
From the Director

Help Us Review Folkways Records

How does one go about reviewing more than two thousand records produced over forty years by one of the audio visionaries of the twentieth century? The answer is "with a lot of help from one's colleagues and friends." Readers of this column are invited to help as well.

The Archives of Traditional Music and the Folklore Institute are cooperating in a review of all Folkways Records still available (about 1,900), funded by grants from the Office of Folklife Programs of the Smithsonian Institution. Folkways Records was produced by Moses Asch, a visionary sound engineer who wanted to create a kind of commercial ethnographic archive of the world of sound. The records include sounds of cities, camps, and South African homesteads, spoken word (from Cicero to Eldridge Cleaver and excerpts from the McCarthy and Watergate hearings), children's music (Ella Jenkins, Pete Seeger, and others), jazz folk music, and a vast collection of ethnographic recordings.

The reason for the review is that the Smithsonian Institution has recently purchased the Folkways label, in conjunction with the Birch Tree Group, Ltd., which will oversee marketing and distribution. By the terms of the Smithsonian purchase, every recording will be kept available in some form. Yet the quality of Folkways records is definitely uneven by today's standards—both in terms of the selection of materials and in the accompanying documentation. Some records are not very good; others are excellent but have poor descriptive notes; yet others are superb on all counts. We are asking knowledgeable specialists to fill out a questionnaire on groups of records in their specialties in order to establish the strengths and weaknesses of the collection. The findings may have a bearing on which records are re-released in compact disc format, for example, or on the decision to improve the documentation on certain records in order to make them more useful.

In my last column I exhorted readers to help the Archives by making a donation and becoming a "Friend" or supporter. There are other ways you can help as well. If you have opinions about one or more Folkways records, please write them down and send them to me, so that we can include your ideas in our evaluation of the vast and exciting Folkways Record catalogue. Be sure to give the record numbers and/or correct titles, to avoid confusion. If you have opinions on new directions or projects the Smithsonian Institution should embark on with the Folkways label, send those as well, since I am certain they will be read with interest by the future Curator of the Folkways collection at the Smithsonian. And of course, if you haven't made a donation yet this year, slip a check in with your letter and you will continue to receive *Resound* and will have contributed to the activities of *this* experiment in the ethnographic documentation of the world of sound.



Resound

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Marilyn B. Graf, *Editor*

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Archives of Traditional Music
Morrison Hall
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405
(812) 335-8632

Anthony Seeger, *Director*
Dorothy S. Lee, *Associate Director*
Mary E. Russell, *Librarian*

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