

Collecting, Collage, and Alchemy: The Harry Smith *Anthology of American Folk Music* as Art and Cultural Intervention

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In 1952 the Folkways record label released a set of three double-LP collections titled the *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Housed in obscure packaging seemingly designed to conceal as much as document, the set collected 84 commercially-released recordings from the 1920s and 1930s covering a variety of styles and genres that, in the streamlined modern 1950s, already sounded as though they came from a distant past despite being just a generation removed from their recording. The set was compiled by one Harry Smith, an experimental filmmaker and visionary painter with an interest in anthropology, an extensive knowledge of mysticism, and a passion for collecting various types of cultural artifacts. The *Anthology* coalesced out of these interests, bringing together art, music, philosophy, and collecting into a work that was both a document and a provocation, a statement about the past and a suggestion about how to remake the present in the interests of the future.

The collection's influence on American music and culture has been widely hailed. The set, and the music and worldview it contained, would spread like a subterranean virus during the decade, serving as a bible for the late-1950s "folk revival," and later as a spur for countercultural musical developments of the 1960s. In 1991, shortly before his death, Smith received a lifetime Grammy award in honor of its enduring influence, which continues in the early years of the new millennium through a late-1990s compact disc reissue and a revived popular appreciation for folk music.

In this article, I argue that the continuing influence of the *Anthology* is due to its being much more than a wonderful collection of songs: It is also in itself a work of art, an artistic collage that draws on alchemical organizational principles, transmuting fragmentary pieces of culture to higher levels of conceptual meaning; in so doing, it provides a set of strategies for working with cultural materials that are particularly postmodern in their implications. In the pages that follow I will tease out these various threads, focusing especially on the role of collecting, the aesthetic strategies of collage, and the philosophy of alchemy that motivated Smith's work. Smith has been referred to as an "American magus" (Iglori 1996) for this mix of influences, with the stress usually on the first half of that phrase; here, however, I would like to consider the second.

Harry Smith

It is no exaggeration to suggest that Smith (1923-1991) should be considered one of the most important underground instigators in American culture and art during the twentieth century. An almost archetypal Bohemian trickster figure, Smith was a key influence on a whole range of creative activities, even as his contrarian temperament and self-destructive tendencies often kept him from receiving broader public notice.

In the visual arts, he is most known for his paintings and films. His work spanned many of the major styles in twentieth century art, including geometric formalism, collage, abstraction, conceptual art, and Surrealism, though given his independent nature he always distanced himself from any particular movement. As a filmmaker he developed several key approaches to avant-garde filmmaking, including techniques for painting directly on film stock, and the concept of "collage films" made up of found images and objects. He also invented a number of projection techniques that were later picked up in the 1960s as part of the psychedelic light shows that would accompany rock concerts.

Smith was an amateur anthropologist and a musicologist, especially interested in Native cultures; among other things, he was the first white man allowed to participate in and record the Kiowa Indian peyote ceremonies, parts of which he edited and annotated for release on the Folkways label in 1975. He was also an expert in philosophical arcana, especially interested in lost and marginalized mystical schools in the Western tradition, such as the esoteric Jewish Kabbalah and hermetic alchemy. Smith's knowledge in these areas was well-respected in various circles: He was an honorary member of various occult groups, and toward the end of his life in the late 1980s he taught for several years at the Buddhist Naropa Institute in Colorado as the official "Shaman in Residence."

And he was a legendary collector. An inveterate book collector, he also assembled the world's largest collection of paper airplanes, now housed at the Smithsonian Air & Space Museum; a huge collection of Ukrainian painted eggs, which he used as sources of iconography for his work; a large collection of string figures from around the world, which he spent years gathering for a (still

unpublished) work on their cultural role in pre-literate societies. Most famously, he collected records, and the *Anthology of American Folk Music* was curated directly from his personal collection of more than 20,000 pre-World War II 78-rpm records.

Smith viewed collecting not as a side hobby but as a central aspect of his other artistic work, saying that it formed the basis for much of his art. He constantly amassed information and images and especially symbols that he could incorporate into his work, sounds and signs and fragments of culture. He referred to himself as a “collagist” as much as anything else, assembling symbols and pieces of culture to form larger meanings that often drew on his studies of mystical philosophy. So his interest in these records was not as rare objects in themselves but as bearers of meaning, cultural documents, that became adapted and transformed through the process of gathering them together (for more on Smith’s artistic philosophies, see Iglori, Singh).

Collecting records as cultural practice

Collecting as a widespread practice is a relatively new cultural phenomenon, historically speaking; once the province primarily of museum curators and rich patrons, in a post-industrial consumer society the opportunities for unofficial and personalized collecting expand greatly. Scholars seem to be still wrestling with how to conceptualize the role of collecting in modern life—some critical views cast it as an obsessive psychological malady (Muensterberger 1994), or as excessive consumption behavior (Belk 2001). Other scholars approach collecting as an aspect of identity creation (Elsner and Cardinal 1994), and still others see it as an extension of the cultural ordering power of curatorial work into non-museum (and thus “non-official-culture”) areas of life (Dilworth 2003).

This last concept seems to have special relevance for those who collect recorded music. Many collectors hold that records exist not just as objects, but also as materializations of another level of cultural meaning. Music writer Simon Reynolds makes a distinction between the collecting of, say, rare stamps, and the collecting of records, which he views as “material with use value, whether that [use is] pleasure or research” (Reynolds 2004, 289). Musician and collector Thurston Moore agrees, arguing that collecting records is essentially a creative act: “When you’re a collector, you’re creating order out of all this chaotic information,” which he describes as an “archival” exercise—“you’re gathering information that falls below the radar, so it becomes less ignored.” He draws a distinction between that mode of collecting and more “mainstream” or “object-oriented” approaches: “I’m more interested in defending the cultural value of music that’s not allowed into the mainstream. That’s more of a renegade practice” (quoted in Milano 2003, 14).

Smith would likely agree. For him, accumulation was only a first step in a creative process; the next level required a process of organization, of creating order. Discussing the *Anthology* in a 1968 interview, Smith said, “All my

projects are only attempts to build up a series of objects that allow some sort of generalizations to be made” (Singh 1999, 97). Recorded music was of interest not just for itself, but as part of a larger system of cultural meaning that is encoded in the records: “my essential interest in music was the patterning that occurs in it” (Singh 1999, 85), with the larger arrangement guided by the goals of the collection, as “the whole purpose is to have some kind of a series of things” that expresses some broader meaning (Singh 1999, 81). In his films that series might be composed of collected images or visual symbols, while in the *Anthology* it took the form of a series of musical/cultural statements embodied in these old recordings.

It is worth stressing that Smith consciously chose to use commercially released recordings in assembling the *Anthology*, which automatically puts his work at odds with more traditional forms of folk song collection (discussed further below). Unlike folklorists such as John and Alan Lomax, Smith was not traveling around the countryside attempting to document songs as played by “authentic” amateur performers; rather, he was fascinated with how modern technologies had influenced processes of cultural change. One aspect of the *Anthology* thus takes the form of a reflexive commentary on the dialectic of folk and modern (and/or popular); Smith approached this folk music as a cultural construct, a part of popular culture, played by skilled performers and technologically captured for popular sharing. This way of thinking about the music allowed Smith to discover all sorts of patterns and parallels within these recorded documents, and led to the many surprising juxtapositions and interconnections that make up the *Anthology*.

The *Anthology*

Throughout the 1940s Smith collected this folk music via old records from the 1920s and 30s. It was becoming more difficult; during World War II many record warehouses were dumping their stock to retool themselves as part of the war effort, and as a result much of the music and history they contained was lost. In the early 1950s Smith went to Moses Asch, head of Folkways records, and convinced him to release an elaborate collection on the new LP medium, curated by Harry from his record collection (much of which later ended up in the New York Public Library); given Smith’s lifelong reputation as a hustler, it seems likely that he was also looking to make some quick cash on the project. Whatever the motivations, Smith’s execution of the project clearly had larger goals in mind; he conceptualized, organized and sequenced the set, wrote the liner notes, and designed the mysterious album covers and curious collage-style booklet that accompanied it.

The records themselves were certainly out of the ordinary as visual objects. The cover of each featured a primitive, one-stringed musical instrument known as the “celestial monochord,” encompassing the entire universe and being tuned by the hand of God. The engraving was taken from a book by Elizabethan alchemist Robert Fludd, and in Smith’s conceptualization was key to understanding the

larger symbolism behind the collection, though it must have been mystifying to the average 1950s record buyer. (For a late-1960s reissue the record label replaced the alchemical image with a stock photo of a Depression-era farmer, obscuring the symbolic import. However, the original cover was reinstated for the late-1990s reissue.) Each volume was also color-coded in a way that went along symbolically with its contents according to the alchemical idea of the four elements—air (blue), fire (red), and water (green); a fourth volume for earth (brown) was planned at the time but not released until 2000.

Smith's booklet further indicated that a larger order was at work here. Decorated with an odd assemblage of old record art, blurry musician photos, woodcuts from old music catalogues, and various visual ephemera, it was more evocative than directly informative. While detailed discographic documentation was present, the most prominent information for each song listing was its number within Smith's larger schema; conventional identifying material such as musical genre or ethnic identity of the musician was largely absent, further enhancing the sense of mystery, one that encouraged listeners to hear these sounds outside the baggage of their conventional expectations.

The music was equally striking for the contemporary listener. Each volume was organized conceptually: volume one was "Ballads" (traditional songs and themes as translated into the American experience), volume two was "Social Music" (communal musics—one record secular, one record sacred), and the third volume was "Songs" (individualized variations on different styles growing out of the traditions); the long-rumored fourth volume consisted of more topical music that responded to contemporary events. Music writer Peter Shapiro argues that the set was especially important for its range of sounds and juxtapositions. It "marked the first time Appalachian breakdowns, Acadian one-steps, coalmining ballads, Delta blues, Piedmont blues, Texas blues and Baptist spirituals became readily available to the wider public" (Shapiro 2002, 82). It was certainly the first time they had all been presented within the same covers, with no particular segregation on the basis of musical style or cultural/racial background. As such, the *Anthology* intentionally scrambled conventional musicological markers, a potentially radical move given the political and social context of 1952. "In a time of rampant racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism and anti-intellectualism, the *Anthology* didn't tell you who was black or white" (Shapiro 2002, 83).

The *Anthology* and folk music

A similar, if less theoretical, integrationist spirit was driving other contemporary roots musics toward the development of rock'n'roll, which would eventually crystallize teenage rebellion into a new pop market. While popular memory of the 1950s generally pictures a time of suburban conformity, a nascent Civil Rights movement, gray-flannel-suit corporate culture, and Cold War political paranoia, countercurrents were also detectable if one knew where to look. Most obvious were the Beats, who rejected mainstream society and loved literature

and jazz, though they mostly disliked folk music. That slack was taken up by a burgeoning folk revival, largely made up of young people who saw folk music and culture as a more authentic alternative to the mainstream, and one that was rapidly being buried by the forces of progress (R. D. Cohen 2002).

Whether intentionally or not, Smith's approach was distinctly different from that of most other contemporary proponents of folk music. The public image of folk that held sway at the time, consciously developed since the 1930s by public advocates such as the Lomaxes, was based in what scholar Benjamin Filene refers to as a "cult of authenticity" that tended to tame the music by exoticizing it (Filene 2000). Music writer Eric Weisbard describes the hallmarks of the Lomax approach as "romanticization of the primitive" and a "fear of modern contamination," paradoxically coupled with "slick packaging" designed to appeal to middle-class mainstream culture (Weisbard 1998, 71). There was more than a bit of Popular Front politics in the mix as well, with the romanticized performers representing an idealized cultural or racial purity. However well-meaning, the overall effect of such an approach was to domesticate the music, casting it as a dying vestige of an authentic past in need of preservation rather than as a living force.

By comparison, in Weisbard's words, Smith's "unruly, paradigm-busting set" effectively "pulls off an anti-Lomax: his work leaves the folk seeming more mysterious, not less so" (Weisbard 1998, 73). The *Anthology* made the music alive and complex, opening a window into subterranean cultural currents that called into question all kinds of taken-for-granted truths. Folk music scholar Jon Pankake said that "these lost, archaic, savage sounds seemed to carry some peculiarly American meaning for us, albeit in a syntax we couldn't yet decipher" (Pankake 1997, 27), evoking what Greil Marcus famously called the "old, weird America" (Marcus 1997, 5). Cultural historian Robert Cantwell argues that, while the *Anthology* "recognizes the association between folksong and particular cultural communities" (racial, geographical, etc.), it also erases "the popular categories, and the stereotypes grown up around them," and in the process it "confuses the classifying impulse" and finally signifies the "complete breakdown of the old cultural geography" (Cantwell 1996, 193-194).

At the time, the distance between the Lomax and Smith approaches may not have been apparent to most folk revivalists—both represented sources of material, opportunities to learn the old songs and styles, which they generally tried to reproduce as accurately as possible. Smith's goals, however, went well beyond mere preservation, and the *Anthology* was more than just a group of songs—it represented a whole way of looking at culture, one aimed at nothing less than wholesale cultural change. In a 1968 interview, Smith referred to Plato's ideas about music, specifically that changing the music might have the power to change the entire society. "I had the feeling that the essence that was heard in those types of music would become something that was really large and fantastic," he said. "In a sense, it did in rock and roll. I imagine it having some kind of a social force for good" (Singh 1999, 83).

Alchemy

To grasp the ways the *Anthology* worked its cultural changes, it is important to understand the philosophy that motivated its creation, and the artistic methods with which it was executed. Smith had been interested in esoteric philosophy throughout his life, and was especially fascinated by the mystical science of alchemy, which he saw as a shadow tradition in Western culture.

Alchemy is often miscast by historians as a stepping stone between primitive religion and modern scientific worldviews (see Holmyard 1968). In fact, many experts agree that much alchemical writing should be interpreted as symbolic and spiritual rather than proto-scientific—that, for instance, the alchemical goal of turning lead into gold was about a process of spiritual perfection rather than physical money-making. Carl Jung viewed alchemical symbolism as an expression of the collective unconscious, a working out of archetypal patterns in a practical cosmology that combines the material and the spiritual (for a detailed discussion of the Jungian approach to alchemy see von Franz 1980). Philosopher and art historian Titus Burckhardt points out that nearly all major world cultures have an alchemical tradition that works “like a science or art of nature” that “encompasses both the outward, visible and corporeal forms, and the inward and invisible forms of the soul” in a way that is “essentially a doctrine of being, an ontology” of the unity of all things (Burckhardt [1960] 1997, 27). Because of this conflation of the abstract and the material, alchemical writing and art is often couched in obtuse metaphors and elaborate symbolism, which likely helps lead to the misunderstandings mentioned above (for an in-depth exploration of the symbolic aspects of alchemy, see Roob 2001).

There are two key concepts from alchemy that can help shed light on Smith’s thought and work. One has to do with a philosophy of correspondences, or repeated patterns at different levels of existence. Alchemists believe that, at a fundamental level, there is no essential difference between spirit and matter, or mind and body; they are simply different states of the same basic material arranged on different levels of being. These levels are usually conceptualized as a hierarchical series of spheres proceeding from gross physical matter to the pure form of God, all tending to want to move toward higher states. Thus one could find similar processes at work at different levels—“as above, so below”—and alchemists would look for correspondences or repeated patterns that would give clues to the world’s workings.

Closely related is the idea of transmutation—that things from lower levels, if their patterns are properly understood, can be transmuted to higher and purer levels by proper rearrangement. Imperfect flesh could be spiritually perfected, base materials could be made transcendent, lead could be turned into gold. Anything in the world can be used to express higher spiritual truths as long as one knows how to work with it, and the goal of the alchemist is to function as nature’s helper in speeding up the process. Hence, some historians believe, why it was often cast as diabolical by Christian and other religions, as an interference

with work that should be done only by God; as Haeffner notes, “alchemists were often accused of involvement with necromancy and other forms of nefarious magic” (Haeffner 1991, 134).

As a process, transmutation involves at least two stages, one of removing or dissolving an element’s initial context or status, and a necessary second stage of re-coalescing it at a higher order of being (a higher “sphere”). The philosophy of alchemy pictures a world in constant flux, consisting of “a continuous rhythm of ‘dissolutions’ and ‘coagulations,’ or of disintegrations and formations, so that the dissolution of any formal entity is but the preparation for a new conjunction” between form and material (Burckhardt [1960] 1997, 123), and the role of the alchemist is as something of a “midwife” to this process. In more modern terms, this might correspond to a process in which deconstruction is a first step, removing an item from its normal context and analyzing its properties and possibilities, followed by a second step of reintegration or recombination of the item with others at a higher level. In historian Mircea Eliade’s words, “the concept of alchemical transmutation is a fabulous consummation of a faith in the possibility of changing Nature by human labours (labours which always had some liturgical significance)” (Eliade 1978, 172). To begin to get a handle on Harry Smith’s approach to the concept, we need only substitute “culture” for “Nature,” since from an alchemical perspective culture would be simply another manifestation of natural processes.

Collage, collecting and alchemy

This process of transmutation has some clear parallels with the artistic practice of collage as it developed in twentieth-century art. First explored by the Cubists around the turn of the century, collage and photomontage perhaps reached their fullest impact in the Dada and Surrealist movements. As art historian Dawn Ades notes, these methods belong to a world of mass communication and mechanical reproduction, working by transforming relationships between familiar fragments as isolated or extracted from their original surroundings, and recombined in a new setting in new forms (Ades 1986, 13-17). By changing the context, one could produce a new meaning or challenge the old; the power of collage, says art critic Donald Kuspit, is its potential to undermine given ideas about the world, to deny the absoluteness of consensus reality (Kuspit 1983, 135-140). Thus collage is not only art, but also social intervention. Art critic Harry Polkinhorn argues that collage, as an inherently self-conscious process of cultural reconstruction, is a key aesthetic process for contemporary culture, for “materially conceptualizing what is unique about our historical experience”; its importance lies “not in understanding the world, now an impossibility, but in interacting with it so as to change it” (Polkinhorn 1989, 221).

Discussing the work of Dadaist Kurt Schwitters, scholar Roger Cardinal points out that collecting is a fundamental part of the collage process, and that in fact a collage *is* a collection—a “gathering of selected items that manifests itself

as a pattern or set, reconciling diverse origins within a collective discourse,” a process of reconstructing reality by reassembling pieces of it (Cardinal 1994, 71). Since the fragments already exist in the world, even as the artist works to recast them they retain vestiges of their previous meaning, so that what are being collaged are not just fragments of image/word/sound, but also fragments of meaning and culture. Collage functions as “a demonstration of the process of many becoming one, with the one never fully resolved because of the presence of many in it” (Kuspit 1983, 127).

The particular process of assembling the collected items will necessarily involve sifting and sorting, ordering and sequencing. The criteria used might be personal, or based on formalist aesthetic values, or related to the socio-political meanings of the objects. For Smith the process seems to have been both theoretical and intuitive, and guided by his understanding of mysticism. He would sometimes describe painstaking methods involving sets of note cards that encoded various meaning structures and associations for individual pieces, sorting the cards carefully to explore permutations of interconnections (Sitney 2002, 249). However, other times he would only use the term “sortilege” to describe his method, referring to a mystical practice of divination based on intuitive or magical principles. In constructing his collages, Smith said, he “assumed that something was controlling the course of action and that it was not simply arbitrary,” that “there was some kind of what you might call God. It wasn’t just chance” (Sitney 2002, 255). Thus the pieces were arranged in ways designed to reveal larger patterns of meaning within them, guided by alchemical process of transmutation—taking fragments from their previous context, and with respect for their possible meanings recombining them into a new whole that reflects a different or higher order.

One classic example of Smith’s alchemical collecting and collaging processes would be perhaps his best-known film, the innovative 1950s collage film *No. 12 – Heaven and Earth Magic*. Film scholar Jonathan Crane describes the film: “Using countless bits and pieces snipped from turn-of-the-century catalogues, alongside images wrested from Indian, Buddhist and Egyptian iconography, Smith’s insanely elaborate collages dance across the screen in complex patterns that are part of ever-larger repetitive cycles” (Crane 2002, 144). In this case, the “base materials” collected from old books and catalogues have their original context/meaning boiled away, allowing them to be reconstituted at higher spheres in relation to other fragments, assembled into symbolic patterns that could become extremely dense and layered with complex interweavings of symbols and meanings.

The *Anthology* as alchemical collage

The *Anthology* was an even more elaborate expression of Smith’s approach to philosophy, art and collecting. In an interview with Smith in the late 1960s, folk musician and writer John Cohen said that he thought of the *Anthology* as a

“statement of interrelationships” more than a mere sampling of music, and Smith replied that “The whole *Anthology* was a collage. I thought of it as an art object” (Singh 1999, 81). Smith’s friend Luis Kemnitzer describes Smith’s aesthetic as “very complex,” in that “the formal attributes only had meaning or attraction or beauty as they accompanied and were accompanied by historical, cultural, psychological context. The possibility that contexts could be manufactured or manipulated only added spice to the aesthetic” (Kemnitzer 1997, 31).

John Cohen observed recently that part of what made Smith’s work so important was how it bridged traditional cultures and avant-garde practices, two areas that had little connection with one another in the polarizing atmosphere of the 1950s (J. Cohen 2000, 37-38). Smith’s willingness to look beyond accepted cultural hierarchies had its roots in his larger worldview. In the words of scholar Philip Smith, Harry believed in “the equality—or even the equivalence—of all races and cultures,” and held to a “resistance to ethnocentric standards of comparison. . . . He had the intellectual scope and taste to study and appreciate every conceivable human culture, and to respect them as they were” (Smith 2002, 92). As such, the insights of rural 1920s musicians and the methods of avant-garde art could engage in a dialogue with one another, as mediated by the larger framework of alchemical translation.

In relation to the *Anthology*, the sortilege process that Smith used to organize this collection of music was based not on academic musicology but on these alchemical principles. The musical selections (fragments) were transmuted by Smith into complex relationships that expressed larger patterns of meaning, interlacing profundity and context in myriad ways. These patterns are difficult to sum up simply in print, since they work on different levels, and at least one of those levels is experiential. Some of them might be musical/formal, rhythms or melodic lines passed back and forth between cuts; but even on this most material level, Smith’s reshuffling of context reframed meaning, as these musical patterns are being traded from Cajun Creoles to Alabama Blacks to West Virginia Scots-Irish musicians, in the process revealing a complex world of cross-cultural musical interface across groups often assumed to be segregated from one another. The songs are also worked together into social patterns—songs for dancing, songs that tell stories, religious songs—and narrative arcs, as similar topic matter was passed from singer to singer, again across and among racial and cultural boundaries—songs about death, songs about encroaching modernization, songs about truth and destiny. The relationships among the individual pieces construct a yet higher sphere of cultural or philosophical meaning, and all of these internal patterns are arranged around one another by the larger alchemical symbolism of the four elements, each volume symbolically corresponding with the qualitative principles associated with that element.

For all the reasons laid out above, I would resist trying to pin a single interpretation on the *Anthology*, as any account will be inevitably limited. However, a discussion of one section might help clarify the multitude of levels on which the collage works, the diversity of the materials it collects, and the processes

behind its formation. Volume four is in many ways the most straight-forwardly topical of the set, and its release in 2000 caused many listeners to go back and re-evaluate the depth of the connections on the older records in relation to the now-completed cycle. Composed primarily of music recorded later than the previous volumes (nearly all 1930s, some as late as 1940), in the alchemical scheme of the elements volume four represents Earth, and the music on the set is accordingly concerned with worldly matters both within its individual pieces, and in a larger thematic sense through Smith's organizational scheme that documents modern life rolling over traditional cultures and running aground in the Great Depression.

Disc 4-A begins with a joyous instrumental, "Memphis Shakedown" by the Memphis Jug Band, perhaps representing a harmonious past. However, as modernity begins to encroach, the songs' topics soon turn darker, tracking the breakdown of social order (a wife runs off with gypsies in the Carter Family's "Black Jack David"), murder (the Blue Sky Boys' chilling "Down on the Banks of the Ohio" chronicles a man's murder of his wife-to-be), and existential aloneness (Arthur Smith Trio's "Adieu, False Heart"). The troubles take on a mythic cast, developing through a series of archetypal tales of folk heroes losing out to new technology and economic power (J.E. Mainer's Mountaineers recount the story of "John Henry," while Jesse James sings of "Southern Casey Jones"), moving into songs of loss and homelessness (Jack Kelly & his South Memphis Jug Band's "Cold Iron Bed," Leadbelly and his "Packing Trunk"), finally ending up in prison with Bukka White's "Parchman Farm Blues," and closing with the Heavenly Gospel Singers bemoaning the "Mean Old World."

Disc 4-B takes up where the first leaves off, and engages with the historical state of the Earthly sphere. "How Can A Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live?" asks Blind Alfred Reed as the Great Depression begins, while Uncle Dave Macon decries corrupt politicians in "Wreck of the Tennessee Gravy Train." The Carter Family hold out hope that there's "No Depression in Heaven," while Roosevelt Graves and Brother sound more resigned, singing that "I'll Be Rested (When the Roll is Called)." The concerns here are not abstractly traditional, but relate to real historical figures and situations: Memphis Minnie celebrates the achievements of African-American boxer Joe Louis in the face of continuing racial oppression in "He's In the Ring (Doing the Same Old Thing)," Dave Macon supports "Governor Al Smith" for president due to his promise to repeal Prohibition, and Minnie Wallace's "The Cockeyed World" foresees war growing in Europe. In the face of this chaos, Smith finally seems to conclude the set with a celebration in an Acadian woodland, "Dans le Grand Bois (In the Forest)" by the Hackberry Ramblers, suggesting perhaps that the only way of rejuvenation was a return to the roots (in cultural terms) or the source of the spirit (in alchemical terms), thus going full circle back to the start and beginning a new cycle at a higher sphere (which, significantly, is how he interpreted the more positive cultural aspects of the 1960s counterculture, in particular its focus on a reconnection to nature and spirituality).

However, such a topical description cannot capture the heterophony of the voices and the diversity of the musical styles and traditions from which the collage is constructed, and the various sets of comparisons and contrasts that the organizational scheme elicits. For instance, disc 4-A begins with a jug band piece that crosses black and white styles, followed by an interpretation of an old English ballad (Bradley Kincaid's "Dog and Gun"), representing the older order that was being broken down, then into an Appalachian country piece that draws directly on that tradition while Americanizing it (the Carter Family's "Black Jack David"), developing through mountain music, various Blues styles, Dust Bowl folk, post-vaudeville music, and finishing out with Cajun dance tunes; the overall structure recapitulates the musical-historical development laid out in the larger *Anthology* in an Earthly frame. Since, as noted above, collaged fragments retain their original associations even as they are being transmuted, individual tracks are often used to exemplify ideas or experiences of a particular group (for instance, the prison-camp song "Parchman Farm Blues" is sung by Bukka White, an African-American man who spent time there), though the sequencing weaves the differing styles together in such a way as to suggest a commonality of culture and topical concerns—in a larger sense, representing all of society as woven into the warp and woof of a shared culture in all its diverse forms, even as that society came apart at the seams during the Depression.

Given Smith's preoccupations, there are also various levels of spiritual or mystical meaning at work throughout. The philosophy of alchemy is a structuring framework in both the symbolic relationships between the four elements and more specific reworkings of mystical archetypes throughout the collection. The nature of the actual fragments collected into the collage also takes on higher meaning within Smith's philosophy. Burckhardt notes that, within the philosophy of alchemy, the phrase "*vox populi, vox Dei*" has special significance, "for the 'people' in the true sense of the word (a feature of the collectivity which the modern collectivity has more or less abolished) corresponds exactly to the true ground of the soul" (Burckhardt [1960] 1997, 99). Music writer Rob Young expands on the point, noting that for traditional musicians, "the notion that they were expressing themselves was utterly alien. The musician or singer was an anonymous servant of God, the sounds he or she produced were not a representation of cosmic Truth, but literally rang with that Truth" (Young 2002, 72). Thus the symbolism of the celestial monochord that frames the set, shown stretching through the various spheres of the universe being tuned by the hand of God, represents the idea of transcendent harmony and agreement—as God tunes the universe, so the tunes on these records are expressions of God's universe. In this case, Smith was taking the base materials from his collection of this raw, common music, boiling away their conventional contexts, finding the patterns and correspondences among them, and transmuting/reconstructing them at higher levels of meaning—in the process, transmuting fragments of American popular culture, as well as suggesting possibilities for further transmutation that continue to be explored today.

Legacies of the *Anthology*

The influence of the *Anthology* on the 1950s folk revival was noted above, providing material and inspiration by showcasing classic performances of important songs. However, its more lasting impact may have worked at a deeper level. Robert Cantwell argues that in the *Anthology* “we can view the birth of a counterculture” (Cantwell 1996, 199); even as television was establishing a glossy new mainstream culture, Smith’s work suggested alternatives by presenting an array of “lost” cultural fragments in a form that could be drawn upon by way of resistance.

That this particular alchemy took a while to process can be seen embodied in the changing image and music of Bob Dylan. When he covered several songs from the *Anthology* on his first LP in 1961, he was clearly doing so in a stance closer to the Lomax model, as a faithful reproduction of a real old-time folksinger (Woody Guthrie, in Dylan’s case). When a few years later he began reworking that archetypal Americana by way of symbolist poetry and electric rock instrumentation, many folkies cried foul, believing he had abandoned the music. However, as Greil Marcus argues at length, the mid-1960s Dylan was even more deeply steeped in the world of the *Anthology* (Marcus 2001). Sean Wilentz notes that Dylan was in fact “escaping the folk revival by reviving a different sort of traditional sensibility,” via an alchemical formula already spelled out in the *Anthology*’s rearrangement of cultural signifiers, collaging fragments of the past as a way to comment on the present (Wilentz 1998, 103).

Reconstructing and recombining various traditions was a significant aspect of the 1960s counterculture, and a similar process to Dylan’s can be seen in other 1960s musicians influenced by the *Anthology*, particularly the wild’n’wooly assortment of former folkies who made up the well-known San Francisco music scene. The Haight-Ashbury version of psychedelia was “rooted in eclecticism” and a “reawakening to the democratic principles of popular music;” the Bay Area bands were united by a drive to “assimilate traditional American music, particularly the blues, into rock” (Hull [1981] 2003, 386). Perhaps the most prominent example of this would be the Grateful Dead, whose wide-open foragings through American musical history drew on everything from traditional folk songs to jazz and blues to the avant-garde. In an early-1970s interview, guitarist Jerry Garcia echoes Smith’s interest in modern technology as an agent of cultural expansion: “You can just go into a record store and pick a century, pick a country, pick anything, and dig it, make it a part of you, add it to the stuff you carry around, and see that it’s all music” (quoted in Pichaske 1989, 141). The Grateful Dead would later repay their spiritual debt to Smith by providing him with a stipend when his health began to fail late in his life.

If the influence of the *Anthology* stopped in the 1960s, it would still be a significant factor in twentieth-century American culture. However, in the 1990s Smith’s role as a cultural instigator finally received official notice in the form of his Grammy award, and the *Anthology*’s reissue spurred a reinvestigation of

American roots music of all stripes. Manifestations included a live tribute CD with popular artists covering songs from the *Anthology*, and peaked over the next few years in terms of mainstream notice with the soundtrack to the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou* and a host of documentaries and public television programs on roots music, ranging from the “Year of the Blues” in 2003 to a reassessment of important figures such as Alan Lomax (see Gordon and Nemerov 2005).

Many of the darker aspects of the *Anthology*’s vision were smoothed out of this popularized style, but Smith’s deeper philosophy and aesthetic continue to influence music outside the mainstream. In the early years of the new millennium one of the prevalent styles in the musical underground is a new avant-folk hybrid that traces part of its lineage specifically to Smith. Dubbed “the New Weird America” by British music publication *The Wire* (Keenan 2003), the name, of course, plays on music writer Greil Marcus’s view of the “old weird America” revealed by the *Anthology*. In musical style and concept, this movement (more of a non-movement according to many participants, who generally speak about their work in typically obtuse alchemical fashion) may be something closer to what Smith had in mind as a full fruition of his combination of the traditional and the avant-garde, a boundary-free mixture of traditional roots and outré techniques that is often explicit in its spirituality, drawing on alchemical language and imagery in lyrics, song titles, and cover art.

In addition to new permutations, Smith’s approach continues to inspire reissues, many attempting to carry on or even expand the musicological aspects of the *Anthology*. For instance, the Yazoo label released a series of compact discs titled *Times Ain’t Like They Used To Be: Early American Rural Music* that work on a similar musical aesthetic as the *Anthology*, mixing 1920s and 1930s recordings from a variety of musical and cultural backgrounds. In a similar vein, the Revenant label, started by legendary folk guitarist John Fahey, released two box sets titled *American Primitive* that document early twentieth-century American spiritual music, similarly eclectic, and significantly incorporating Smith’s interest in music as a vehicle for higher matters. Another Yazoo series titled *The Lost Museum of Mankind* takes the concept outside of the United States, gathering wide-ranging examples of early “ethnic” music recordings from around the world.

The idea of record collecting as rescuing and re-presenting otherwise “lost” musical styles has been a major trend in the CD age, and reissues make up a sizeable portion of new releases each year. Many have begun to explore genres and cultures that most listeners never even knew existed—politicized African funk from the 1970s, or Taiwanese surf music, or Turkish 1960s psychedelic rock—and most are released by independent record labels run by record collectors who uncover these lost items. Implicit in this process is the possibility of cultural change through exposing people to lost examples of different cultures; even if such projects are not taken to alchemical extremes, all share a fairly postmodern notion that popular cultural history does not need to be “official” consensus history. Projects such as Smith’s have contributed to a general sense

that history is not set in stone, but grows and develops and can be changed or rewritten as new information is brought to light.

In another setting, Smith's cultural collage logic has permeated contemporary music even more deeply in the form of the DJ: record collectors, searching through old recordings for patterns of sound and meaning that can be collaged together into a larger creation, constructing a new art form out of fragments of the past. To the extent that the DJ represents one of the signal logics of postmodern culture, these seemingly obscure notions of Harry Smith's about collaging culture become remarkably current. As communication scholar Jonathan L. Crane notes of the *Anthology*, "decades before the DJ was recognized as a fluid composer in his or her own right, Smith was an aural bricoleur of the first order" (Crane 2002, 142). Folk musician Peter Stampfel of the Holy Modal Rounders puts it more succinctly: "If god were a DJ, he'd be Harry Smith" (quoted in Shapiro 2002, 82).

Whatever happens to these trends in the near future, one might fairly suspect that Smith's work still has some influence left to come. In a world of constant change, Smith provided tools not just for thinking about that change but for guiding and shaping it. In the words of Jonathan L. Crane, Smith's work "remade perception" by "demonstrating that perception is a malleable instrument." Starting with the collection of various fragments of culture, his projects treated this "sense data, what comes in through the eyes and ears, as raw material that has value only after it has been run through the mind" (Crane 2002, 142). Harry's friend, filmmaker Robert Frank, says that Smith was "so far ahead of his time. . . . This knowledge, this accumulating of things, would have been perfect in this age of computers" (Igliori 1996, 122). As such, Smith's methods and goals offer insight into ways of living in the present. If contemporary postmodern culture is indeed a world of fragments, Smith's examples suggest that this can represent not a pessimistic end-stage but a new beginning and an opportunity for cultural renewal: take those fragments and work with them, understand and process and sort them, in the interests of finding ways to remake and remodel that culture at a higher level—strategies not of consumption and cynicism but of transmutation and transcendence.

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