

# The Inner Sleeve Artwork selected this month by The Handsome Family



## Various (Edited by Harry Smith) Anthology Of American Folk Music

SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS RECORDINGS 1952  
IMAGE BY ROBERT FLUDD

Surely only a madman would choose a Renaissance engraving of an ancient Greek idea to adorn the cover of an American folk anthology? Then again, this isn't your average folk anthology. The songs are a haphazard jumble, seemingly selected regardless of race or region and ordered in obtuse categories that put screechy barn-dance fiddles near tenor crooners, and group ancient ballads with a song about the sinking of the Titanic. Yet look further... the songs are divided not only into

ballads, songs and social music, but also into air, water and fire. There is alchemy at work.

Consider the evidence: Harry Smith claimed he took peyote in Sarah Carter's driveway then knocked on her door, not (as you might expect) to ask about her life in The Carter Family, but to see the patterns of the quilts she was sewing. Smith spent his youth trying to document the dance steps of Pacific Northwest Indians. He made animations that were painstaking interpretations of jazz tunes. He had a gift for drinking and borrowing money, but also for mapping out trails across terrain that other people couldn't even see.

Robert Fludd's *Celestial Monochord* (1618), which adorns the cover of Smith's *Anthology*,

is an illustration of the Pythagorean notion of the music of the spheres. Pythagoras believed there was a sacred music made by the universe (as if the planets and stars were strings plucked by God). It's said that Pythagoras could actually hear this perfect melody, but, sadly, none of his students could hear even the faintest note of it, and thus the philosopher was forced to attempt a description through various mathematical formulas. We still use his formulas, but the song yet remains largely unheard.

The 17th century Rosicrucian Robert Fludd spent much of his time designing perpetual motion machines. One day an epiphany came to him — the blood circulating through his veins was the truest vision of the very machine he

had tried for years to build. "Yet, if the ears of man may not hear the music of the spheres," he wrote in 1618, "his eyes may follow the paths of celestial sound."

Can we know the workings of the world by studying the blood circulating through our body? Can a mere folk anthology help us hear the unheard music of the universe? Who knows? Hillbillies, ancient Greeks, alchemists, fiddlers, Rosicrucians, jug bands — perhaps God does pluck all into being upon a single wavering string. In any case this is an album cover to stare at and dream. □ *Brett and Rennie Sparks, aka The Handsome Family, are the Angela Carters of contemporary folk. Their latest album, Days Of Wonder, is released by Loose*