

CAMILLE: You're listening to A Closer Look at The Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music.

(Music: "King Kong Kitchie Kitchie Ki-Me-O" - Chubby Parker [fade out under speech:])

CAMILLE: This podcast contains:

I. A detailed description of the visual elements seen on the packaging and the handbook of the Anthology

II. An analysis of the aforementioned visual elements and their significance to the singular aesthetic and nature of the Anthology as a whole

III. A reflection on the current significance of the Anthology and the ways in which its aesthetic sets it apart in study from other folk song collections of its time.

The three volumes as a set in this podcast work to crack the playfully avant-garde code Harry Smith planted in the illustrations and layout of his anthology, specifically the 1960s reissue in the heart of the folk revival, and to define his visual technique as a cross-generational icon of the revival.

(Music: "Fatal Flower Garden" - Nelstone's Hawaiians)

CAMILLE: *(like a commercial)* "The tone—without the scratch!"

(Music continues, fades out after first verse under speech:)

CAMILLE: Volume one: descriptions.

The cover of each of the three volumes of the Anthology features an iconic photograph of a tenant farmer. Dressed in a wrinkled button-down shirt, sturdy overalls, and a weathered hat, the man looks as though he has been working all day. He sports an unkempt beard on his scrawny chin and neck. Rather than appearing exhausted, as one could expect from the hard-working farmer, he instead looks satisfied and even happily contemplative, a dimple hinting at the start of a small smile.

(Music: "Drunkard's Special"—Coley Jones)

Though the photograph is replicated on the cover of each of the volumes, it appears in three distinct color schemes and sits to the right of a unique description on each respective volume. The first is a collection of ballads. Under the title is a credit to the eccentric editor Harry Smith, followed by a listing of the tracks included in that collection. The two successive volumes, titled

Social Music and Songs, respectively, are visually laid out identically to the first, each with their own catalogue of contents.

(Music continues)

Upon opening the the packaging of the collection to listen to its contents, the listener encounters a corresponding handbook that walks through the process of actively following along while enjoying the recordings contained in the anthology. The cover of the handbook is whimsically ornate yet somehow practical, like a musical Farmer's Almanac. In a manner that evokes both a comfortable nostalgia as well as a scientific air, the illustrations that litter the front of the handbook consume most of the real estate of the page. The tiny images are a collection in of themselves; each represents a slice of Americana, from the cowboy hat to the blacksmith to the Liberty Bell, from the various farm animals to the bald eagle perched on top of it all. A scholarly, well-dressed and well-bearded man supervises the scene while sketching a waveform through the center of the page. The title text repeats the general information included on the cover of each volume, but new material is covered in a divergently clinical box outlining the organization of the Anthology contents -- a listing of the selections complete with research and notes, an alphabetical index, and finally a bibliography citing references.

(Music: "Peg and Awl" – The Carolina Tar Heels)

The next page contains a foreword by Smith himself accompanied by a key to deciphering the listing of each track -- each corresponds to a unique number, followed by information from the original recording label, a concise summary of the lyrics (some of which are quite entertaining), general information about the song, and a list of references. And so it begins! The listener may follow along with the handbook track by track, entertained by inserts of sheet music samples, photographs of featured performers, and illustrations of folk instruments sprinkled throughout the immaculately organized catalogue.

(Music: "King Kong Kitchie Kitchie Ki-Me-O" repeat)

(Music: "Wake Up Jacob" – Prince Albert Hunt's Texas Ramblers)

CAMILLE: Volume two: analysis.

Part of what makes the Folkways Anthology so unique is Harry Smith's background and experience. While many of his predecessors and contemporaries in the field of archival musicology and research spent most of their careers in the aforementioned field, Smith in contrast was a Bohemian Renaissance man. From painting to filmmaking, from literary editing to collecting as an art, he made legendary contributions to American culture outside of the anthropological and musicological work put into the folk music collection. His well-rounded, unpolished yet passionate perspective on archival research is evident in the character of the anthology. As folk revivalist John Cohen put it, "Smith was finally more interested in what patterns of cultural artifacts told him about himself than what they suggested about the people who produced them.... collecting

was an artistic endeavor for Smith, because the arrangement of the collected objects followed the dictates of his own idiosyncratic imagination.... Smith was surely among the first to directly implicate folk music in an avant-garde artistic vision.” Because Smith crafted the Anthology in a very personal and characterized manner, his audience too is able to connect with the work on a personal level.

(Music continues)

Now let's revisit our friend the tenant farmer. In the original release of the collection in the early 1950s, the front cover depicted an image from a book by Elizabethan alchemist Robert Fludd. The image was a celestial monochord, a peculiar and archaic one-stringed instrument that embodied the alchemic theme present throughout the visual presentation of the anthology. For the 1960s reissue, however, it was time for a change. In order to represent a collection (and for that matter a country) so diverse and so rich in iconic imagery, Smith had to choose a cover image for his anthology that was both neutral and powerful in representing the people that his music portrayed. The farmer is working-class, perhaps struggling or even destitute. His dated photograph thrown into the context of the 60s is a sort of salute to the hardships the people of the Depression Era went through, a memory retold to both the older and younger generations who purchased the collection during the folk revival.

(Music: “Saut Crapaud” – Columbus Fruge)

The layout and range of the Anthology are also instrumental in properly representing the scope of American folk music. Smith made a bold and cutting-edge choice to erase regional, social, and racial categories, focusing instead on musical style as the basis of organization for each volume. The “Ballads” volume contains songs that tell stories, the “Social Music” volume contains both secular and religious music written for the purpose of communal performance, and “Songs” contains vocal music of a particularly poetic lyrical structure. In addition to this innovative move, he chose to include commercial recordings from his personal music collection that had been released previously, which is why his song descriptions include information off their original recording labels. Differing from his counterparts of the time who traveled through their regions of interest and recorded the songs they desired to collect themselves, Smith’s inclusion of previously released recordings mirrors the cut-and-paste nature of the Anthology’s layout, gathering songs from far and wide into a conglomeration representative of American folk music as a whole.

(Music: “Old Country Stomp” – Henry Thomas)

Smith's carefully measured visual aesthetic of the handbook adds a cross-generational appeal to the anthology. The illustrations and photographs both on the cover and throughout the booklet harken back to old printing press imagery and dated commercial catalogues. On the other hand, the haphazard, cut-and-paste layout of the images is comparable to that of zines which were growing in popularity at the time among underground subcultures, many of which were closely related to other music scenes. This internal juxtaposition broadens the anthology’s intrigue across younger and older generations of listeners, nostalgia served with a hip tone.

(Music continues)

CAMILLE: Volume three: a modern reflection.

(Music: “I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground” – Bascom Lamar Lunsford)

It's clear that the Anthology was a beautiful enigma of its time, and its endearingly peculiar imagery, encoded to conjure up both a distant fond memory as well as a timeless curiosity, is a large part of its modern significance and cause for appreciation. In 1997, Smithsonian Folkways decided to orchestrate another reissue of the Anthology, this time on CD, counting on a demand from a diverse audience. Said Smithsonian Folkways Marketing Director Brenda Dunlap of the re-release, "...I think there will be demand. Given the requests we've received over the Web, and handwritten postcards and that sort of thing, I do see a lot of interest in it. We have kids at radio stations asking about it as well, which is always a good sign, so there is a new generation of interest there, too."

(Music continues)

Even more recently, in 2014 the Anthology made a triumphant appearance in Pitchfork music magazine. Executive Editor Mark Richardson wrote of his excitement to acquire his copy of the limited edition vinyl reissue of the collection released that year, an artifact he believes to be a pivotal point in the concept of personal music. In his words, "...it invented the idea of the mixtape, that one could express something by selecting music and presenting it in a certain way."

(Music: “Expressman Blues” – Sleepy John Estes and Yank Rachell)

Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music is an extremely well-crafted work of art. It exceeded the expectations and preconceived notions of folk music collections at the time of its original release, was an integral part of the folk revival of the 60s at the time of its first reissue, and today continues to inspire both appreciation for the past and creative innovation for the future. Arguably, none of these accomplishments would have surfaced if not for the Anthology's bizarre yet inviting appearance, and its deceptively accessible layout of content. Harry Smith's genius concoction of a mashed up folk wonderland dares its audience to go ahead and judge it by its cover.

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