



Harry Smith, at 19, photographed for a 1943 issue of *The American Magazine* at home with three Lummi Indian Nation guests.

BOOK REVIEWS

Shaman in Residence

BY DAVID YAFFE

AUGUST 26, 2023

READING TIME: 5 MINUTES

COSMIC SCHOLAR: *THE LIFE AND TIMES OF HARRY SMITH*
by John Szwed

Your phone can access more music than you could listen to in a lifetime. It's a vast archive, and we have no shortage of Baedekers. For the modest price of a subscription, your streaming service tells you what music you'll like and where it comes from, and the playlists never stop. If they think it's worth it, Apple Music will tell you an artist's "essentials," their "next steps" and "deep cuts." Apple has around 30,000 of these playlists drawing on more than 100 million tracks, and the space for them is infinite.

Making them would be a dream job for a music geek, but they are, with a tweak or two.

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These categories may seem basic, but they were actually a revolution in the America of 1952. The *Anthology of American Folk Music* did not even reveal the race of the performers. Smith knew even then that the music of white Appalachia had blues influence, and he made sure that blues ballads were sung by Black artists. In Smith's notes to the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, he called terms such as "hillbilly" and "race" "objectionable," and talked in interviews about wanting his anthology to be a "blindfold test" for critics. But Smith saw everything.



Smith at the Hotel Chelsea, in New York, 1969.

There was no source; with his own scratchy 78s, Smith was his own source. This was someone who, at 15, started recording the Lummi tribe of the Pacific Northwest—he was the first to record them, and they banned future recording by anyone else—and kept going from there. He was flunking anthropology at the University of Washington before dropping out, while becoming an ad hoc anthropologist himself. By 1952, just in time for the folk revival, Smith was a guy who knew a guy. Dave Van Ronk said, “We learned everything we knew from the *Anthology*. It was our Talmud. It was our Bible.”

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language, and that’s what attracted me to it in the first place.”

The tracks were recorded between 1927 and 1932, before the sound could be diluted by the marketplace, and that is exactly what folk listeners were looking for. Some listeners of the *Anthology of American Folk Music* tracked down Clarence Ashley, Dock Boggs, Mississippi John Hurt, and Sleepy John Estes and re-started their careers. Before the music found its way to Dylan, Smith had to know what was out there, where it came from, and who recorded the definitive version, a tricky endeavor when it came to folk music, a genre which, arguably, had many definitive versions. Someone who took on that task would have to know almost everything about everything.



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Sleepy John Estes, whose "Expressman Blues" was included in Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, circa 1949.

Smith appeared to be that man, and he was a little too eccentric for this world, but he was just authentically weird enough for the bohemian corners of San Francisco and, mostly, New York City, where he talked his way into rooms at the Hotel Chelsea, Allen Ginsberg's apartment, and various flophouses and S.R.O.'s.

Is being a collector a job? Sort of. But the academy was not for him, and any kind of desk job would have been more unthinkable. Smith was untamable, a hobo who canonized definitive hobo music.

“We learned everything we knew from the *Anthology*. It was our Talmud. It was our Bible.”

In his illuminating, definitive biography *Cosmic Scholar: The Life and Times of Harry Smith*, John Szwed takes on the life of someone who left no archive, who was a

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Smith with his murals at Jimbo's Bop City, in San Francisco, circa 1950.

Szwed, an emeritus professor of anthropology at Yale and of music at Columbia, and the author of biographies of Sun Ra, Miles Davis, Billie Holiday, and Alan Lomax, is fascinated by the weirdos who fill our playlists, and even though Sun Ra believed he came from outer space, Smith could be the weirdest and most enigmatic of them all. Szwed is a scholar, but he is also a storyteller, and he makes you feel like you are taking in Thelonious Monk at the Five Spot and running into Leonard Cohen, Patti Smith, and Robert Mapplethorpe at the Chelsea. Any one of them could be buying you dinner while you laid the next big idea on them.

When he wasn't collecting records, Harry Smith was painting—inspired by Dizzy Gillespie or Native ceremonies—and making experimental films: abstracts, many of them destroyed, also inspired by Gillespie, and gaining the praise of the *Village Voice* film columnist Jonas Mekas, even though Smith introduced himself saying, “I am Harry Smith and I hate you.” Mekas, in turn, called him “the last alchemist of the Western world, the last magician.”

Smith's *Cosmic Kingdom* to find the 11 in 1950 but 1

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Robbie Robertson, Michael McClure, Bob Dylan,
and Allen Ginsberg in San Francisco, 1965.

One night, in 1985, Dylan showed up with a six-pack and a tape of his new album, *Empire Burlesque*. When Ginsberg told him Smith was in the other room, Dylan said, “Harry Smith. Now that’s someone I’ve always wanted to meet.” But Smith would not budge from his bed and just complained about the noise, even as he was paying close attention to the sound of Dylan’s voice. Really, he could not leave the room because he was overwhelmed; he felt that, through the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, he essentially invented Dylan and did not want to violate their spiritual bond.

The *Village Voice* film columnist Jonas Mekas called Harry Smith “the last alchemist of the Western world, the last magician.”

Ginsberg eventually arranged for Naropa University to anoint Smith as the Shaman-in-Residence, but Smith found his way back to freeloading at the Chelsea—he owed

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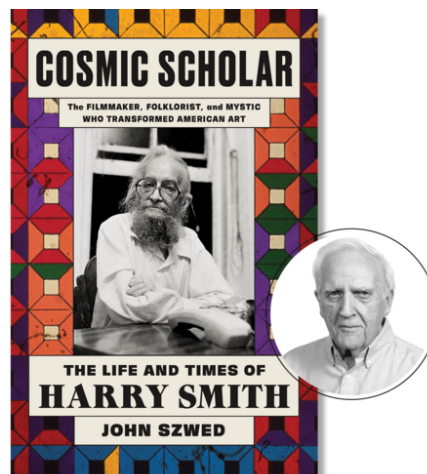
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was not what it used to be. Smith left us with a world that had already been discovered. The music went digital, then into streaming, and eventually it ended up on your phone, always available and greeted mostly with a shrug. Anyone with access to YouTube can listen to the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, but most of those people are listening to something else.

There could always be a new pile of 78s—or even some neglected MP3s—that could change the world. Would the world bother to notice?



416 pages; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; \$35

Cosmic Scholar is available at your local independent bookstore, on [Bookshop](#), and on [Amazon](#).