

## A Tribute to Moses Asch

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Each year the Smithsonian Folklife Festival holds a special evening concert to honor both its co-founder Ralph Rinzler (1934–1994) and a key person with whom he collaborated. The 2010 Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert pays tribute to Moses Asch (1905–1986), the founder of Folkways Records, by presenting Hazel Dickens, Alice Gerrard, Bernice Johnson Reagon, and others who recorded for Folkways during Asch's lifetime.

Moses Asch was the great sound documenter of the twentieth century. As the son of acclaimed novelist, Sholem Asch, he grew up amidst artists and intellectuals first in Europe and then New York City. In 1939 he started his own record company, Asch Records, based on his desire to release music that had something to say, not necessarily music that was popular or would sell well. Some of the individuals who fell into the Asch orbit were Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Lead Belly, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Burl Ives, Mary Lou Williams, and Langston Hughes. The Asch label was followed by the Disc Recording Company of America and then by the Folkways Records and Service Corporation in 1948.

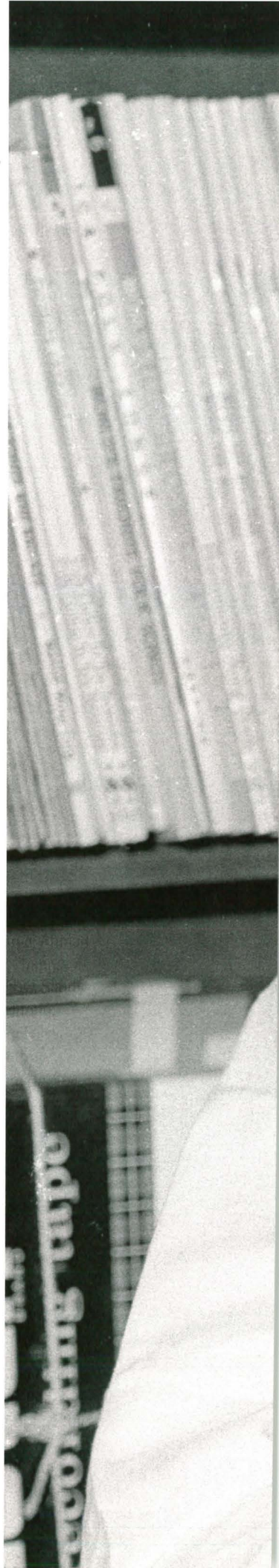
During the next thirty-eight years, Asch released nearly 2,200 albums. He kept every title in print, even if it sold rarely. "You don't take Q out of the alphabet just because you don't use it as often," he explained. Asch's corpus of recordings is an amazing feat—not only for being primarily one person's effort, but also for creating a veritable encyclopedia of sound—human, natural, and mechanical.

The Folkways catalog was divided into world traditional music, jazz, blues, folk, ragtime, songs of protest, spoken word, science and nature recordings, and his crucial children's section. Some of Asch's best children's recordings—especially by Guthrie, Seeger, and Ella Jenkins—sold so well that he could afford to produce unusual specialty recordings like *Sounds of the Office* or *Using Self-Hypnosis to End Test Anxiety*, which he knew would never make money.

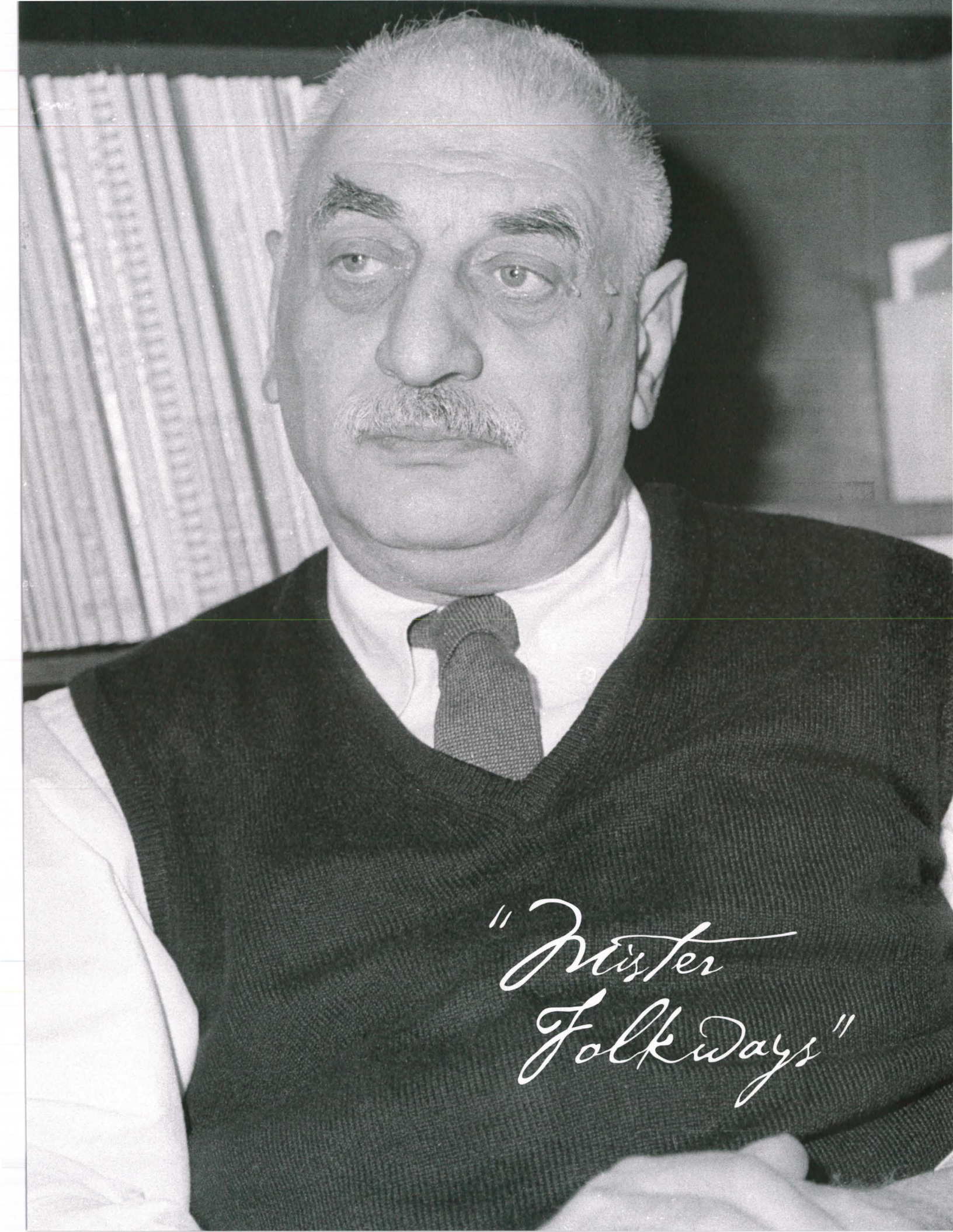
Each Folkways record came with heavy black cardboard sleeves and a booklet tucked inside. These liner notes were crucial to fulfilling Asch's desire that his recordings inform; they were written by some of the foremost experts in the field. One of those writers—during the great folk revival of the late 1950s and 1960s—was a young Ralph Rinzler who contributed liner notes for *American Banjo* (1957), thought to be the first bluegrass LP ever released. Rinzler later brought his own recording projects to Asch for release, and subsequently became the director of field research for the Newport Folk Festival.

In 1967, the Smithsonian hired Rinzler to help organize the first Festival of American Folklife, which was a four-day event held on a stage outside the Smithsonian Castle. Thanks in part to the continuing success of the Festival, Rinzler became the Smithsonian's assistant secretary for public service and in that position was able to wage a successful campaign to acquire Folkways Records in the mid-1980s.

During the later years of his life, Asch was worried that no one would carry on his life's work, but rather would retain only the best-selling Folkways titles and scrap everything else. Fortunately, Rinzler was able to convince Asch that the Smithsonian would keep the label alive. The collection came to the Smithsonian in 1987 and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings was founded in 1988—not only to continue the Asch legacy by maintaining every single recording, but also by issuing new releases in a similar vein. During the past twenty-two years, Smithsonian Folkways has released more than four hundred titles—a respectable number, though not equal to the amazing pace managed by "Mister Folkways" himself, Moses Asch.







*"Mr.  
Folkways"*