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The strange but true life story of musicographer Harry Smith



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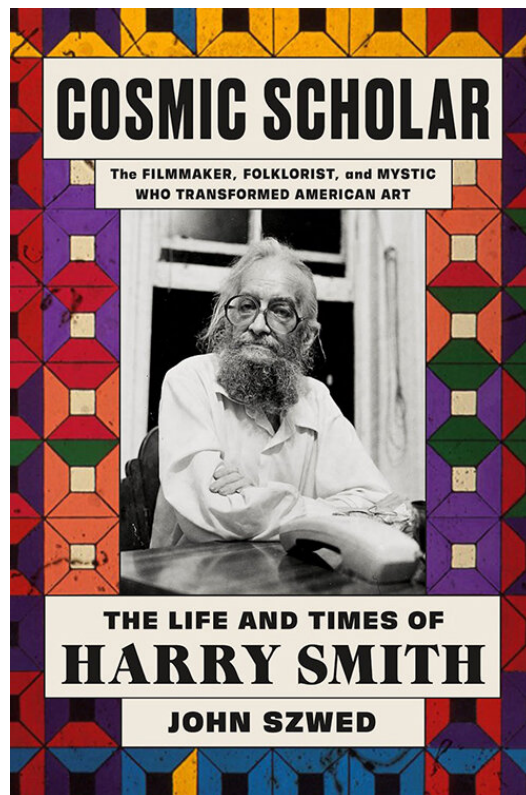
John Szwed

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By BILL CASTANIER

Harry Smith is one of those benign white-bread name that elicits thoughts of boring or dull. But if you had been riding the subway in New York City in the mid-1960s and the real Harry Smith sat next to you with his scraggly beard, unkept hair, body odor, alkie breath, a small tape recorder and large periscope glasses and was mumbling about “patterns,” you would have moved. Pick up the new book “Cosmic Scholar,” by biographer John Szwed, if you want to know why. In addition to being stewed most of his life, the “real” Harry Smith was a genius who’s hard to pin a title on. His interests were broad and deep, and he was strange to the point of bordering on insanity, but his creative spark still lives today.

Smith was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1923 into a normal two-parent home. His father worked in a cannery and his mother taught on an Indian reservation. Both read extensively. He attended a mixed-race school and became fascinated by Indian rituals and life. He was readily accepted as an observer of rituals few outsiders had ever witnessed, and he began making audio recordings of ceremonies, painting watercolors and taking photographs.



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He fell in love with collecting information and the life of a documentarian, which would rule the rest of his life. A friend, Ed Sanders, founder of the Fugs and himself one strange dude, called him a “giant data squirrel.”

A normal person would see an object and say, "That's an object," while Smith would see the same object and see the beginnings of a pattern. He would begin collecting similar objects, ranging from paper airplanes to bandages discarded from tattoo work. Nothing was out of bounds.

In the 1940s, Smith took a shot at college, but his attention span for study was zero. However, his need to collect information and various things seemed to quadruple. He began experimenting with film, mixing it with light shows, music and colors, presaging the Hippie movement. His early animation was bizarre. Imagine mixing Thelonious Monk's "Misterioso" with images that represent a pattern like an EEG. Or his odd mixing of "The Wizard of Oz" with Buddhist ritual.

One of Smith's projects that still resonates with musicians is his 1952 publication of a six-LP collection of American vernacular music, including everything from fiddlers to Delta Blues, from Appalachian ballads to Cajun squeezebox waltzes. The collection, "Anthology of American Folk Music," heralded the 1960s' folk revolution. Musicians of that era rushed to release their own versions of Smith's collection, including Bob Dylan, Neil Young and Canned Heat. The book details how Dylan borrowed at least 15 of the recordings for his own work, including the classic "Stackalee," by Frank Hutchinson, and "James Alley Blues," by Richard Brown.

Szwed points out that Smith's approach of reissuing previously recorded music was different from Alan Lomax's, who went into fields and prisons and sat on front porches and in rural churches to record for his collection. Smith just borrowed from the 10,000 78 rpm records he had already collected. Szwed has also written a masterful biography of Lomax.

The liner notes on Smith's albums are worth the price of admission. Of course, they ramble, but they are funny and poignant. They are worth a half hour of reading. Smith is alleged to have signed all 2,000 copies of the set, but I couldn't find his signature on the collection I once owned, purchased from the MSU Salvage Store in the early 2000s.

Smith's living conditions were erratic, varying from extensive periods couch-surfing with the likes of poet and writer Allen Ginsberg to bedding down at New York's legendary Chelsea Hotel, where he left a huge bill when he was evicted. Smith lived from hand-to-mouth, and what he put in his mouth varied from peyote to instant mashed potatoes.

Despite working on art, video and music projects full time in his 63 years, Smith left very little of his work behind because of his vagabond existence. He often found his work thrown to the curb when he was evicted.

With the publication of this new biography, Smith's life and work is being reexamined to fullest extent possible. A new exhibition was recently launched at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York that attempts to celebrate this amazing genius of art, music, filmmaking and musicology.

By the 1970s, Smith was barely making it and was "adopted" by Ginsberg, who got him placed in a Buddhist-like college in Boulder, Colorado. He was able to make one more special appearance in 1991, when he put on a tuxedo and accepted a special Chairman's Merit Award for Lifetime Achievement at the Grammy Awards for "Anthology," which inspired countless musicians.

If you want to know more about Smith, listen to this two-hour interview with Szwed on the public radio program “American Routes.”

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