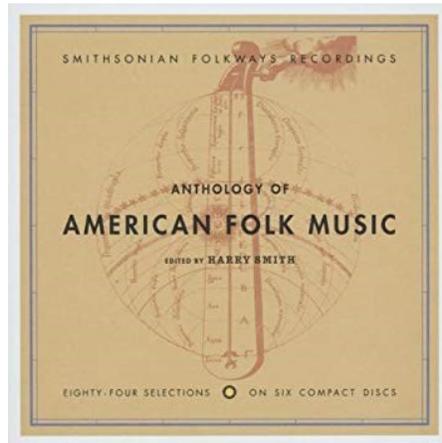


# “Anthology of American Folk Music”--Harry Smith, editor (1952)

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Essay by Ian Nagoski (guest post)\*



*Original album package*

“An Anthology of American Folk Music” is a compilation of 84 vernacular performances from commercial 78rpm discs originally issued during the years 1927-32. It was produced by Harry Smith and issued as three two-LP sets by Moses Asch’s Folkways Records in 1952. It was kept in print from the time of its original release for three decades before it was reissued on compact disc to critical heraldry by Smithsonian/ Folkways in 1997. During the 1950s and 60s, the collection deeply influenced a generation of musicians and listeners and has helped to define the idea of “American Music” in the popular imagination, due in large part to the peculiar sensibilities of its compiler, Harry Smith.

Smith was born Mary 29, 1923 in Portland, Oregon, and raised in small towns in the northwest by parents with humdrum jobs and involvements with both Lummi Indians (on this mother’s side) and Masonry and Spiritualism (on his father’s). By his teens, he had attended exclusive Indian ceremonies and bought recordings by African-American performers, including Memphis Minnie, Rev. F.W. McGee, Tommy McClennan, and Yank Rachell, which lit the fuse of a life-long fireworks display of obsessive collecting of records that were “exotic in relation to what was considered the world culture of high class music,” as he put it in a 1960s interview with John Cohen.

After a year and half studying anthology at the University of Seattle, Smith relocated to Berkeley, California, ca. 1942, where he ingratiated himself in the nascent experimental cinema scene and built his record collection to, he said, about 20,000 pieces. He bought out leftover dealer stock in lots and gathered specific, interesting titles where he could. A dedicated listener, he amassed not only blues, hillbilly, and gospel recordings but also Cajun, Trinidadian, Rumanian, Irish, and Mexican records as well as many discs abandoned by Japanese-Americans when they were interned. When he relocated to New York City around 1950, he brought with him only about 2,000 of those discs.

Primarily a post-Kandinsky painter on the be-bop scene in New York with a voracious appetite for historical and anthropological literature and aspirations to create more of the films that he’d started in California, he lived as a disconnected “beat,” in perpetual and terrible need of money and approached Moe Asch to buy his record collection. Smith later recalled that, at their meeting, he wore a jacket with holes mended with masking tape on which he had drawn tweed patterns in

order to make his poverty less obvious. Asch declined to buy Smith's collection but expressed an interest in issuing a compilation made from them. So, Smith, 27 years old, under the influence of narcotics, hypnagogics, hallucinogens, and amphetamine as often as possible, set to work. He needed the money fast.

A perfectionist and artist of great precision, Smith assembled the collection with the sense that it would be heard by musicologists and musicians, retaining elements of beat-generation humor and a previously unheard-of determination to declassify performers by race. He strictly limited inclusion to what he viewed as good performances with good lyrics and, for better or worse, excluded recordings by immigrants, Jews, and American Indians. He was certainly influenced by and made reference to earlier ethnographic works including Francis James Child's anthology of ballads and Alan Lomax's 1937 mimeographed list of "American Folk Songs on Commercially Available Records."

For American Leftists in the 1950s whose tastes were epitomized by Pete Seeger and Henrietta Yurchenko, Smith's "Anthology" was a revelation into the music of the "working people" of the US and their connections to traditions a century earlier. That Smith chose an image of a 17th century Robert Fludd drawing of a "celestial monochord" as the cover image for the set and carefully laid out notes in a surrealist-influenced collage for each track with synopses and references made the experience of the "Anthology" as if it was something mystical and Eternal, vastly different from, for instance, Henry Cowell's Music of the World's Peoples series, undertaken around the same time but retaining little of the cultural resonance of Smith's set.

Divided into Ballads, Social Music (subdivided into one LP of dance tunes and one LP of religious performances), and Songs, the Smith "Anthology" was supposed to have included a fourth volume--each connected to Earth, Air, Fire, and Water--but the fourth volume was never completed. A dispute with Moe Asch's secretary and business partner Marion Distler, who wanted a certain pro-Franklin D. Roosevelt bluegrass tune included and which didn't suit Smith's taste was part of the problem. But a pattern throughout Smith's working life was another. He regularly developed something unique and beautiful, then quickly expanded the idea to an unworkable degree and therefore never finished it, moving on to his next dream, even as the last one haunted him.

After a decade of work in films, Smith produced two more significant Folkways LPs. He recorded the Fugs in the mid-60s and then a group of Kiowa peyote songs that he recorded in Oklahoma. He considered the Kiowa three-LP set to be superior to his earlier "Anthology" for good reason; its structure and methods are more thorough. By the late 1970s, Smith had moved on from the way of working that had produced his "Anthology." His methods were more complex and detailed, partially through his film work, partially through his critical reading of the structuralist anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, and partially through missed career opportunities and egotism. "I reject," he said then, "that entire approach to music. Things that happened more than thirty years ago or something about the statute of limitations... I can no longer be held responsible for having put that thing together in the way it was put together."

By then, the damage was done. A post-War generation of folkies had declared what he'd quickly made from his record collection, in an attempt to keep the wolf from the door, a "Bible" of Americana, while he was a disillusioned middle-aged drunk on the Lower East Side with an amazing collections of records, Easter eggs, paper airplanes, and Seminole patchwork that no one much cared about.

When he was awarded a Grammy for his "Anthology" in 1991, a few months before he died, he said, both earnestly and blithely, "I'm glad to say that my dreams came true. That I saw America changed through music. And all that stuff that the rest of you are talking about."

At least two of the performers on Smith's "Anthology" were "rediscovered" in the 1960s and made second careers as a direct result of the recirculation of their songs--namely Mississippi John Hurt and Dock Boggs. Many songs were covered from the set, and many of the performers were given long-lasting recognition as a result of their inclusion.

The whole of Smith's work was to do with communication, of the transmission of thought and experience from one person to another, and he was a conduit of exceptional intuition. His condition of poverty through much of his life was often to do with his, as he put it, "snottiness"--his affectation that he knew better. But when one listens to his "Anthology," it's clear that he certainly did know better. Despite the limits he set for the project, there is no performance that is not in its own way fascinating, and it gives an expansive and powerful impression that we are, as Americans, one people who can create something together.

*Ian Nagoski is a music researcher and record producer in Baltimore, Maryland. He has produced dozens of reissues of early 20<sup>th</sup> century recordings in languages other than English for labels including Dust-to-Digital, Tompkins Square, Sound American, and his own Canary Records, and others. He has given talks across the US and Europe and written for a variety of publications.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.