


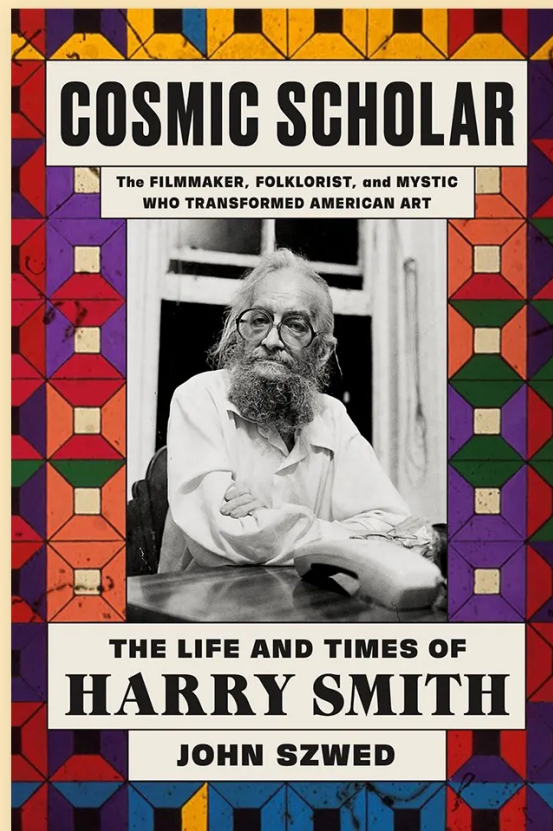
BOOKS

BRIEFLY NOTED

“Cosmic Scholar,” “Up Home,” “The Caretaker,” and “Emergency.”

September 25, 2023

 Save this story



Cosmic Scholar, by John Szwed (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). The Beat polymath Harry Smith—an eccentric, couch-surfing, bearded bohemian who repaired the holes in his jacket with duct tape and lived on pea soup, mashed bananas, and cigarettes—bears some resemblance to the protagonist of Joseph Mitchell’s masterpiece “Joe Gould’s Secret.” But, whereas Gould’s life’s work turned out not to exist, this biography argues persuasively that Smith’s contributions to art, anthropology, avant-garde film, and, most of all, popular music were profound. Szwed, also the author of an excellent biography of Billie Holiday, shows how the legacy that Smith left behind—including the six-LP “Anthology of American Folk Music,” from 1952—influenced the sensibilities of Bob Dylan, Jerry Garcia, and countless others.

