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'Cosmic Scholar' Review: Harry Smith's Strange Frequencies

Smith collected rare books, paper airplanes, Pennsylvania Dutch tools—and harvested the folk music recordings that changed a generation.

By Timothy Farrington Follow

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Harry Smith with his 'brain drawings,' ca. 1950. PHOTO: HY HIRSH/HARRY SMITH ARCHIVES

The 1952 "Anthology of American Folk Music" was the canon shot heard 'round the world. The six-LP set delivered postwar listeners a trove of riches from what the critic Greil Marcus later called the "old, weird America"—white Appalachian country, black Delta blues, Texas fiddle music, Alabama gospel and wheezy Cajun waltzes. The detailed liner notes in an accompanying handbook mixed scholarly precision with deadpan humor and strange caprice. Index entries include "Loneliness mentioned on record" as well as "Clapping, records featuring"; the occultist Aleister Crowley and the spiritualist Rudolf Steiner are cited as inspirations for the project; and many songs are tagged with headline-like summaries ("THEFT OF STETSON HAT CAUSES DEADLY DISPUTE. VICTIM IDENTIFIES SELF AS FAMILY MAN"; "WIFE'S LOGIC FAILS TO EXPLAIN STRANGE BEDFELLOW TO DRUNKARD").

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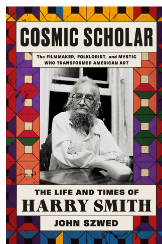
Cosmic Scholar

By John Szwed

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

416 pages



The "Anthology" fed the 1960s folk revival, and Jerry Garcia, Neil Young, Patti Smith and Elvis Costello, among others, have since drawn on it like a musical seed bank. Bob Dylan has covered 15 of its 84 tracks, including "Stackalee" by Frank Hutchison and "James Alley Blues" by Richard "Rabbit" Brown.

The collection was curated by one man, a gnome-like polymath named Harry Smith, who viewed it as a "collage," a hybrid of document and art. With it he put a lasting stamp on the vernacular American songbook. But as John Szwed shows in his highly enjoyable biography, "Cosmic Scholar: The Life and Times of Harry Smith," the "Anthology" was only one facet of a varied career devoted to synthesis and connection.

Smith thought of himself mainly as a painter, though most of his visual art, including influential animated and abstract films, has disappeared. Irascible, alcoholic and allergic to paying rent, he would rip up his work in anger, toss it aside once completed, lose it to eviction or cannibalize it for further projects, ever heedless of his legacy. He was "completely committed to art," one friend recalled, "little interest in the outcome of his work"—only the "doing of it."

Unlike his fellow music-gatherer Alan Lomax, who made field recordings, Smith compiled his anthology from commercial records—his own vast collection of 78s that had been put out by regional labels in the 1920s and '30s. But his work, like that of the ethnomusicologist Lomax, was rooted in ethnography. Smith had a compulsive urge to document that dated to childhood and "would always identify himself as an anthropologist," writes Mr. Szwed, a professor emeritus at Yale as well as an accomplished biographer.

Born in 1923 in Portland, Ore., Smith grew up mostly in Washington state, on the shores of Puget Sound. His father was a foreman at a fish cannery, his mother an artist and teacher who had worked at Native schools in Alaska. Small and sickly, the boy read deeply in his parents' wide-ranging library. As a teenager, he grew fascinated by the nearby reservations on which some of his schoolmates lived. He began visiting them by bus and bike, ranging as far north as Canada's Vancouver Island and gaining entree as few others had to tribal life. Smith painted watercolors of what he saw. He took photographs. He developed his own system for notating dance. He made sound recordings, including, Mr. Szwed tells us, the first ever of Lummi rituals. By the time Smith was out of high school, a local professor had written to express interest in his research.

At the University of Washington, however, Smith lasted only five semesters, during which he got bad grades, even in anthropology. But he continued his documentary projects throughout his life. His protégé Ed Sanders, a poet and co-founder of the proto-punk band the Fugs, once called Smith a "gigantic data squirrel," which captures his feral curiosity. He collected occult tomes, paper airplanes, Pennsylvania Dutch tools, the characteristic fabric patchwork of Seminole Indians and more. He spent so much time browsing in used bookstores that the clerks would ask *him* what was in stock. His goal was always what he called "saturated study," a totalizing vision that would reveal hidden truths by mapping intricate interconnections. "Whatever you couldn't put in a diagram didn't interest him," one friend observed.

First in Berkeley, Calif., where he had moved in 1945 to work as assistant to an anthropologist, then in New York, where he arrived in 1951, he expressed this vision in beguiling experimental films that pulse with movement and color. Intoxicated by jazz, Carl Jung, stimulants and psychedelics, Smith painted celluloid by hand, animated woodcuts from Victorian books and deployed lighting rigs of his own devising to flood the frame with saturated glows. Buddhist, alchemical and geometric symbols sport and mingle. One film sets out to "transcribe" the 11-minute Thelonious Monk song "Misterioso": one image for every note. Others are set to natural rhythms, "organized in specific patterns," Smith explained, "derived from the interlocking beats of the respiration, the heart and the EEG alpha component."

Over the years he created a film about the Seminoles; a documentary on the peyote ritual of the Kiowa; and an aborted Buddhist adaptation of "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz." In 1972 he began work on an grand project that he promised would offer a "mathematical analysis" of a Marcel Duchamp painting expressed using bits of music and text from Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's 1930

opera "Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny." This was his most ambitious feat of intergenre translation, an attempt to render the opera's libretto as "universal, or near universal, symbols" that spanned cultures. When it premiered in 1980, it required four simultaneous projectors, plus a colored spotlight that Smith manned himself to vary each performance. The film was hailed as a mystifying masterpiece.

Smith's other main achievement was funding all this work, and his bare-bones lifestyle, without having a job. He stayed in flophouses and friends' apartments. He lied, manipulated, begged and stole, but his victims were mostly willing, happy to support an obvious genius. When he was evicted in 1977 from Manhattan's Chelsea Hotel, where he had become an anchor of the bohemian demimonde, he left $7,000 in unpaid rent. But the manager was soon pining to have him back. Through it all, Mr. Szwed stresses, Smith was "never lazy": "Bum" or "mendicant," he accomplished a huge amount. "I am, alas, myself a maniac," he wrote in one (successful) grant application. In another he lamented that "the number of people willing to part with cash to finance esoteric alchemical works are still much less than in the 17th century."

"Cosmic Scholar" is an impressively full portrait of an erratic subject, even if the text can feel slightly unpruned. And Mr. Szwed makes fine farce out of Smith's relations with friends, admirers and patrons (often the same people). One recalled Smith asking "for a couple of dollars to get a cab to Allen Ginsberg's to get $5 so that he could take a cab to Peggy Guggenheim's to ask her for $2,000 for his research." Ginsberg was fond of Smith ("so devious, so saintly") but, despite his presumably high tolerance for irregular modes of life, found the increasingly ill Smith exasperating as a permanent guest. When Bob Dylan came over for an evening in 1985 to play Ginsberg his new album, Smith yelled at them to turn it down. Mr. Dylan then asked to meet the mystical eminence, but Smith refused to get out of bed.

Twice Ginsberg tried to take Smith out of town and foist him on others without telling him in advance. The second time, he succeeded, leaving Smith at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colo., where he would live in a groundskeeper's cottage and became a beloved campus elder, offering lectures as unpaid "Shaman-in-Residence." Thence it was that in 1991, only three months before his death, Smith traveled back to New York—a young fan paid for the flight and hotel —to receive a special Grammy. He was being honored for his work on the "Anthology," which he had barely listened to in decades. Right before the ceremony, his guest, a parapsychologist whom he barely knew, was entrusted with the care of five kittens that had been smuggled in by Smith, ungovernable to the last.

—Mr. Farrington is a former editor at Harper's and the Journal.

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