

CHARLES BOGERT

Sounds of North American Frogs (1958)

Folkways' archive of field recordings embraces science and nature as well as song, and this, one of the label's bestsellers, is a particular highlight. Recorded by Charles Mitchell Bogert, a herpetologist and curator for the American Museum of Natural History, *Sounds of North American Frogs* brings you just that – the calls and cries of 57 species of frogs and toads, painstakingly captured by Bogert himself from creeks, swamps and roadside ditches across the continent. These strangely beguiling snatches of Barking Treefrogs, Red-Spotted Toads and Plains Spadefoots are linked by charming exposition from Bogert, whose easy drawl and obvious enthusiasm contribute appreciably to the album's charm.

Audio alchemists Matmos number among the many fans of Folkways' field recordings. Their latest album, *Return to Archive*, is built around samples taken exclusively from the label's non-musical offerings, including *Frogs*, which they describe as "a completely arresting document... like an uncanny combination of Noah cataloguing the inhabitants of his ark... at once deeply froggy and deeply human." Award-winning composer Christian Mason is another devotee, calling the album "inspiring and informative... a great reminder of the sonic richness and diversity of the natural world."

Clockwise from immediate right: Harry Smith in 1988 (photographed by Allen Ginsberg); booklet for the *Anthology of American Folk Music*; 'Algo Bueno' (Jazz Painting) by Smith; Smith poses circa 1950 with his 'brain drawings'; 'Untitled' zodiacal hexagram on a scratchboard by Smith



VARIOUS ARTISTS

Anthology of American Folk Music (1952)

Without a doubt the most celebrated title in Folkways' catalogue, Smith's *Anthology* can justly claim to be one of the most influential audio collections ever committed to wax. Almost as astonishing as the music itself is the story of the man who collated it. A West Coast eccentric, a record collector, experimental filmmaker,

inveterate hoarder and mystic, with a deep interest in esoteric spirituality, Harry Smith has become a near-mythical figure in the minds of folk fans and modern beatniks, occupying a place somewhere between inspired musicologist and cosmic guru. Smith did not record the 84 folk, blues and country tracks, which date between the mid-1920s and the early 1930s, they were drawn from his personal stash of 78s, many long out of print by the time he approached Folkways with the idea of re-releasing them.

Originally issued in 1952, the *Anthology* failed to make any waves, yet from the time of the 60s folk revival onwards, Smith's labour of love became a source of fascination and inspiration for a litany of major artists, including Bob Dylan, John Baez, Dave Von Ronk and Jerry Garcia. Folk icon Peggy Seeger chose Smith's opus as part of the *One LP* project by William Ellis – a series of portraits in which creatives posed with albums they considered of fundamental importance. "I'm a singer of folk songs, but they're the real ones," said Peggy of the musicians collected on this absorbing set.

INSIDE THE *MIND* OF HARRY SMITH

The life works of Harry Smith (1923–1991) defy categorisation, though the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City has tried to give it some cohesion with *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten: The Art of Harry Smith*, an exhibition running until January 28, 2024 which collects together his paintings, films and poetry alongside unexpected objects from his multifarious collections. Here is but a small selection:

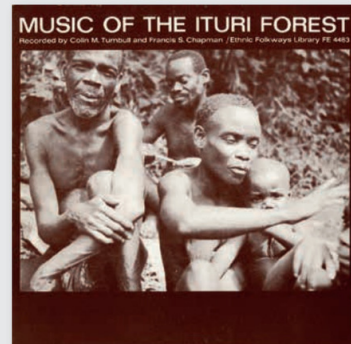


FRANTZ CASSEUS & LOLITA CUEVAS

Haitian Folk Songs (1953)

East of Cuba and Jamaica and south of the Bahamas, the Caribbean nation of Haiti owes its musical heritage to the indigenous Taino people and settlers from Africa, France, Spain and many other countries. Epitomised by the music known as *méringue*, a potent blend of European and African sounds and rhythms, traditions of playing and singing are integral to the country's heritage. That heritage came under attack during the US military occupation from 1915-1934, a time which saw Haitian *vodou* and other aspects of local culture brutally suppressed. Born right at the dawn of this era, talented Haitian guitarist Frantz Casseus made it his life's mission to champion the music of his birthland. *Haitian Folk Songs* supplied the perfect setting for Casseus' playing, accompanying the sole voice of Lolita Cuevas.

Born in Puerto Rico, Lolita Cuevas grew up in Haiti from the age of two and displayed a deep interest in traditional songs. She gave her first professional concert aged 15 and became a mainstay in local nightclubs, on radio, and in shows throughout Latin America, the Caribbean and the United States. In 1953, she met with Casseus to record this luminous set, which sees the duo deliver a mesmerising collection of native folk tunes. For Leyla McCalla, former cellist with the Carolina Chocolate Drops, and now a successful solo artist, this album proved revelatory in exploring her ancestral roots. "These songs have stayed with me," she says, "as some of the most poignant versions of classic vodou songs."



VARIOUS ARTISTS

Music of the Ituri Forest (1957)

To take even the briefest of dives into the Folkways catalogue is to become lost in a web of fascinating stories, not least on this release, which pinpoints the enduring magic of the label's releases – Folkways chronicles the story of humanity as told through its music. The accompanying notes for this release are by anthropologist Colin Turnbull, who also engineered the recording. One of the many curious figures to be found behind Folkways' releases, Turnbull was born in London, studied philosophy, and served in the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve during WWII. He first travelled to the Congo in 1951 where, on a break from his duties as a musicologist, he met Hollywood producer Sam Spiegel, for whom he built the boat that would later feature in the award-winning movie, *The African Queen*.

Turnbull had a particular fascination with the Bambuti people of the northeastern Congo: pygmy hunter-gatherers who comprise one of the oldest Indigenous groups in the region. Bambuti society recognises no chiefs or councils. Music-making is an evenly shared process, with each member contributing one or two notes, the whole gradually building into something far greater than its parts. These songs are woven into the everyday life of the Bambuti, and these recordings capture music for travelling, dancing, drinking, initiation ceremonies and even elephant hunting. Grammy-Award winning singer Carly Simon credited this album as inspiration for her song, 'Menemsha', highlighting the far-reaching influence of Folkways' glittering discography.

Leyla McCalla on Haitian Folk Songs

"After I read the book, *The World That Made New Orleans* by Ned Sublette, I was insatiable for more knowledge about Haiti and Haiti's relationship to Louisiana history. In New Orleans, I found myself at the crossroads of my ancestral and adopted homes. I remember thinking, 'I wonder what Haitian folk music sounds like?' I did a Google search and found *Haitian Folk Songs*. This album is important because it melds the aesthetic of the classical voice and guitar with the world of Haitian music. It was recorded in the 1950s at a time when Haitian maestros were trending towards mimicking big band styles and using that to interpret Haitian songs (also completely gorgeous and important). These songs offer a more intimate and subtle approach to the music and have a timelessness that transcends the sound of any era. It is also the album that led me to Casseus' own composition, 'Mesi Bondye' [aka 'The Harvest Song'], which has become a standard on my setlists."



Kim Atkins; Allen Ginsberg; Courtesy of Harry Smith Archives; Hy Hirsch; Laura Parrain; Courtesy of Jeff Place; Courtesy of Ralph Rinzler Archives; Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

