

Folkways at 50: Festivals and Recordings

Fifty years ago, an immigrant audio engineer with a deep love of American music, Moses Asch, started his third record company in New York City after suffering two bankruptcies.

He called the new company Folkways Records and decided he would use it to create a kind of public archive of the world's sounds. He was also determined to provide a record label for those whose voices were rarely heard beyond their communities, from the most traditional artists to the most avant-garde. He

would eventually produce over 2,100 LP records and keep them all in print until his death in 1986. In 1987 the Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways Records as well as the Moses and Frances Asch Collection of archival materials, now both part of the Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies. In 1998 we look back over a half-century of activities that have profoundly influenced the music of our time, and



Pete Seeger and Moses Asch at Folkways' office, New York City, 1956.

Photo © David Gahr

look forward to new technologies and new directions through which to do the same for the future.

It is appropriate to celebrate Folkways' 50th anniversary at the Folklife Festival. Folkways Records was a touchstone of the early folk music revival through its support of many influential artists and its participation in many events. Moses Asch housed *Sing Out!* magazine during its early years; he recorded at the Newport

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Folk Festival; he published the recordings of generations of researchers and scholars — including some of those who would eventually have a major influence on the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. For example, recordings of Doc Watson and his family by Ralph Rinzler, founding director of the Festival, were first issued on Folkways; Bernice Johnson Reagon, African-American scholar, singer, songwriter, and folklorist with the Festival's African Diaspora Program, recorded her first album on Folkways. Moreover, the philosophies of Folkways and the Folklife Festival were similar: to celebrate cultural diversity and human artistry; to provide an educational framework through which to understand cultural manifestations; and to encourage people to delve as deeply as they wish into the subject matter by providing substantial supplemental material — liner notes in the case of Folkways and program books like this one in the case of the Folklife Festival.

In three 50th anniversary concerts we recognize the importance of music for children in the Folkways legacy, look back at some of the influential artists recorded by Moses Asch in the 1940s, and then look forward to artists who appear on the most recent compact disc issued by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

**Children's Matinee, Friday, June 26th,
5:30 – 7:00 P.M., Featuring Ella Jenkins
and Larry Long with Children from
Rural Schools in Alabama**

Music for children has been one of the most influential parts of Folkways Records — many people heard their first Folkways record in a classroom. Moses Asch thought children should be exposed to good, authentic music from many cul-

Support for Folkways At 50 comes from BMI (the American performance rights organization), the United States Postal Service, M.A.C.E. (Mississippi Action for Community Education), Global Arts/Media Foundation, P.A.C.E.R.S. (Program for Academic and Cultural Enhancement of Rural Schools) Small Schools Cooperative & Community Celebration of Place Project, KOCH International, Smithsonian Magazine, Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History, TRO The Richmond Organization, Columbia Records and Sony Music Entertainment, Michael Asch, Walter Beebe and the New York Open Center, Andrew Dapuzzo and Discronics, David Glasser, Charlie Pilzer, and Airshow Mastering, Inc., Judith DeMaris Hearn, Ella Jenkins, Richard Kurin, Mark Miller and Queens Group, Inc., Microsoft Corporation/Media Acquisitions Department, Arnold L. Polinger, Razor & Tie Entertainment, and The Recording Industries Music Performance Trust Funds.

tural traditions. In this afternoon concert we celebrate not only the contributions of musicians who perform for children but the creativity of children themselves.

Folkways Founders/U.S. Postal Service Folk Musicians Stamp Concert, Friday, June 26th, 7:00 – 9:00 P.M.

In 1998 the U.S. Postal Service is issuing a stamp series commemorating four important figures in the folk music revival of the 1950s and 1960s: Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, Sonny Terry, and Josh White. All four artists recorded for Moses Asch. To honor these men who played prominent roles in both Folkways and 20th-century American music, we are inviting musicians whose styles have been strongly influenced by them to perform at an evening concert. Featured artists are Toshi Reagon, Josh White, Jr., Arlo Guthrie, and the Willie Foster Blues Band.

Heartbeat: Voices of First Nations Women Concert, Sunday, June 28th, 5:30 – 9:00 P.M.

Because most traditional Native women's music has been performed in private settings — in their homes or during tribal ceremonies — very little of this music has been heard outside the women's own communities. Yet women's music is a growing and dynamic part of Native music today. In addition to traditional women's genres, women have recently begun to perform music previously restricted to men. A number of singer/songwriters also have created songs that use Native languages and rhythms and often deal with issues of concern to contemporary American Indians.

Some of the artists featured on a new Smithsonian Folkways recording of Native women's music will be presented in a concert that celebrates both the release of the album and the half-century that Folkways Records and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings have been introducing wider audiences to commu-

nity-based music. The program will feature Sharon Burch (Navajo singer/songwriter), Joy Harjo and Poetic Justice (contemporary poetry and jazz), Judy Trejo and her daughters (Paiute traditional songs), Mary Youngblood (Aleut-

Seminole flute player), Tzo'kam (traditional Salish songs), and Sissy Goodhouse (Lakota traditional singer).

Anthony Seeger, Ph.D., is curator and director of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

Suggested General Reading

Goldsmith, Peter. *Making People's Music: Moe Asch and Folkways Records*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998. The first comprehensive biography of the man who founded Folkways Records, his vision, and his influence on 20th-century music.

Suggested Listening for the Children's Matinee

Jenkins, Ella. *Songs Children Love to Sing*. Smithsonian Folkways 45042.

Long, Larry. *Here I Stand: Elders' Wisdom, Children's Songs*. Smithsonian Folkways 45050.

Smithsonian Folkways Children's Music Collection. Smithsonian Folkways 45043.

Suggested Listening for the Folkways Founders Concert

LEAD BELLY *Folkways: The Original Vision* (Smithsonian Folkways 40001) with songs by Lead Belly and Woody Guthrie; *Lead Belly's Last Sessions* (Smithsonian Folkways 40068); and the *Lead Belly Legacy Series* (Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 40045, 40105).

WOODY GUTHRIE *Folkways: The Original Vision* (Smithsonian Folkways 40001) with songs by Lead Belly and Woody Guthrie; *This Land Is Your Land* (Smithsonian Folkways 40100); and, for children, *Nursery Days* (Smithsonian Folkways 45036).

SONNY TERRY *Sonny Terry: The Folkways Years* (Smithsonian Folkways 40033) and *Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee Sing* (Smithsonian Folkways 40011).

JOSH WHITE The original acetate masters recorded by Moses Asch were preserved for over 50 years and released in April on *Josh White: Free and Equal Blues* (Smithsonian Folkways 40081).

Suggested Reading & Listening for the First Nations Women Concert

Bataille, Gretchen. *American Indian Women: A Guide to Research*. New York: Garland, 1991.

Green, Rayna. *American Indian Women: A Contextual Bibliography*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979.

———. *Women in American Indian Society*. New York: Chelsea House, 1992.

Jamieson, Kathleen. *Native Women in Canada: A Selected Bibliography*. Ottawa: Social Sciences and Humanities, 1983.

Burch, Sharon. *The Blessing Ways*. Canyon CR546.

———. *Touch the Sweet Earth*. Canyon CR535.

———. *Yazzie Girl*. Canyon CR534.

Goodhouse, Sissy. *The Third Circle: Songs of Lakota Women*. Makoche 113.

———. *Tiwahe*. Makoche 140.

Harjo, Joy, and Poetic Justice. *Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century*. Silver Wave 914.

Heartbeat: Voices of First Nations Women. Smithsonian Folkways 40415.

Heartbeat 2: More Voices of First Nations Women. Smithsonian Folkways 40455.

Youngblood, Mary. *The Offering*. Silver Wave SD 917.