

# Folkways Records: The Legacy of Moses Asch Comes to the Smithsonian

The Smithsonian Institution this year acquired Folkways Records, a massive recorded sound collection of the world's musics, languages, oratory and natural sounds compiled over a lifetime by Moses Asch. Included in the diverse Folkways catalog are some 2,000 records featuring thousands of traditional artists and historical figures documented by three generations of ethnomusicologists, folklorists, anthropologists, and area specialists. The catalog has an enormous range — from Native American ritual songs, southern mountain ballads, creole music, New England sea shanties, cowboy songs, and Black gospel to folk music from Kenya, Hindu religious ceremonies, folk tales of Oceania and Caribbean dance; from lullabies and children's games of New York to spoken word recordings of Martin Luther King, Sigmund Freud, W. E. B. Du Bois, Margaret Mead, and Carl Sandburg. In addition to the more well known musical recordings of Leadbelly, Woodie Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Ella Jenkins are also documentary recordings of major historical events of the 20th century — the Suffragette movement, the Great Depression, the American Labor Movement, the Spanish Civil War, the Holocaust, the Civil Rights Movement, and Poland's Solidarity. The Folkways collection also includes non-musical sounds: a study of infant cries, sounds of technology (e.g., locomotives and office equipment), animals, and nature (e.g., bird calls and the tropical rain forest).

The Folkways recordings are at once a celebration and a careful historical transcription of particular cultural interests and expressions. In the early part of this century, Asch, a pioneer in sound electronics, recognized that new recording technology provided an unprecedented and powerful tool for capturing the spoken word, music, song, and sounds of hope and desperation of the world's people. Motivated strongly by the sense of cultural loss in America, the traditions endangered by World War II Europe, and social changes around the globe, Asch hoped to preserve in recorded form the voices, languages, and sounds that made life meaningful to generations of human beings. He set out on a documentation program of immense proportions. He included written notes and illustrations with the recordings so as to broaden our understanding of music, oral tradition, and their contexts. He kept all his releases in print and available, for, in his plan, each constituted an important entry in a world-wide encyclopedia of cultural expression. In keeping with Asch's vision, the Smithsonian will continue to make available the full Folkways catalog.

In addition to the catalog recordings, the Smithsonian has acquired the Folkways archive, consisting of master, field, and unpublished recordings; fifty years of ethnographic files on music and oral traditions; and related correspondence and album cover art work. This corpus has been called a "national, indeed world, artistic

and scientific resource,” one that the Office of Folklife Programs plans to make available to scholars and researchers.

Moe Asch dedicated his life to the Folkways enterprise. Born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1905, the son of Sholem Asch, a well known and non-conformist Yiddish novelist, Moe came to New York in 1914 after sojourns in Berlin and Paris. His Aunt Bashe, an early pupil of Montessori and educational advisor to the fledgling Soviet government in Russia, exerted a strong influence on his childhood — evidenced by the scores of children’s songs, music, games, and stories in the Folkways catalog. Living in New York, Asch became interested in radio transmission. As Asch said,

I became so involved with the radio . . . because I saw the possibility, coming from Europe where there were only boundaries, that this was a medium that overcame boundaries, overcame customs. The air was free. We were able to communicate all over the world with other human beings without barriers.

In the ’20s, sparked by his interest in radio and sound transmission, Asch went to Germany to study electronics at a technical school with students from all over Europe.

That’s when I first started to hear about folk music. And the first thing I heard was that there isn’t any folk music in America . . . One day when I was in Paris . . . I came across the 1913 edition of John Lomax’s cowboy ballads. And it had an introduction by Teddy Roosevelt, which guided me through life because he said that folklore and folksongs were the real expression of a people’s culture . . . Lomax showed clearly that there *was* a folklore in America.

Upon his return to the United States, Asch worked for various electrical companies, started Radio Laboratories, and worked on numerous sound amplification projects. Through Lomax Asch met Huddie Leadbetter, better known as “Leadbelly.” Leadbelly was an ex-convict from Louisiana with a powerful 12-string guitar, a rich repertoire of southern Black music, and immense talent. Asch’s recordings of Leadbelly’s children’s songs, released as *Play Parties* under the Asch Records label were not a commercial success but did draw the attention and ire of the New York press which villified Asch for producing records of a Black ex-convict singing songs for children.

But Asch persisted in recording, documenting, and releasing albums that spoke to important social issues of our times — civil rights, social justice, cultural equity. Albert Einstein recorded for Moe Asch during World War II, speaking of the cultural destruction wrought by the Nazis. Woody Guthrie recorded hundreds of songs and ballads speaking to the soul of the nation, the tribulations of the dust bowl disaster, and the proprietary rights of the common man. Pete Seeger challenged Asch.

[Pete] created my whole folk music concept — because he created ideas and songs. And every time he had an idea I went along with it — and there are those fifty albums that we did. Every one is Pete’s idea. I tried to work with all my artists that way — I wanted to know what they had to say and how they wanted to say it. That’s what it meant to me to be a documentor.



# HEALING SONGS OF THE AMERICAN INDIANS

From the Smithsonian Denismore Collection  
of the Archive of Folk Song, Library of Congress

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS LIBRARY FE 4251

19 songs with descriptive notes from 7 tribes  
Edited by Charles Hoffman

Recorded on location by  
Dr. FRANCES DENSMORE  
for the Bureau of American Ethnology,  
Smithsonian Institution



In 1947, after a series of other labels and bankruptcies, Moe Asch founded Folkways Records. The name came from the famous book by William Sumner. Asch was ably aided by Harold Courlander who had made field recordings in Haiti, Cuba, and Ethiopia. Willard Rhodes, an anthropologist with a collection of Native American music, initiated the ethnic album series with *Music of the Sioux and Navajo*. Folkways pioneered the regular practice of producing extensive written notes to accompany recordings. In the early days Asch drew inspiration from his own literary background and from the important work being done by the WPA Federal Writer's Project. More recently, this documentary project has been vitalized by collaborative projects between Folkways and the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music. In each of the forty years of Folkways Records, the catalog and accompanying documentation continued to grow. Asch expanded his catalog motivated by his own interests, the deluge of tapes, and requests that would come to him from scholars and travelers fresh from the field, and by the need to offer timely social commentary. Moe Asch succeeded in building an edifice of profound worth and beauty through brilliance, logic, a modicum of business sense, energy, determination, and a lot of *chutzpah*. A common refrain throughout the industry, among scholars and by artists used to explain one's sacrifices for the Folkways project, is "only because it's Moe."

Folkways has been an important instrument in the study and dissemination of recorded sound data, especially of community-based, folk aesthetic traditions—song, instrumental music, and

speech. Moreover, the historic role that Folkways has played in bringing folk culture to the national consciousness makes the Folkways collection an invaluable document in the study of the development of American and world culture. The phonograph record and its related media, radio and cassette tape, have become part of the dialogue of traditional cultures — a lively world-wide musical interchange that involves scholars, the interested public, and the tradition bearers themselves. As foreseen by Moe Asch, these recordings have enabled performances to transcend boundaries of time and place and thus have played an important role in the preservation and conservation of living traditions through increased communication, understanding, and appreciation of the aesthetic and ethical values of others. The Folkways acquisition adds to the Smithsonian a new “museum of sound” — one unencumbered by walls that can disseminate its wisdom to people everywhere.

Moe Asch died last October. He is survived by his family, by his friends, by the many artists, scholars, and students he served, and by a lifetime labor of love — the recorded joy, sadness, prayers, and visions which will enrich generations to come. We are grateful to Moe for his work in the increase and diffusion of knowledge about traditional cultures and also for his choice of the Smithsonian as the appropriate institutional setting for Folkways.

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\_\_\_\_\_ and Alan Lomax, eds. *The Lead-belly Songbook*. New York: Oak Publications, 1962.

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Capaldi, Jim. “Conversation with Mr. Folkways.” *Folkscene* (May, June 1978).

Shelton, Robert. “Folkways in Sound.” *High Fidelity* (June 1960).

For information about the purchase and distribution of Folkways Records contact:

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For information about the Folkways archives contact:

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