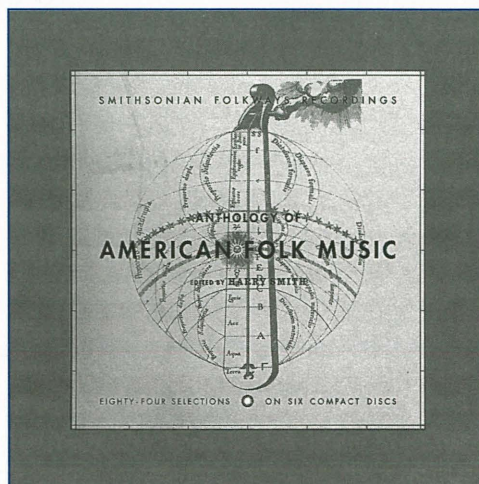


The Festival and Folkways — Ralph Rinzler's Living Cultural Archives

This year Smithsonian Folkways received two Grammy Awards and a third nomination. The updated re-release of the Harry Smith

Anthology of American Folk Music, dedicated to the work of Ralph Rinzler, won for best historical album and best album notes, with staff members Amy Horowitz, Jeff Place, and Pete Reiniger honored with awards. The New Lost City Ramblers — John Cohen, Mike Seeger, and Tracy Schwarz — were nominated for *There Ain't No Way Out* as best traditional (style) folk album and performed at the Festival's 1997 Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert. The connections between these albums and Ralph Rinzler is central to the work and history of the Festival, Folkways, and the Center.

The connections go back to the 1950s. Rinzler had been learning about folk music from Library of Congress field recordings, attending university folk festivals with Roger Abrahams and Peggy Seeger, and, with Mike Seeger, seeking out migrants from Appalachia who sang and played at various gatherings. He produced Folkways recordings, and valued the Folkways Harry Smith *Anthology of American Folk Music*. The *Anthology*, published in 1952, was a crucial document in the history of the folk revival, containing 84 tracks from commercial records of Southern, Appalachian, Black, and Cajun musicians made in the 1920s and 1930s. These raw recordings were annotated with weird yet insightful notes by avant-garde artist/anthropologist Harry Smith. The recordings were a far cry from those of the chart-topping



The Anthology, re-released in expanded form, won two Grammy Awards in 1998.

Kingston Trio and other folk pop groups of the time. They were used for their rough style and lyrical content by Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Jerry Garcia, and many others.

Rinzler was hardly alone in thinking that the people and music on the Smith *Anthology* were mainly the stuff of archives and museums — long dead.

On a trip to North Carolina in 1960, Rinzler and Seeger met up with none other than Clarence Ashley, whose 1929 recording of “The Coo-coo Bird” was on the *Anthology*. It was as if Rinzler was immediately connected to a past he had thought was mythological. Through Ashley, Rinzler met Doc Watson. On a drive to Watson’s house in the back of a pickup truck, Rinzler, who’d been playing the banjo, was joined by Watson, who

Richard Kurin

offered a rendition of “Tom Dooley.” Rinzler was struck by Watson’s version, diverging as it did from the Kingston Trio’s hit. Upon questioning, Watson said he knew the Dooley story as told by his great-grandmother. Watson went on to talk about the place where Dooley was hanged. He pointed out the Grayson Hotel that belonged to the family of the sheriff that arrested Dooley. Tom Dooley was not some character made up for the purpose of singing an entertaining song, Rinzler realized, but part and parcel of a community’s oral history.

At Watson’s house Rinzler was introduced to Doc’s father-in-law, Gaither Carlton. Rinzler described Gaither as “an extraordinary man. He was a great presence: very quiet and shy but with a real depth and intensity and a quality that I really loved.”

Rinzler told the Watsons about the folk revival, but they didn’t really understand why people would be interested in that kind of music. Doc was playing rockabilly with an electrified guitar and asked Rinzler about touring as a country musician. As Rinzler recalled,

I said, there is this album of records recorded in the twenties and thirties that has been reissued because there’s a whole group of people who are interested in this music now, and they’ll buy this record — people like me who are in college and they’re fascinated. But no one believes that Clarence Ashley and the people on this record — any of them — are still alive.

Gaither looked at the *Anthology*. He recognized some of the names. We played G. B. Grayson’s recording of “Omie Wise.” Gaither sighed when it was over — he literally had tears in his



eyes. And he said, very quietly, under his breath, "Sounds like old times."

He said that in a way that came from so deep inside of him that it just gripped me and really moved me: even now [1986] I just get tears in my eyes thinking of it. And what that said was how deeply meaningful that music was for those people. I got an inkling of understanding of the degree to which many people did not want to give up that music, but felt that it was outmoded or discarded, and whatever they may have thought of it, the world knew better. It was the beginning of a kind of anger, an activist, ideological, romantic stance that I took.

Doc, Gaither, and others played that day — the old tunes they knew and liked. As Rinzler remembered,

I knew the style of the music but had never really connected with the people who played. I knew it as a sound, not as an expression of the thinking, functioning person sitting in front of me. I had no idea what kind of people played this music. I just had the sound ringing in my ears of this beautiful, pentatonic, archaic-sounding music sung in a vocal style that left Frank Sinatra far behind.... What astonished me was that the people who are great musicians in traditional music are as profound as artists in any kind of art.

All of a sudden I understood that style was emblematic — that it was their identity. The style of that music, and the sound, was for some people who they were. It represented their parents and their values, and a way of life that was slowly changing. For those people it was not necessarily a change that they wel-

Rinzler (right) on a fieldwork trip in 1966.

Photo by Bob Yellin

comed or valued, but that was imposed; and while the younger generation was reaching for it, I came later to realize that as the generations matured, they became more wistful and looked back and gave value to things that they were quick to reject earlier.

On that one trip I got an understanding of the meaning and value and function of music — a whole contextual framework that I built on later — and of craft, that I never had before.

It was these sounds, songs, and styles that Mike Seeger, John Cohen, and Tom Paley (and later Tracy Schwarz) sought out, learned, and recorded as the New Lost City Ramblers. They were musical traditions that Mike and Pete Seeger,

1998 Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Alan Lomax, Ralph Rinzler, and others brought to the Newport Folk Festival. Other musicians on the *Anthology* — Dock Boggs, Mississippi John Hurt, Eck Robertson, Sleepy John Estes, the Carter Family — as well as Doc Watson participated in the Newport Festival.

Rinzler was heavily influenced by Alan Lomax's ideas about the connection between the survival of folk traditions

whelm local cultures. But the same means could enhance and promote knowledge and appreciation of those local expressive systems, as well as their continuity within host communities.

Rinzler brought this philosophy to the Smithsonian. In the mid-1960s S. Dillon Ripley, then secretary, wanted to enliven the institution. "Take the instruments out of their cases and let them sing," he said.

drew a huge crowd and strong press interest. It was an instant hit. Its success was recognized by many on Capitol Hill. Said one congressman,

For the first time, thousands of people, over 430,000, experienced a live museum which exhibited the art of American folklife and they loved every toe-tapping minute.... Basket weavers, pottery makers, woodworkers, carvers, doll makers, needle workers, tale tellers, boat builders, and folk singers, dancers, and musicians from all over the country were brought to remind Americans of their heritage — still a living part of our nation. In this day of the frug and jerk Americans need to be shown what their own culture has produced and continues to produce.

Another senator noted, "The Smithsonian is becoming much more than a repository for old artifacts. The exhibits are coming out of the display cases and the men and women directing the institution are showing that a museum can be vital and creative."

What started out as the discovery in Doc Watson's home that the *Anthology* represented a living tradition had turned into a revitalization of the museum. Rinzler quickly articulated a cultural conservation strategy for the Festival — suggesting that museums conserve cultures while they live rather than waiting to collect their remnants after they die. The role of a museum can be to help empower people to practice their culture, realize their aesthetic excellences, use their knowledge, transmit their wisdom, and make their culture a vital means for dealing with contemporary circumstances.

This approach characterized Rinzler's tenure as Festival director until 1982, and was extended after he was appointed the Smithsonian's assistant secretary for public service. In that position he blazed the Smithsonian's first steps toward digital technologies, led efforts to establish



The Watson family in 1960. Photo by Bob Yellin

and their public performance and dissemination. Lomax observed two cultural currents simultaneously occurring in the United States and abroad. Like his predecessors, he found many cultural styles falling into disuse or being destroyed. But he also found a broad array of cultural traditions with an amazing resiliency. Lomax suggested that enlightened government policies could help preserve and encourage those cultural forms by utilizing them in the schools, popular entertainment, and other forums. He recognized that some of the factors that hastened the destruction of cultures, such as new technologies, could now aid them as well. Radio broadcasts, sound recordings, television programs, and films promulgating mass global aesthetics could over-

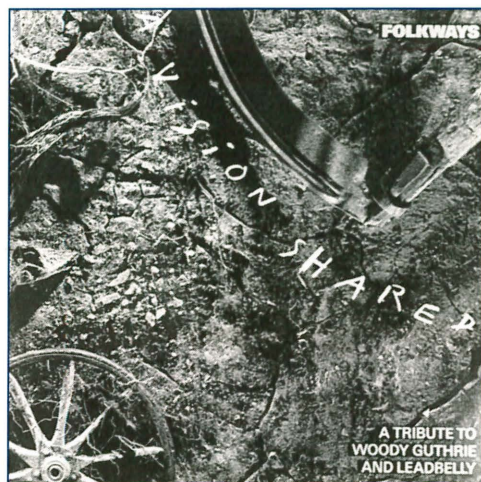
James Morris was hired and became head of the Division of Performing Arts. He instituted a wide variety of performance programs and suggested a summer folk-life festival. Rinzler was hired on contract to program the event.

The Festival would present living — as distinguished from historically re-created — traditions. The living culture Rinzler had found, in Appalachia, in Cajun country, through his Newport work, needed help, encouragement, and validation in a society whose sense of beauty and value is generally driven by the exercise of power and the commodification of the marketplace. "There was a sense in my mind that cultural democracy was as important as any other kind of democracy," said Rinzler.

The Festival began in 1967. It included 58 craftspeople and 32 musical groups,

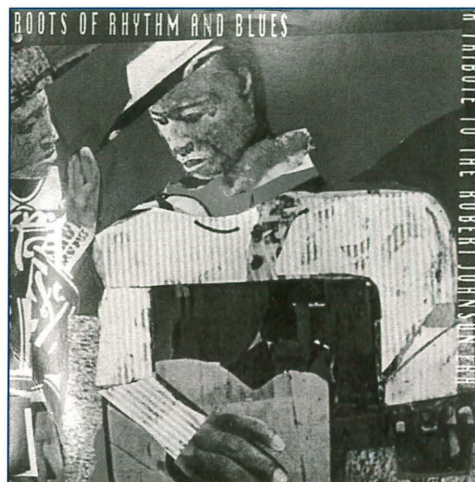
*I am deeply indebted to Ralph Rinzler.
He did not leave me where he found me.*

—Doc Watson



Folkways: A Vision Shared won a Grammy in 1989.

museums and programs that addressed the diversity of American culture, and pursued the acquisition of Folkways Records. He envisioned Folkways coming to the Smithsonian from founder Moses Asch as a documentary collection, museum of sound, and self-supporting enterprise. With Don DeVito and Harold Leventhal, he lined up contemporary musicians — Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, Emmylou Harris, U2, John Cougar Mellencamp, Brian Wilson, and others who also had been influenced by the “old music” of Folkways — to do a benefit album. That album paid for the acquisition of the collection, won a Grammy, and assured that Folkways would continue to actively document and disseminate



Comprised of recordings made at the Festival, *Roots of Rhythm and Blues* was nominated for a Grammy Award in 1992.

our musical cultural heritage.

After his stint as assistant secretary, Rinzler continued his work with the Festival and Folkways. He co-curated *Roots of Rhythm and Blues* at the 1991 Festival and won another Grammy nomination for the resultant recording. He produced a series of oral history/music instruction videos with Pete Seeger, Ralph Stanley, Watson, and Bill Monroe. He produced new Folkways albums of Watson, Monroe, and Ashley, and at the time of his death was working on an expanded edition of the *Anthology of American Folk Music*.

Upon his death, Doc Watson said, “I am deeply indebted to Ralph Rinzler. He did not leave me where he found me.” The same could be said in reverse. From Doc and Gaither Rinzler had found the Harry Smith *Anthology* to provide a window into a whole realm of culture, submerged, hidden, and overlooked, but nonetheless real and alive. This view permeated his vision of the Festival, motivated the acquisition of Folkways, and

continues to characterize the activities of the Center. Anyone who comes to our archive today finds old recordings being mined for new releases, Festival research and documentation being used for new recordings and education kits. Multi-media projects range from music provided for *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?* and *Encarta* to Web pages and video anthologies of American and world music. No dead archive or dusty museum collection here, but rather an energetic activity to understand, represent, and nourish living traditions and their ongoing transformations. It is thus most fitting that the Smithsonian regents at their meeting this January formally named the Center’s holdings the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections.

Dr. Richard Kurin is director of the Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies and the author of Reflections of a Culture Broker: A View from the Smithsonian and Smithsonian Folklife Festival: Culture Of, By, and For the People. He first worked on the Festival in 1976 and was awarded the Secretary’s Gold Medal for Exceptional Service to the Smithsonian in 1996.