

Anthology of American Folk Music Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

The release of the famous Anthology as a CD box last year was widely hailed as a watershed event. One Grammy award later, I finally got around to buying the set. I suppose I had resisted in part because of the price of a six-CD set, but more to the point was a reluctance to plod through six sides of musty, creaky folk chestnuts. When the set arrived, there was a palpable sense of dread as I opened the shipping carton. Inside was a red pasteboard LP-sized box, with a simple label in a familiar, dated typeface. Inside was a funky "handbook," crudely typeset and loaded with misspelling and weird graphics. There was also a somber-looking thick booklet, with the same schoolbook type. The set reminded me of the Scrabble game I'd played as a kid, or—no that was it! Sixth grade music class with Mrs. Horowitz, where we glumly sat in rows droning on about "Little Liza Jane."

So it took a bit of dedication to pop the first disk into the player. Three short tracks later I was hooked! In addition to its unquestioned significance, this is a work of entertainment. There are reasons why folk songs get passed down—they're fun, they tell compelling stories and occasionally, they even rock.

The Anthology was first released in 1952, compiled by a twenty-nine-year-old Northwestern eccentric with the deceptively inconspicuous name of Harry Smith. It is a carefully edited compendium of one man's view of American folk music, drawing exclusively from commercial recordings originally released from 1927 to 1932. Although there are recording cylinders containing folk songs from as early as 1888, the period captured here dates from the beginning of electronic recording to the general shutdown of the folk music industry due to the Great Depression.

The original Anthology was released as a true album of six LPs, along with the idiosyncratic "handbook."

What a very strange beast it is. Produced with a seemingly deliberate cheesiness, it contains a brief, paragraph-sized graphic for each song. There is basic information regarding the artist, original recording date and label. For ballads, there's also an odd, often funny synopsis of the song, written as a headline. For example, the song Mrs. Horowitz taught as "Frog Went A-Courtin'" ("King Kong Kitchie" here) is described as "Zoologic Miscegeny Achieved in Mouse Frog Nuptuals (sic), Relatives Approve." Similarly, the summary of Stackalee is "Theft of Stetson Hat Causes Deadly Dispute, Victim Identifies Self As Family Man."

The Anthology had a huge impact on the emerging folk movement of the early 1950s. If everyone that bought a Velvet Underground album formed a band, then everyone that bought the Anthology must have recorded a cover of at least one of its tunes. The extent of this influence is partially documented in the accompanying modern booklet, which attempts to list some of the covers of each song, divided into folk, rock, British, bluegrass, etc. It's rare that a song has fewer than a dozen covers listed.

Being folk music, there's also an implied freedom to rewrite the songs when they're re-recorded. One example is "Down On Penny's Farm," a light banjo blues about the misery of working on Penny's farm. The obvious rewrite is Dylan's "Maggie's Farm," where old Mr. Zimmerman declares he just ain't gonna work anymore. Then there's the Specials ska anti-Thatcher protest rewrite of Dylan. Ten years from now, there's bound to be another evolutionary step or three.

The Anthology is divided into three double-CD volumes: Ballads, Social Music and Songs.

Volumes 4 and 5 were in the works at some point, but by then Harry Smith had sold his collection, half to a private collector and half to the New York Public Library. Everyone had a favorite volume, and then favorite songs within that volume album.

Volume 1 (Ballads) contains an amazing number of familiar tunes, mostly twisted into unfamiliar patterns. "Stackalee," or course, has had numerous incarnations, including a top ten hit for Lloyd Price and a ska-like version by the Clash. "Kassie Jones" manages to wreck the train in this volume without the benefit of a snoutful of cocaine. For Titanic fans, there's "When That Great Ship Went Down." For me, there are two previously unknown standouts.

The first, "Peg and Awl" by the Carolina Tar Heels, is a mournful tune about the loss of shoe construction jobs to a newly invented machine in the 'Year of 18 and 4.' The tone of the singer is so distraught (the liner notes say "pathetic") that at first I thought this was a song of lost love — 'Peg and All.' Instead, it's protest music, crying against the onslaught of machinery, as is "John Henry," which follows in a few tracks.

My second favorite, "Drunkard's Special," is a shaggy dog tale of a man stumbling home and discovering a series of incriminating clues of his wife has been up to in his absence. First off, there's another mule, "where my mule ought to be." No honey, you're too drunk, that's a milk cow. Hmm, never seen a saddle on a milk cow. Next night, there's another coat on the coat rack. No honey, you're too drunk, that's a bed quilt. Hmm, never saw pockets in a bed quilt. Third night, there's another head on the pillow, where my head ought to be. No honey, that's a cabbage head. Funny, never saw a cap on a cabbage head. Then the song stops cold. No resolution. Raymond Carver had nothing on these birds when it came to succinct story telling.

Volume 2 (Social Music) is perhaps the least accessible, containing a lot of rather bizarre gospel music. There are two tunes by a Rev. J.M. Gates that are particularly haunting. It's a scary, barely comprehensible ranting chant, part reverie and part warning. Byrne and Eno's My Life in the Bush of Ghosts could have been made from this side alone. Another highlight is Blind Willie Johnson's "John the Revelator," with Johnson's lead vocal playing a call and response with a frail sounding woman.

Volume 3 (Songs) features a few more famous artists, like the Carter Family, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and John Hurt. Still, many of the standouts are by less known performers, like Clarence Ashley's "Coo Coo Bird" and Bascom Lunsford's "I Wish I Was A Mole." There's also a bit of Cajun sing-song stomp. The entire set finishes up with one of the odder highlights, Henry Thomas singing "Fishing Blues." It's a direct line from this pan-piped delight to "Goin Up Country." Both are mindless, bouncy numbers that are infectiously good-spirited.

Besides the great fun to be had listening to this set, there's also a lot to think about. Much of this music, although only 25 years old when Anthology was originally released, was nearly lost for all time. The shellac it was recorded on was coveted by the war effort, and the government was buying record collections for 20 cents a disk. It was really the efforts of a few dedicated collectors that kept this music alive. Imagine if we were in danger of losing "Stairway to Heaven." Stop smiling.

I was also stunned to recognize how many of these songs I learned, in bowdlerized form, back in grade school in the early 1960s. The album had such an impact that within ten years its songs had been institutionalized into suburban schoolbooks.

The sound quality throughout this set is remarkable. The master tapes of the original Anthology were only partly usable, and through the resources of the Smithsonian Institution (which

owns the Folkways label), original versions of the records were scrounged up and re-recorded. Which brings me to a final note. The Smithsonian recently announced it was shutting down its flagship label, known for sets like 'Classic Jazz,' but pledged to keep Folkways in print. That is essential, and the Smithsonian's flagship label must be revived. Let your congressional representative know how important these labels are to our cultural heritage. Please.— Bill Kuhn