollers co-existed as intertwined practices, that bluesmen had the possibility to listen to hollers performances and vice-versa, and that some performers were actually knowledgeable in both the genres. The change of title is also a testament to “race records” marketing influences.<sup>33</sup> In general, this image demonstrates that trying to determine the evolution of one genre into the other as if music could exist outside of the singular life trajectories of the individuals that perform it is not only extremely difficult, but also not particularly interesting. An approach that considered the transition, translation and transformation of elements (techniques, patterns,

<sup>30</sup> From the concerts around the world during the blues revival, to his relations with Rolling Stones, Muddy Waters’ career is exceptional. For more informations, I suggest to start from Gordon (2013).

<sup>31</sup> *I be bound to write to you* (1942, AFS 06629 A01, Library of Congress).

<sup>32</sup> Library of Congress, AFS 06629 A04 and AFS 06629 B01.

<sup>33</sup> For more information on the marketing of blues and on the evolution of the music industry of Race Records I suggest to start from Sutton (2016).

structures, themes and so on) from one genre to the other, in both directions, by focusing on the individual interpreters' perspectives, preferences and capabilities, is bound to give us a richer insight on the relations between hollers and the blues.

## 6. The missing link

In the following years, a large number of publications kept probing the hollers genre, mainly relying on the narratives established in the past. A generic reference to hollers seemed unavoidable every time the subject the origins of the blues or the African roots of African American music were brought up. Cook (1973), Polillo (1975), Oakley (1976), Epstein (1977), Titon (1977), Levine (1977), Palmer (1981), Spencer (1992), Yurchenco (1995), Muir (2010) repeated the same informations derived from the writings by Oliver and Courlander. An interesting example of the late developments of this trend is the work by Gerhard Kubik, in his volume *Africa and the Blues*, published in 1999. The book surely raised the bar in the field of study of the relations between African and African American music practices, and did so in terms of the impressive amount of references, examples and direct documentations that inform the discussion. Yet, the few pages where the author references hollers follow the same narrative of his predecessors.

The author first refers to hollers on page 26. He quotes Ottenheimer (1987) who cites "a few European travelers" about the peculiarities "of a melismatic bardic nature" of the African American cries. By force of bibliographical references alone, the author then affirms that "some of these melodic, textual, and stylistic ingredients were eventually absorbed by what would become the blues".

He then brings up the hollers again on pages 65 and 66. The author quotes Paul Oliver and his certainty, expressed in *Savannah Syncopators* (1970: 66), that there is a possible connection between the hollers and the declamatory style used in Ghana. Right after that, the author comments on a personal communication that he had with David Evans, where he expressed his opinion that hollers derived from "cattle herding song tradition", adding that "of course the West African savannah is an area of much cattle herding". This assumption is not demonstrable. African American people in the South, especially under slavery, were for the greatest majority not cattle herders (Littlefield 2017). Furthermore, herding techniques used in the South of the United States probably come from North-European traditions, not from Africa (McWhiney and McDonald 1985). Last but not least, none of the holler lyrics that I analyzed so far contained the slightest reference to cattle herding, whereas the references to agricultural labor abound.

A reference to the hollers appears also on page 85. Explaining what the distinctive traits of the blues are, he chooses as the first one the fact that it is a "solo singing tradition". He then adds that "related to this complex are the unaccompanied field hollers", following with a list of discographic references to compilations of African American folk

music. Right after, in the same page, he adds: «In Africa I have repeatedly recorded parallels, for example among the Vute and Tikar of the Cameroon Grassfield areas (cfr. Hollers and hunting shouts, recordings B8662, in the Phonogrammarchiv Vienna, 1964/Kubik)». Those “parallels”, as well as the compilations referenced, do not seem to be referring to the hollers in particular, but to the wide genre of “solo singing tradition[s]”, and the author does not clarify what those “parallels” consist in.

One last reference to the hollers shows up at page 102, inside a discussion about the lack of documentation covering the XIX century African American profane songs: «secular song form, hollers and lullabies ‘weird in interval and strange in rhythm’ [cit. from Peabody 1903] whose melodic materials eventually contributed to the genesis of the blues [...]». Yet again, hollers appear in a chain of authority quotations, and as a historical pendant of the blues.

## 7. New frontiers of discussion

Getting closer to the present day, the wave of epistemological uncertainty that flooded the academic world has had, if nothing else, the effect to put forward some doubts about the blues-hollers connection. A good example is given by the definition of the word “field holler”, written by Paul Oliver, for the *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music* (2003, vol. II: 137): «Although it has been generally assumed that hollers were the antecedent of the blues, there is no documentary evidence confirming this». Another example, in the volume *American Folklore: an Encyclopedia* (Brunvand 1996: 372, 373), for the word “holler” we can read: «Contemporary thinking de-emphasizes the romanticized view that the holler is a pre-blues form and suggests that hollering was one among a familiar stock of vocal techniques from which performers borrowed» (Burtis 1996).

Some scholars thus started to analyze the lyrical content and the language used in the hollers, as an oral source, inside more ample articles that dealt with historical analysis and discussion on the Jim Crow era. Those scholars did not look at the holler documentation simply as a sample of pre-blues forms, or as post-slavery African remnants. Rather, they started analyzing hollers as meaningful documents able to shed light on the context inside which they were used, on the personal life trajectories of the performers, and even on the effects of the decades of misinterpretations of hollers documentation.

Giampaolo Chiriaco, in the article *Filling the Space, Field Hollers and the Role of Singing in African-American Communities* (2012), after briefly quoting some authors on the relevance of vocal expression in a community and on the possible connections between hollers and African singing practices,<sup>34</sup> discusses the results of his research on the docu-

<sup>34</sup> Among them, the most interesting one might be Diouf’s suggestion to compare *Levee Camp Holler* to a “Koran” recitation, which might sound feasible and interesting at first (Diouf, 1998: 198). The problem is that there are at least 6 performers who recorded a “Levee Camp Holler”: Lewis “Billy” Bell (1942, AFS

mentation available from the nineteenth century on hollers. From this documentation the author deduces that they were a «vocal style, rather than a crystallized musical form» (*ibidem*: 1). This vocal style would have then been one of the culturally accepted ways to manipulate one's own social presence, pertinence, and relevance, or to maintain contact between the members of the group and to permit the expression of meaningful or problematic contents (exclamations of terror, sadness, melancholy, solitude).

The author's research, based on the recurrence and use of the word "holler" in the Federal Writers' Project documentation<sup>35</sup> tends from my point of view to conform to the linguistic definition of the term, and by doing that it falls in its semantic trap. The word "holler" is polysemic in a double sense: on one side there are a lot of terms that are used to talk about the musical form hereby under discussion, but at the same time the term could be used to describe different actions, as it's a synonym for "shout", both as a noun and as a verb. It was thus used to describe different forms of expressions, from the simple call for meal time gathering, to the complex exhibition of one's own existential condition, to the sudden sound of disapproval for something going wrong, to the rendition, through stratified symbols, of the pain caused by the death of someone close. With this, I do not intend to say that the simpler forms of hollers, outlined in Chiriaco's research, did not have their own level of formalization nor I intend to diminish their importance in the construction of the social context of the African American communities. What I want to point out is the importance of paying attention to the different meanings tied to the word "holler", or in other words to admit a historical and local differentiation in the use of the word to refer to objects or actions that are, ultimately, different.

If Chiriaco's article is an interesting head start for those who would like to probe the scant documentation on nineteenth century hollering practices, still I believe that the lack of concrete analysis of the hollers documented in the Jim Crow era reduces the reliability of its conclusions. In particular, his claim that hollers were a "vocal style"; rather than a "crystallized musical form", does not seem to be backed up by an adequate confrontation with the documentation.

On a different level of relations with historical documentation, in 1991 John Cowley published an article, *Shack-Bullies and Levee Contractors: Bluesmen as Ethnographers*, where he reconstructed the social, economic and cultural system of levee camps. The documentation collected by Cowley for his article is vast and very well detailed, and comprises a number of references to lyrics of songs, among which figure some hollers. In his article, Cowley does not take into consideration hollers with a musicological perspective, but as oral sources. The care with which he handles and explains some of the

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06646 A1 and A2), John "Black Sampson" Gibson (1933, AFS 00179 B03), William Henderson (1942, AFS 06646 B04), Ed Lewis (1959, T886R04), Johnny Lee Moore (1959, T886R03), and Steward W.D. "Bama" (1957, T803R03). These hollers are very different in terms of the musical resources used, and the author does not explain which one he is using as reference for the comparison.

<sup>35</sup> The Federal Writers' Project was a collection of interviews to ex-slaves. The materials can be freely accessed through the website of the Library of Congress (see Media and links section)



expressions used in those lyrics, tying them to the social and political context where they were collected (or that they refer to), goes to a great length in demonstrating how much those sources could tell us about the Jim Crow south, if properly taken into account.

Similarly, an article from 2006 by Michael McCoyer is a dense reconstruction of the exploitative methods used in levee camps. The article suggests a point of view that takes also into account issues of gender, race, identity and culture production by the workers, and refers to the lyrics of some hollers (both by levee workers and prisoners) to demonstrate the thesis. The author's multifaceted approach to the problem, and the place hollers have in the article's logical development, again demonstrate what those materials could potentially give us in terms of a better understanding of the period.

One last article needs to be quoted. In 2013 Shobana Shankar wrote a brief but outstanding piece regarding the cultural production of the women in Parchman Farm talking about its richness and diversity, the difficulty to reduce it to the standardized views of African American folklore given by scholars, and the impact of their work on the perception of African American culture and identity. Shankar's discourse, taking into account gender, race and economic perspectives, offers the reader a robust, multifaceted, multidisciplinary, effective and direct point of view that puts into question the work by scholars of the past (mainly Cohn, but also the Lomaxes, Herbert Halpert, Lawrence Gellert), giving us the ability to rethink their perspectives. At the same time, her discussion relies on a thoughtful and attentive analysis of both the lyrics of the songs, the poems and letters of the Parchman women, and a wider, minute documentation about the world that surrounded them. The author's pervasive focus on the details challenges the standardized views established in academia, while giving us an important methodological suggestion on how the holler documentation could be discussed in a less fallacious way.

## Conclusions

As time went by, hollers have been the target of repeated attempts to be fit into narrow categories. The act of referring to hollers to establish a historical relation with the Blues or with African practices went hand in hand with the inability of giving a proper description of what hollers actually were, how they were composed or used, what they were communicating. This limited perspective even developed, in recent cases, into the denial of the existence of a holler genre, downgrading them to generic styles or fragmented and unrelated practices. This oversimplifying reductionism, by giving up altogether an assessment of the existing materials, seems to be just another aspect of the same misuseage of the legacy of hollers.

The amount of documentation available is enough to create a general definition of hollers. As they were forms of communication through musical means, any analytical interpretation of their features should take into account three aspects: the lyrics content

and structure, the methods used to express them and their localized use in a certain context. My analysis led me to distinguishing between two sets of common hollers features.<sup>36</sup>

Hollers were songs based on short poetic compositions, mostly composed of rhyming couplets of stress meter verses. Interpreters sung them at the top of their lungs, without recurring to falsetto timbre. The music structure used to sing the verses is comprised of a series of modules, normally one for each hemistich. Each singer used his own set of modules, which were limited in number: normally between three and eight. Modules melodic profiles varied between singers, although the single elements composing them and the methods of variation were shared. All singers had modules used for specific logical parts of the lyrics, like openings, expositions, closing formulas, and so on. Hollers melodic profiles normally moved between pitches that adhered to a tempered scale, but with a continuous glissando effect.

While these formulas could have contributed to the clarity of the message conveyed, there was another set of features that went in the opposite direction. Hollers relied on a multifaceted compositional system, on codified vocabulary and on particular vocal techniques. The lyrics were often built on emic tropes. The stress meter verses were filled with interjections that disrupted the rhythmic flow. The melody lines were systematically complicated through different methods of variation. The melodic profile could sometimes lead the voice to rapidly drop down one or two octaves, going from a loud shout to a low whisper. The voice timbre and the pronunciation hindered a univocal recognition of some key words.

My hypothesis is that while the first set of hollers features could have contributed to the clarity of the message conveyed, the second one veiled it. For these reasons, hollers could be described as a codified means of communication that relied on vocal techniques to convey content while efficiently limiting access to it only to those who knew about the code itself. This must not come to a big surprise, if we consider the context where they were used.

As we have seen with the last articles quoted, some scholars have already shown how a deeper and meaningful attention to the documentation is liable of giving us a great deal of references to challenge the existing theories regarding hollers in particular and African American culture in general. Hollers expressed the burdens, the hopes and the troubles of African Americans who lived in a highly racist environment, where their bodies and their labor were objectified and turned into capital, mere fuel for a production system that thrived on their backs. Those songs functioned as a receptacle for all the worries and pains that they had to face in that context, and as a tool for discussing

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<sup>36</sup> The author is working on a comprehensive description of the ways field hollers were constructed and used, as a PhD project for the University of Bologna to be published in 2019. A first overview can be found in Vanelli (2013), and the first analytical observations on the structure and composition of hollers have been published in Vanelli (2016).

them, pointing them out and collectively facing them. Their variety and significance as affirmations of identity give us important insight on the complexity of the historical experience of African Americans, one that cannot be easily reduced to oversimplified relations of gender, race, power and identity.

For those reasons, we could study field hollers as meaningful documents reflecting the struggles and complexities of that time. To study hollers, though, would first require a recognition of the existence of the field holler genre in itself, and of its musical details.

## Media and links

The majority of audio materials referenced here can be found in the archives at the Library of Congress or in Alan Lomax's Association for Cultural Equity online archive:

<https://loc.gov/>

<http://www.culturalequity.org/>

The materials from the Federal Writers' Project can be freely accessed here:

<https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/newdeal/fwp.html>

The field notes for the recording trip by John and Ruby Lomax in the South can be accessed here:

<https://www.loc.gov/item/lomaxbib000855/>

The latest documentation on field hollers are some videos produced by Alan Lomax in 1978, that can be freely accessed on the Association for Cultural Equity Youtube website:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCInpAOuv6nqdf6EheU4Wfjg>

A number of hollers recordings were also uploaded to youtube, and some important publications of collections of African American music were uploaded on Spotify, like the entire "field recordings" collection produced by Document records. The number 8, that I referred to in note 8, can be accessed for free at this link:

<https://open.spotify.com/album/1yPzQyYFccBcPVTnhXiNcI>

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