GREIL MARCUS

INVISIBLE REPUBLIC

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FOR PAULINE

fumbling them ("D . . . wait, uh, no, D, not D, E . . ."). Yet it has a floating melody like no other he has found, sung in a voice of rapture and engima he has sought ever since. The music-box piano of Richard Manuel and the frontier-church organ of Garth Hudson lift "I'm a Fool for You" out of time: the words are like some bootleg gospel of Christ, ellipsis as parable. It's a vision of transmutation: Christ returned as both supplicant and unbeliever, as in folk legends where he escaped with Mary Magdalene to exile in France or assumed the form of King Arthur. As partners in myth and maybe crime (self-apostasy?), he and the singer merge. "When I come back, when I don't make my return," he proclaims, as his first (or last) dispensation, "A heart shall rise and a man shall burn."

Except to say that I hear "A man shall burn" as "Every man shall burn," this is not an interpretation I would ever think of or that anyone else would likely think of—or rather it is not an interpretation at all. It's not an attempt to define or decode what a singer meant when he sang what he sang, but a response to a certain provocation. It is an attempt to catch what the singer took out of the air of a particular time and place, to catch what the singer and the musicians with him put back in the air.

What they took out of the air were ghosts—and it's an obvious thing to say. For thirty years people have listened to the basement tapes as palavers with a community of ghosts—or even, in certain moments, as the palavers of a community of ghosts. Their presence is undeniable; to most it is also an abstraction, at best a vague tourism of specters from a foreign country.

F O U R

THE OLD, WEIRD AMERICA

As it happens, these ghosts were not abstractions. As native sons and daughters, they were a community. And they were once gathered together in a single place: on the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, a work produced by a twenty-nine-year-old man of no fixed address named Harry Smith. Issued in 1952 on Folkways Records of New York City—as an elaborate, dubiously legal bootleg, a compendium of recordings originally released on and generally long forgotten by such still-active labels as Columbia, Paramount, Brunswick, and Victor—it was the founding document of the American folk revival. "It gave us contact with musicians and cultures we wouldn't have known existed," John Cohen of the New Lost City Ramblers, an archivist guitar-fiddle-and-banjo band that formed in 1958, recalled in 1995 at a gathering to mark the fourth anniversary of Smith's death. The *Anthology* introduced Cohen and hundreds, then thousands of others to performers from the 1920s and '30s—artists, Cohen said, "who became

like mystical gods to us." The "*Anthology* was our bible," singer Dave Van Ronk wrote in 1991 of the Greenwich Village folk milieu in the mid-1950s. "We all knew every word of every song on it, including the ones we hated. They say that in the 19th century British Parliament, when a member would begin to quote a classical author in Latin the entire House would rise in a body and finish the quote along with him. It was like that." In 1959 and 1960, at the University of Minnesota, in Dinkytown, the *Anthology of American Folk Music* was Bob Dylan's first true map of a republic that was still a hunch to him.

From its first number, "Henry Lee" (which as "Love Henry" Dylan used to open *World Gone Wrong* in 1993), to its last, Henry Thomas's "Fishing Blues" (which Dylan tossed off in a New York studio one day in 1970), Smith's *Anthology* is a backdrop to the basement tapes. More deeply, it is a version of them, and the basement tapes a shambling, twilight version of Smith's *Anthology*, which was itself anything but obvious. "In Elementary Music The Relation Of Earth To The Sphere of Water Is 4 to 3, As There Are In The Earth Four Quarters of Frigidity to Three of Water," ran one of four "quotations from various authors that have been useful to the editor in preparing the notes"; in this case the author to whom editor, compiler, and annotator Harry Smith turned was Robert Fludd, seventeenth-century member of the London College of Physicians, pantheistic theosophist, a translator of the King James Bible, and devotee of the Swiss physician-alchemist Paracelsus. A more modern quotation, slightly twisted, might make at least as good an entryway.

Once the poet Kenneth Rexroth was looking for a phrase to

describe the country he thought lay behind Carl Sandburg's work—the poems and folk songs, the Lincoln books and the clean face framed by straight white hair—whatever it was that, say, led Bob Dylan to knock on the old man's door one day in 1964, looking for a blessing or a legacy. Rexroth came up with "the old free America."

When I first ran across those words they almost made me dizzy. "The old free America"—the idea, the words themselves, seemed all but natural, coded in the inevitable betrayals that stem from the infinite idealism of American democracy. I don't hear any irony in those words. But while I respond helplessly to them, I also recoil—because those words cast Americans out of their own history.

They cut Americans off from any need to measure themselves against the idealism—the utopianism, the Puritans' errand into the wilderness or the pioneer's demand for a new world with every wish for change—Americans have inherited. By fixing the free America, the true America, in the past, those words excuse the betrayals of those Americans who might hear them. There's an alluring, nearly irresistible pull in the phrase—at least there is for me—and I almost took it to name the territory that opens up out of the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, but instead I only stole the cadence; as I listened to Smith's assemblage with the basement tapes playing before or after, the phrase rolled over. The old, weird America is what one finds here—not Rexroth's rebuke to his readers, but an inheritance Smith's listeners might prefer to claim had reached them by mistake.

There is a frame for Smith's U.S.A., his fashioned nation, in a book called *American Studies*—not a textbook, but a first

novel published in 1994 by Mark Merlis. The narrator of the novel is a sixty-two-year-old man named Reeve; he lies in a hospital bed after being beaten nearly to death by a boy he picked up. He is remembering an English professor he once studied with, a man named Tom Slater. Slater is transparently based on F. O. Matthiessen—the great Harvard scholar, author in 1941 of *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, a troubled Stalinist, and secretly a homosexual. In the Red Scare of the late 1940s, Matthiessen heard the hounds baying at his door; in 1950 he killed himself. In the Harvard English department, debate over who might have been to blame went on for years.

As Reeve thinks through the past, he chases down its every vanity—of the left, the university, the famous book (here called *The Invincible City*), of the closeted, celibate professor and his salon of golden youths. But no matter how distant, evanescent, or false, the image of utopia the long-dead professor once raised before Reeve's eyes cannot be erased. In a dreamy passage that echoes back and forth from the present to the seventeenth century, Reeve remembers it all: Tom Slater has been driven from the university. "He sits in his living room and realizes that he hasn't read anything in weeks, he hasn't written anything," Reeve says, re-creating the time, imagining the scene: "he will never teach again. Everything he sank his energy into for thirty chaste years is gone."

The seminar above all, that famous seminar of his, that he first had the audacity to call "American Studies"—nowadays that means dissertations on "Gilligan's Island." But that wasn't what Tom meant at

all. He never meant to study America, the whole shebang, in all its imbecile complexity. For him there were, perhaps, three hundred Americans in as many years. They dwelt together in a tiny village, Cambridge/Concord/Manahatta, Puritans and Transcendentalists exchanging good mornings, and Walt Whitman peeping in the windows. A little Peyton Place of the mind, small enough that Tom could know every byway and every scandal. I am not certain that Tom, in his life, ever uttered words like "Idaho" or "Utah." Not unless there was a strike there.

He had made a little country of his own. In those first few years during and after the second war, America was what we talked about in Tom's overheated seminar room. Every week someone came into the room with a chance notion or an off reading destined to become holy writ for the generation that came after. As Jefferson thought it would take a millennium to settle the continent, so we thought it would take forever just to cut a few paths through the forest primeval of nineteenth-century letters. Now it's used up, all of it, from Massachusetts Bay to Calaveras County. But while it lasted: even I was excited some days, though I hadn't quite done all the reading and was there only because this was the life Tom had laid out for me. Even I felt, with Tom and his real students, like a conquistador, staking my claim on the imagined America that lived in that little room where it was so hot my glasses fogged up.

There was the real exile, maybe, when they shut the door of that seminar room in his face, cast Tom out from the land that wasn't just his birthright but to which he had given birth and a name.

An imaginary home and a real exile: those might be the borders of the imagined America in Harry Smith's *Anthology of*

American Folk Music. It was no accident that the *Anthology* was issued in 1952, at the height of the McCarthyist witch hunt, just two years past the time Mark Merlis's real and fictional incident takes place. It was not irony that led Smith, near the end of his life, as shaman in residence at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, to record every sound he encountered in the course of a Fourth of July, from speech to fireworks to crickets. In 1952, with the United States at war in Korea and resurgent at home, a world power and the envy of the world, seemingly complete and finished, Smith too made his own country, with about as many inhabitants as filled Tom Slater's village, those from the twentieth century conversing easily with those of two hundred years before.

That is Smith's *Anthology*. It was a collection of eighty-four performances on six lps in three hinged two-record sets—contraptions (soon replaced by boxes) that suggest less a likely mechanism for the delivery of recorded music than a cryptic homage to a lapsed patent that, dating to some time before the First World War, understandably failed to catch on. Each set carried the same cover art, in blue (air), red (fire), and green (water): from a Robert Fludd compendium on mysticism, Smith used an etching by one Theodore DeBry of what Smith called "the Celestial Monochord." Dating back to at least 400 B.C., said to have been invented by Pythagoras, the monochord was a protean instrument, a simple sounding box with a single string, not dissimilar from the diddley bow of the black American South, a piece of wire strung against a wall from floor to ceiling. The monochord was used for tuning and as a timer until the late nineteenth century; five hundred years earlier the word had entered the English language as a synonym

for harmony, agreement—for the "acorde," the poet John Lyngate wrote in 1420, between "Reason & Sensualyte."*

On the covers of the *Anthology* volumes the monochord was shown being tuned by the hand of god. It divided creation into balanced spheres of energy, into fundaments; printed over the filaments of the etching and its crepuscular Latin explanations were record titles and the names of the blues singers, hillbilly musicians, and gospel chanters Smith was bringing together for the first time. It was as if they had something to do with each other: as if Pythagoras, Fludd, and the likes of Jilson Setters, Ramblin' Thomas, the Alabama Sacred Harp Singers, Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers, and Smith himself were calling on the same gods.**

Smith's twenty-eight-page accompanying booklet was just as unlikely. Visually it was dominated by a queer schema:

*From the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as is another quotation Smith surely knew ("There's no subject I haven't studied," he once snapped to an interviewer), this from John Bulwer's 1644 *Chirologia, or the natural language of the hand . . . Whereunto is added, Chironomia; or the art of manuall rhetoricke*: "Their cunning management of the Hand in time and tone, I have sometimes call'd the Horse-Rhetorique of Smithfield, which by calculation I have found to differ from the Fish Dialect of Billingsgate, in the monochord of motion."

**In the early 1960s, Irwin Silber of *Sing Out!* magazine took over the marketing of Folkways Records and replaced Smith's chosen art with a Ben Shahn Farm Security Administration photograph of a battered, starving farmer, effectively transforming Smith's alchemical allegory into Depression-style protest art. In the context of the time, when folk music was linked to protest, specifically in terms of the civil rights movement and the commonly invoked national shame of Appalachian poverty and backwardness, with poverty understood as ennobling and the poor themselves often perceived as art statements, it was a smart commercial move.

heavy, black, oversized numbers, marking each of the eighty-four selections as if their placement altogether superseded their content, as if some grand system lurked within the elements Smith had brought to bear upon each other. The booklet was decorated with art from record sleeves advertising "Old Time Tunes" (music that as first recorded in the 1920s was already old, even on the verge of disappearance, and was sold and experienced as such), with woodcuts from turn-of-the-century catalogues of musical instruments, and with faded, hard-to-make-out photos of performers. In 1952 fiddler Eck Dunford, blues guitarist Furry Lewis, the Eck Robertson and Family string band, bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Cannon's Jug Stompers were only twenty or twenty-five years out of their time; cut off by the cataclysms of the Great Depression and the Second World War, and by a national narrative that had never included their kind, they appeared now like visitors from another world, like passengers on a ship that had drifted into the sea of the unwritten. "All those guys on that Harry Smith Anthology were dead," Cambridge folkies Eric von Schmidt and Jim Rooney wrote in 1979, recalling how it seemed in the early 1960s, when most of Smith's avatars were very much alive. "*Had* to be."

Smith's notes were solemn jokes. Information for each recording as to performer, composer, label, master number, date of release, and so on was given precisely; comments on the sourcing or transmission of a piece followed in sober manner; and each song and ballad, hymn and sermon, was reduced to pidgin summary or newspaper headline, the latter running from screaming newsbreak ("JOHN HARDY HELD WITHOUT BAIL AFTER GUNPLAY . . . WIFE AT SCAFFOLD") to charming human-

interest filler ("ZOOLOGIC MISCEGENY ACHIEVED IN MOUSE-FROG NUPTUALS, RELATIVES APPROVE" for a version of "Froggy Went A-Courtin' "). Again in 1995, John Cohen:

> Here's "The Butcher's Boy": "FATHER FINDS DAUGHTER'S BODY WITH NOTE ATTACHED WHEN RAILROAD BOY MISTREATS HER." Here's another song: "WIFE AND MOTHER FOLLOWS CARPENTER TO SEA: MOURNS BABE AS SHIP GOES DOWN." "GAUDY WOMAN LURES CHILD FROM PLAYFELLOWS: STABS HIM AS VICTIM DICTATES MESSAGE TO PARENTS." Now, I think it's terrific—it seems forceful and crazy and comical—but if you ever looked at the serious folklorists, [at what] they've written, *these are the Child ballads*, these are the *major tomes*, these are handed down from medieval times to ancient Britain, they're the great traditional ballads, and there's volumes and volumes of scholarship about them—and that Harry could get them down to one-liners is—unnerving.

The whole bizarre package made the familiar strange, the never known into the forgotten, and the forgotten into a collective memory that teased any single listener's conscious mind. There was, remembers the artist Bruce Conner, who encountered the *Anthology* in the early 1950s in the Wichita Public Library, "a confrontation with another culture, or another view of the world, that might include arcane, or unknown, or unfamiliar views of the world, hidden within these words, melodies, and harmonies—it was like field recordings, from the Amazon, or Africa, but it's here, in the United States! It's not conspicuous, but it's *there*. In Kansas, this was fascinating. I was sure *something* was going on in the country besides Wichita mind control."

As a document carrying such faraway suggestions, the *Anthology of American Folk Music* was a seductive detour away from what, in the 1950s, was known not as America but as Americanism. That meant the consumer society, as advertised on TV; it meant vigilance against all enemies of such a society and a determination never to appear as one; it meant what Norman Mailer, in words that in the 1950s could have been those of many other people, described as the state of mind of the republic: the coexistence of the fear of "instant death by atomic war" and the fear of "a slow death by conformity with every creative instinct stifled." This was boilerplate, no matter how true; a dead language the instant it was spoken. The *Anthology* was a mystery—an insistence that against every assurance to the contrary, America was itself a mystery.

As a mystery, though, the *Anthology* was disguised as a textbook; it was an occult document disguised as an academic treatise on stylistic shifts within an archaic musicology. This was in Harry Smith's grain. A polymath and an autodidact, a dope fiend and an alcoholic, a legendary experimental filmmaker and a more legendary sponger, he was perhaps most notorious as a fabulist. He liked to brag about killing people: "Maybe every three or four months," he said in 1972, "I'll think of somebody I've killed and wonder what their life would have been if they'd gone on." He was a trickster: "Magic Man," Robert Frank called him. Bruce Conner, who met Smith in 1956 in New York, when both were working for Lionel Ziprin's Inkweed Studios, an avant-garde greeting card company, was a skeptic (Smith, he says, once tried to kill *him*), but not Ziprin: " 'You know,' Lionel would say," Conner remembers, " 'you can't tell how *old* Harry Smith is—he might be thirty, he might be sixty.' " Sometimes Ziprin thought Smith was a nineteenth-century mystic: not a reincarnation, but the ageless thing itself, immortal, all mask.

He was in fact born in 1923 in Portland, Oregon, and grew up in and around Seattle; he died in 1991 in New York City, where he had become known as "the Paracelsus of the Chelsea Hotel." Devotees surrounded him at the end; at his memorial service, Lionel Ziprin told Conner, Smith's followers were mixing his ashes with wine and ingesting them. "What they're doing to Harry, these people are cannibals!" Ziprin said. "Look, Harry's gone," Conner said. "You should be concerned about what Harry's doing to *them*—sitting in their rooms, in their bodies." For a man who was raised on the notion of the transmission of souls and who as a young man sat down with a pile of old records to practice it, it would have been a fitting end.

Smith's parents were Theosophists; when he was a child, Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant ("She had already been people like Christ and Leonardo," Smith said), and Bishop Leadbeater, dead or alive, were almost like family friends. Smith's great-grandfather John Corson Smith, who Smith claimed had been aide-de-camp to Ulysses S. Grant during the Civil War and later governor of Illinois, was one of many nineteenth-century mystics to refound the Knights Templar, the medieval order of crusader-monks believed by some to have possessed the Holy Grail, the Ark of the Covenant, or the secret of being. Smith's paternal grandfather was a leading Mason. "I once discovered in the attic of our house all of those illuminated documents with hands with eyes in them, all kinds of

Masonic deals that belonged to my grandfather," Smith said in 1965. "My father said I shouldn't have seen them, and he burned them up immediately." But, Smith said, on his twelfth birthday his father presented him with a complete blacksmith's shop and commanded that he turn lead into gold. "He had me build all these things like models of the first Bell phone, the original electric light bulb, and perform all sorts of historical experiments," Smith said; the *Anthology of American Folk Music* would be the most complete historical experiment he ever devised.

Smith's upbringing was a garden of confusions. His mother's family, he recalled, had left Sioux City, Iowa, in the 1880s, "because they felt it was becoming too contaminated by the Industrial Revolution"; his mother's mother founded a school in Alaska "that was supported by the Czarina of Russia," which led to his mother's sometime insistence that she was Anastasia, the last of the Romanovs. His father was once a cowboy and later worked in the Washington salmon fisheries—unless his father was, as Smith often said, the English satanist Aleister Crowley, whose motto "Do As Thy Wilt Shall Be The Whole Of The Law" was another of Smith's *Anthology* epigraphs. Crowley was yet another refounder of the Knights Templar, his sect being the Ordo Templis Orientis—in which, in 1985, Smith, without his knowledge, was ordained a bishop. His mother, Smith said, had had a long affair with Crowley, beginning in 1918, when she saw him "running naked down the beach" on Puget Sound. "We were considered some kind of 'low' family, despite my mother's feeling that she was the Czarina of Russia," Smith said. "We were living down by the railroad tracks."

Smith developed rickets, which left him stunted and humped. "The universal hatred I've stirred up against myself, it comes from being sloppy among a bunch of tidy people," he said near the end of his life—despite his common appearance as a derelict, he was speaking philosophically. By tidy people he meant certain circles of his parents' friends, followers of "the Transcendental philosophy that Emerson developed . . . [who] came to Concord to learn," but his own family "prided itself on its backwardness. You see, even when they had James Whitcomb Riley to listen to they still preferred Chaucer."

As a schoolboy, swirling in the irregular orbits of his parents' religion, their fantasies, their poverty and delusions of grandeur, Smith discovered the local Indian tribes. Living near Seattle in South Bellingham, he began to investigate the rituals, music, and languages of the Nootka, the Kwakiutl, the Lummi. A photo in a 1941 issue of *The American Magazine* shows a teenage Smith—with glasses, Pendleton shirt, and a look of calm concentration on his face as he sits before the feathered and horned elders of the Lummi tribe—"recording the drums and chants of the Lummis' annual potlatch, or winter festival. . . . Closest to the aboriginal form of any Indian dance in the U.S." "He hopes to study anthropology under University of Washington profs.," the article titled "Injuneer" concluded, "and they are hoping to study anthropology under him."

A turning point in Smith's life came about two years later, when he left his studies at the university and traveled to San Francisco. There and in Berkeley he entered bohemian circles. Already at work on abstract, hand-painted films, he met artists, poets, Communists, folk singers, and folklorists.

Writing in 1994 of that time and that milieu in *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California*, Richard Cándida Smith could be describing the auras of Smith's *Anthology*:

> The avant-garde on the West Coast had a preference for cosmological-theosophical over psychological-sociological understandings of art and the individual's relationship to larger forces. The sacred, which need not involve a personalized diety, was valued over the profane. . . . Historical "facts" served hierarchy, while tradition was liberating because it grew from a voluntary personal response to the repertory of the past.

I like that phrase, "the repertory of the past." I like Cándida Smith's description of response to it. Harry Smith might have as well. He drew on both his haunt-ridden boyhood and his own vast collection of 78s to assemble his *Anthology*—a collection that began around 1940, when he bought a record by the Mississippi bluesman Tommy McClennan. "[It] had somehow gotten into this town by mistake," Smith said of South Bellingham, speaking to John Cohen in New York in 1968. "It sounded strange so I looked for others." In a Seattle Salvation Army shop he heard Uncle Dave Macon's "Fox and Hounds": "I couldn't imagine what it was." Carl Sandburg's *American Songbag* took him to the Child ballads so named for—and famously numbered by—the Harvard English professor whose 1882–96 *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* catalogued a legacy that by the 1920s persisted more readily in the southern Appalachians than in the British Isles. Other books and directories took him to southern fiddle music, Cajun chansons

tristes, cowboy laments. The war was a boon: warehouses were cleared for military supply, putting thousands of forgotten discs from the 1920s and '30s on sale for next to nothing. Smith found scores of old records—gospel, blues, parlor tunes—by the Carter Family, the beloved trio from the Clinch Mountains of southwestern Virginia; not long after, in a Calaveras County trailer camp, in the California Gold Rush country, he found autoharpist Sara Carter herself. Though devout in her retirement, barring all music from her door, Carter nevertheless regaled the young collector with tales of Jimmie Rodgers, the Blue Yodeler, who like the Carter Family first recorded in 1927 at the prophetic Bristol Sessions on the Tennessee–Virginia line: tales of how in his days as a railroad brakeman, "everywhere Jimmie Rodgers went he threw marijuana seeds off the back of the train so that you could tell where he had been." "I was looking for exotic music," Smith told John Cohen. "Exotic in relation to what was considered to be the world culture of high class music."

As Smith searched for the hillbilly classics and primitive blues made in the commercial half-light of the Jazz Age, he found himself in the first years of his own childhood. He might have heard what people have always heard in strange music: the call of another life. He might have imagined that, going back to his first years with his oldest records, he was reliving and rewriting his life from the start. It would have been only a first step; the history of the republic, the story the country told itself, was just as vulnerable. As Smith learned the contours of old styles, as he tracked melodies and phrases through the Chinese boxes of folk etymology, he found himself in the 1800s

and then back further still, decades tumbling into centuries, ghost lovers and backwoods crimes replacing the great personages and events of national life.

It was a quest, and not merely personal. "I felt social changes would result from it," Smith said of his *Anthology* in 1968; he meant to provoke an instinctive response on a plane of social magic. In the scared and satisfied reactionary freeze of the postwar period, the *Anthology* was meant to distinguish those who responded from those who didn't, to distinguish those who responded to themselves. "Told with 'cunning,'" Susan Buck-Morss writes of Walter Benjamin's ambitions for his *Passagen-Werk*, his unfinished study of Paris arcades, in words that fix what Smith completed, "[it] would accomplish a double task: it would dispel the mythic power of present being . . . by showing it to be composed of decaying objects with a history"; "it would dispel the myth of history as progress (or the modern as new) by showing history and modernity in the child's light as archaic." Cunning was the last thing Harry Smith lacked.

Smith's definition of "American folk music" would have satisfied no one else. He ignored all field recordings, Library of Congress archives, anything validated only by scholarship or carrying the must of the museum. He wanted music to which people really had responded: records put on sale that at least somebody thought were worth paying for. Though Smith noted that folk songs had been commercially recorded as far back as the 1880s and that markets for blues and hillbilly records took shape in the early 1920s, he restricted himself to the commonly held music of traditional and marginalized American cultures as it was professionally recorded between about "1927, when electronic recording made possible accurate

music reproduction, and 1932 when the Depression halted folk music sales."* These years comprised the high point of a time when northern record companies suddenly realized that the spread of rail lines and the emergence of radio on a mass scale had opened up self-defining and accessible audiences throughout the South for church and dance music, regionally distinctive blues, melodic allegories handed down over generations; as a commercial proposition, those years were a window opening onto a seemingly infinite past. As a historical period, they were an economic opportunity to capture ritual, and it was the scent of ritual Smith pursued.

*By 1933 record sales had fallen to a bare 7 percent of what they had been in 1929; in the rural South, a cash economy, never firmly established, all but ceased to exist. Sales revived in the mid-1930s, partly because of the introduction of 78s selling for as little as twenty-five cents and, in fields of vernacular music, the replacement, in the main, of itinerant or community-based recording artists by full-time professionals. Older, traditional material was dropped for recording purposes; the commonplace banjo, with its limited vocabulary, was replaced almost completely by the guitar, which allowed for greater virtuosity and in the more competitive milieu of the period led to a demand for it.

Smith programmed a fourth, brown-covered (earth) volume of his *Anthology*, based on a "content analysis" of the post-1932 Depression period. "My essential interest in music was in the patterning that occurred in it," Smith told John Cohen. As he had noticed that 1880s recordings of "Victorian ballads" were full of "children freezing to death . . . a great many of these songs on the records were in a snowstorm, some poor kid peddling the papers at the Ferry Slip in order to get medicine for the father who is at home dying of Asiatic Cholera or something," for the Roosevelt era he was fascinated by the plethora of brother acts, the profusion of songs with the word "food" in their titles, and "how many times the word 'Railroad' was used during the Depression and how many times during the war." The set was never issued because Smith never completed the notes.

Dressed up as a good pedagogue, and arming his selected old discs with complex, cross-referenced discographies and bibliographies, neatly attaching story songs to the historical events from which they derived (the mythical historical events, sometimes), noting changes in approaches to voicing, instrumentation, tunings, and the like, Smith divided his eighty-four choices into three categories, his three sets of two lps each: "Ballads," "Social Music," and "Songs." Within his five-year span, he paid no attention to chronology as he sequenced the numbers; for all of his painstaking annotation, he never identified a performer by race, determinedly sowing a confusion that for some listeners persists to this day. "It took years," Smith said happily in 1968, "before anybody discovered that Mississippi John Hurt wasn't a hillbilly."

Very carefully, Smith constructed internal narratives and orchestrated continuities. He moved tunes about homicide into those about suicide. Or he placed a performance so that it would echo a line or a melody in a preceding number—so that the repeated line might deepen its power of suggestion, or the doubled melody intensify the gestures of the actors on its stage. Linking one performance to another, he ultimately linked each to all.

Out of such arrangements Smith made a world, or a town: Smithville. In this town Clarence Ashley's "The House Carpenter," a tune once known as "The Demon Lover," a ballad in which earthly lust is ended with unearthly punishment, is as suffused with religious awe as the Reverend J. M. Gates's sermon "Must Be Born Again." Here Bascom Lamar Lunsford's "I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground" is more otherworldly—less

at home in this world—than the Memphis Sanctified Singers' "He Got Better Things for You."

Smith opened his first volume, "Ballads," with Dick Justice's "Henry Lee," the story of a knight's murder by his spurned lover, as witnessed by a talking bird ("Not a good record," Smith said with numerological certainty in 1968, "but it had to go first because it was the lowest numbered Child ballad [of the set]"). He followed it with progressively spookier versions of the often supernatural English and Scottish love tales that since the late eighteenth century had functioned in mountain hollows as what in blues language would be called a second mind: tales of murder and suicide in which love is a disease and death the cure. With the air over his town growing heavier, Smith moved to numbers about more prosaic, homegrown killings. The blind fiddler G. B. Grayson—a descendant of the man who arrested Tom Dula in 1866 and who as both a singer and a player sounds at least as old as the story he is telling—describes how in 1807, in Deep River, North Carolina, a pregnant woman named Naomi Wise was drowned by her lover, who escaped justice and disappeared into the West. The sense of age in the performance is displacing. It's not as if the event is being recalled by an ancient witness; it is as if the event, as it happened, has made the witness old. The actions described are all will, the performance is all fate, and the rest of "Ballads" follows its path. Cole Younger goes down after the James Gang's 1876 bank robbery in Northfield, Minnesota. President Garfield falls to hobo evangelist, con man, and would-be ambassador to Brussels Charles Guiteau in 1881, and President McKinley to anarchist Leon Czolgosz

twenty years after that. In 1894 a coal worker hangs for killing a man over a crap game in West Virginia; in 1895 Stackalee shoots Billy Lyons in St. Louis. Four years later, in the same neighborhood, Frankie shoots her lover Albert (unless it was thirty years earlier, and somewhere else).

Murder is superseded by disaster. Craftsmen are thrown out of work by machines. "TECHNOLOGICAL UNEMPLOYMENT HITS SHOE INDUSTRY IN THE YEAR OF 18 AND 4" is Smith's headline for the Carolina Tar Heels' "Peg and Awl": the band is so comically pathetic, as if it's all their own fault but they can't figure out how, you can see Laurel and Hardy acting out what they're singing. So people go where the work is, and in a refrain that runs all through American song and past the borders of the country, from "Canadee-i-o" to "The Hills of Mexico," they find themselves tricked out of their shoes. Stranded in the American version of hell on earth—Arkansas—a "DITCH DIGGER SHOCKED BY EMPLOYMENT AGENT'S GROTESQUE DECEPTIONS" repeats his name again and again because he's not sure he still owns anything else.

Then the hammer comes down. In the years after the Civil War, John Henry dies in a race with a steam drill. The *Titanic* sinks. Trains are wrecked; across six minutes, Furry Lewis wonders over Casey Jones's last ride as if it is a story his mother told him, holding every lesson he will ever need, if only he could plumb the story to its depths. Farms fail; the boll weevil dethrones King Cotton. "Ballads" ends with "Got the Farmland Blues," which really is a *farm*land blues. "I woke up this morning," Clarence Ashley sings with the Tar Heels, "between one and two . . ."

Though roughly tracing a chronology of British fable and

American happenstance, and in most cases tied to historical incidents, these ballads are not historical dramas. They dissolve a known history of wars and elections into a sort of national dream, a flux of desire and punishment, sin and luck, joke and horror—and as in a dream, the categories don't hold. What Smith's ballads dramatize is action; passivity; regret; sardonicism; absurdity; fear; acceptance; isolation; the wish for mastery running up against forces no one can understand, let alone master. After this—after Kentucky banjoist Buell Kazee's disappearance into "The Butcher's Boy," in which he becomes a young woman reading from her own suicide note ("Over my coffin place a snow-white dove / To warn this world I died for love")—Smith's two lps of "Social Music" are a respite, a place of simple pleasures where the most troubled heart is filled only with a gentle yearning.

A dance is under way. Fiddlers play waltzes and reveries, reels and stomps. There is drinking and merriment, time for brazen shouts and fond words. Home is venerated, a beloved dog is recalled, and then—then god, in the person of the Reverend J. M. Gates, asking, like a man making the cruelest joke last as long as he can, "Oh! Death Where Is Thy Sting?" Chanting in a fashion that Smith dated to the spread of the Great Awakening to the Georgia territory in the mid-eighteenth century—chanting against a chorus that seems constantly on the verge of breaking up into pieces—the Atlanta preacher is fearsome and implacable. His voice is deep, harsh, impatient; impatient with the weaknesses of the spirit and the flesh—impatient with human nature. Suddenly you're trapped. The party wasn't supposed to end this way, in the middle of a Jonathan Edwards sermon reincarnated as a 1926

gospel hit and an ineradicable aspect of national memory, transmitted to all Americans as if it were a gene, but now, in a church that changes shape and color with each new performance, the party is just starting. It's as if, now, the whole community has to pay for the solitary crimes of the first two lps and for the revelry of the third—and as if everyone knows that this is fitting and proper, that this is right. But by the time "Social Music" ends, it is not only the shape of the church but god's face that has changed. Against all odds, it is smiling. The Reverend F. W. Moore celebrates "Fifty Miles of Elbow Room." The Reverend D. C. Rice and His Sanctified Congregation take their place in a great army. "I'm on the Battlefield for My Lord," they sing, and they make you want to join them. The pleasures of the dance, the wallow in drink, now seem very distant, and worthless. In this place is a great spirit of freedom: the freedom of knowing exactly who you are and why you are here.

You leave "Social Music" in the arms of certain knowledge. Instantly, on "Songs," you're ripped from that embrace and cast into a charnel house that bears a disturbing resemblance to everyday life: to wishes and fears, difficulties and satisfactions that are, you know, as plain as day, but also, in the voices of those who are now singing, the work of demons—demons like your neighbors, your family, your lovers, yourself. The first side of "Songs" is a panorama of the uncanny. It's not that here nothing is as it seems; as Buell Kazee feels his way through the dimming haze of "East Virginia" and in "I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground" Bascom Lamar Lunsford pictures himself as a lizard in the spring, as Rabbit Brown wanders the one-block labyrinth of "James Alley Blues" and Dock Boggs smiles

"Sugar Baby" 's death's-head smile, it's as if nothing that seems even is. "Who'll rock the cradle, who'll sing the song?" Boggs asks, as always it seems, twisting the words until they're scratching off each other's vowels, and Brown answers, his guitar all foreknowledge, his voice all suspicion, the gonging of his strings making a hall of echoes: *Are you sure we really want to know?*

Now tricksters rule, sharps who can guess your weight and tell your secrets. The carnival has arrived in Smithville, just as it does in Smith's *Heaven and Earth Magic*, the sixty-six-minute animated film he made between 1957 and 1962. There he set dancing countless images clipped from the same sources as the illustrations in the *Anthology* booklet; as on the opening side of "Songs," every image was less a representation of the real than a symbol of the imaginary, of the notion that the imaginary could become real at any time.

"Step right up, win a kewpie doll, ladies and gentlemen, eight shots for a quarter," you hear on the soundtrack, along with lots of talk, the noise of crowds moving eagerly down the midway, rifles cracking in the shooting gallery. Set before you is the Theatre of Illusion, assembled from cutouts of old advertisements, Sears catalogues, instructional manuals, religious tracts, and the likes of *Epilepsy and the Functional Anatomy of the Human Brain*: an array of mechanical devices, including klieg lights, a boiler, and instruments less easy to name, all topped by a rotating wheel.

In the foreground of the machines, a homunculus opens a valise. A man removes mannequin stands as pieces of the valise are sucked into the lights by an unseen force. The mannequin stands turn into mannequin shapes, then into dresser's models

with rounded, Lillian Russell busts, which are replaced on the stands by giant eggs. A skull emerges and goes into the lights, a carp appears and goes into the boiler as the crowd laughs, a hand materializes and disappears into the lights with the eggs, followed by a whiskey crock. A huge mallet appears; the crowd roars. A head like that of an old-time baseball player drops onto a dressmaker's shape, changes into the head of a woman, and floats off. You hear hurdy-gurdy music and the pitchman again; the mannequin stands reconfigurate as androgynous silhouettes.

The mallet rotates the wheel faster and faster. As the noise of the wheel moving takes over the sound, the mannequins are thrown back by the wind of the machine. A two-headed figure—a body with two circles for heads—is self-assembled out of detritus the wheel is casting off. The whole begins to swirl in a storm of its own making, sweeping up confused and frightened noises from the crowd until all is sucked up, all is swept away, the carnival gone, the landscape bare. You hear crickets, a train whistle; for a moment there is no movement.

This is the mood of the first side of "Songs." The streets of Smithville have been rolled up, and the town now offers that quintessential American experience, the ultimate, permanent test of the unfinished American, Puritan or pioneer, loose in a land of pitfalls and surprises: Step right up, ladies and gentlemen! Enter the New Sensorium of Old-Time Music, and feel the ground pulled right out from under your feet!

The two lps of "Songs" continue on from this first side, maintaining a startling level of power and charm, on through suites of tunes about marriage, labor, dissipation, prison, death. Mississippi John Hurt quietly puzzles over John Henry's self-

sacrifice, as if burrowing out from under the rubble he left behind. Blind Lemon Jefferson makes his guitar into a tolling bell for "See that My Grave Is Kept Clean." He stops time, stops Death, and then, as if he knows the pause is somehow less cheating Death than a cheat on life, lets the song move on. Uncle Dave Macon's foot-stomping exuberance, his long reach for good times, bursts through numbers beginning on a chain gang or in the midst of deadly labor strife. Born in 1870 in Tennessee, Macon died in 1952, the year Smith's *Anthology* appeared; before 1924, when he made his first records, he worked as a teamster. For "Way Down the Old Plank Road" he stands up in his wagon, pushing his horses, cracking his whip with a Babe Ruth smile: "KILL YOURSELF!" he shouts out of the hurry of the song. He sounds like he wants to watch and then go you one better. It's one of the truest, highest, most abandoned moments in American speech—as can seem every note of "The Lone Star Trail." With a passion words and melody can elicit but not account for, movie star Ken Maynard, "The American Boy's Favorite Cowboy," ambles out of the soundtrack of *The Wagon Master* to chant and moan, yodel and wail, stare and tremble, more alone, more stoic and more restless between heaven and nature, than anyone has been before. The shape of the land, its vast expanse, its indifference to who you are or what you want, looms up as this solitary figure says his piece: I am the first cowboy and the last. Here no one sees me, myself least of all, I am happy, I am free.

The whole long story is brought to a close when it is lifted out of itself, with the freest song imaginable, Henry Thomas's "Fishing Blues," played on panpipes, an instrument that blocks all possibility of tracing the historical origins of this song or

that—the high, lilting sound of the panpipes goes back to the end of the Paleolithic. This sound is older than any surviving language, and so might be the message of this song from a railroad bum who crisscrossed the South from the end of the nineteenth century into the 1940s, a message he repeats over and over, as if it holds the secret of being: "Here's a little something I would like to relate / Any fish bite if you got good bait."

There is an almost absolute liberation in "Fishing Blues"—a liberation that is impossible not to feel, and easy to understand. Yet there is a liberation just as complete brooding on that first side of "Songs," breathing through Dock Boggs's nihilism, Bascom Lamar Lunsford's pantheism, the ghost dance of Rabbit Brown. This liberation—or this absolute—is not easy to comprehend, but for just that reason it is here, in Smith's most explosive collage of scavenged old records, that the *Anthology of American Folk Music* finds its center, or its axis; it is here that Smithville begins to shade into Hawthorneville, Melvilleburg, Poetown. Judgment Day is the weather here: in 1926 in "Oh! Death Where Is Thy Sting?" Judgment Day was an event, but in Smithville it is also a way of life, present in the smallest details of landscape and language, gesture and the passage of time. Its presence makes all these things into symbols and charges them with meaning that cannot be enclosed. "I have seen the task which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith," one of Smith's preachers might be explaining, taking his text from Ecclesiastes. "He hath made every thing beautiful in his time; also he hath set the world in their heart, yet so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end."

In an essay on the *Anthology* called "Smith's Memory Theater," Robert Cantwell wrote about one of the songs in this sequence, but he might have been writing about almost any one of them, or all of them. "Listen to 'I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground' again and again," he says. "Learn to play the banjo and sing it yourself over and over again, study every printed version, give up your career and maybe your family, and you will not fathom it." What he is saying is not that different from what Bob Dylan was saying about folk music in 1965 and '66, when to so many nothing he could have said about folk music could have been less than a lie. "All the authorities who write about what it is and what it should be," Dylan said, "when they say keep it simple, [that it] should be easily understood—folk music is the only music where it isn't simple. It's never been simple. It's weird . . . I've never written anything hard to understand, not in my head anyway, and nothing as far out as some of the old songs."

I have to think of all this as traditional music. Traditional music is based on hexagrams. It comes about from legends, Bibles, plagues, and it revolves around vegetables and death. There's nobody that's going to kill traditional music. All those songs about roses growing out of people's brains and lovers who are really geese and swans that turn into angels—they're not going to die. It's all those paranoid people who think that someone's going to come and take away their toilet paper—*they're* going to die. Songs like "Which Side Are You On?" and "I Love You Porgy"—they're not folk-music songs; they're political songs. They're *already* dead.

Obviously, death is not very universally accepted. I mean, you'd think that the traditional-music people could gather from their songs that mystery is a fact, a traditional fact . . . traditional music is

too unreal to die. It doesn't need to be protected. Nobody's going to hurt it. In that music is the only true, valid death you can feel today off a record player.

Bob Dylan could have been talking about the first side of Harry Smith's "Songs": one quality that unites the singers here is that *they* sound as if they're already dead, though not because they have accepted that the meaning of the songs they're singing can be fixed in advance. It's as if they're lining out an unspoken premise of the old Southern religion: only the dead can be born again.

No performance captures this sensation more completely than the first number on this magical side, Clarence Ashley's 1929 Columbia recording of "The Coo Coo Bird." There is no more commonplace song in Appalachia; the song has been sung for so long, by so many, in so many different communities, as to seem to some folklorists virtually automatic, a musicological version of the instinctive act, like breathing—and therefore meaningless. Like scores of other coffeehouse folk singers, Bob Dylan was singing it in the first years of the 1960s; as Ashley sang and played the song, he paid in full every claim Dylan would make about traditional music. He pays as well the claims of the uniquely plainspoken argument the South African musicologist Peter van der Merwe makes about the sort of Appalachians who appear all across Smith's *Anthology*: Ashley, Lunsford, Kazee, Boggs, Eck Robertson, the Carter Family, G. B. Grayson, Uncle Dave Macon, Frank Hutchison.

When middle-class America first discovered these mountain folk there was a tendency to present their ways as even more primitive

and archaic than they actually were. Nonsense was talked of their "Elizabethan speech," as though they had been preserved unaltered since the sixteenth century. As an inevitable reaction, it is now fashionable to point to urban influences on this isolated rural culture, just as it is fashionable to make similar observations about British country people. Taking all such reservations into account, I still believe that the biggest danger lies in *under*estimating the strangeness of these cultures. It takes a constant effort of the imagination to realize the isolation of their lives, the lack of canned music, the scarcity of professional musicians, the grip of tradition.

Clarence Ashley was born in 1895 in Bristol, Tennessee; as a teenager he traveled with minstrel troupes and medicine shows ("I was always crazy about the show business"). By the 1920s he was a professional itinerant musician, playing in string bands, at fairs, on the streets, to miners as they picked up their money or their scrip. He died in 1967. In 1929 he was in his mid-thirties; he sounded seventeen, or one-hundred-and-seventeen, as if he'd died seventeen or one-hundred-and-seventeen years before. For "The Coo Coo Bird" he carried the tune as it appears throughout Lee Smith's 1992 novel *The Devil's Dream*, sounding down through the history of a Virginia mountain family (which in its sixth generation of filial and fiddler mystery turns up a young woman studying semiotics at Duke), every time a beckoning to the will and a warning against fate, a sign of lust and mortal danger. Ashley's performance made one thing clear: however old the singer was, he wasn't as old as the song.

Like many of the numbers on the third volume of the *Anthology*, "The Coo Coo Bird" was a "folk-lyric" song. That

meant it was made up of verbal fragments that had no direct or logical relationship to each other, but were drawn from a floating pool of thousands of disconnected verses, couplets, one-liners, pieces of eight. Harry Smith guessed the folk-lyric form came together some time between 1850 and 1875. Whenever it happened, it wasn't until enough fragments were abroad in the land to reach a kind of critical mass—until there were enough fragments, passing back and forth between blacks and whites as common coin, to generate more fragments, to sustain within the matrix of a single musical language an almost infinite repertory of performances, to sustain the sense that out of the anonymity of the tradition a singer was presenting a distinct and separate account of a unique life. It is this quality—the insistence that the singer is singing his or her own life, as an event, taking place as you listen, its outcome uncertain—that separates the song, from which the singer emerges, from the ballad, into which the singer disappears.

Just as it is a mistake to underestimate the strangeness of the cultures that spoke through folk-lyric fragments ("I'd rather be in some dark holler, where the sun refused to shine"; "My name I'd never deny"; "Forty dollars won't pay my fine"), it is also a mistake to imagine that when people spoke through these fragments, they were not speaking—for themselves, as contingent individuals. What appears to be a singer's random assemblage of fragments to fit a certain melody line may be, for that singer, an assemblage of fragments that melody called forth. It may be a sermon delivered by the singer's subconscious, his or her second mind. It may be a heretic's way of saying what could never be said out loud, a mask over a boiling face.

Ashley's singing—high, a voice edgy with the energy of

musing, of wanting, of not getting, of expecting to get it all tomorrow—rises and falls, dips and wavers, playing off the rhythm his banjo makes like a tide eddying up to a bank again and again. There's a willful irascibility in his voice, a disdain for the consequences of any action the singer might take, or not take. The banjo could be from another song or another world. The music seems to have been found in the middle of some greater song; it is inexorable. The opening and closing flourishes on the banjo seem false, because the figures in the music make no progress, go from no one place to any other; the sound was here before the singer started and it will be here when he's gone.

In this mood, in this weather, the most apparently commonplace fragment in Ashley's "Coo Coo Bird"—the verse seemingly most unburdened by any shard of meaning—cannot be meaningless.

> Gonna build me
> Log cabin
> On a mountain
> So high
> So I can
> See Willie
> When he goes
> On by

It sounds like a children's ditty only until you begin to realize the verse is made to refuse any of the questions it makes you ask. Who is Willie? Why does the singer want to watch him? Why must he put aside his life and embark on a grand

endeavor (in versions of "The Cuckoo" closer to its protean, British form, the log cabin is a castle) just to accomplish this ordinary act? The verse can communicate only as a secret everybody already knows or as an allusion to a body of knowledge the singer knows can never be recovered, and Ashley only makes things worse by singing as if whatever he's singing about is the most obvious thing in the world. The performance doesn't seem like a jumble of fragments. Rather there is a theme: displacement, restlessness, homelessness, the comic worry of "a people," as Constance Rourke wrote of Americans as they were when the Civil War began, "unacquainted with themselves, strange to the land, unshaped as a nation." "We Americans are all cuckoos," Oliver Wendell Holmes said in 1872. "We make our homes in the nests of other birds." This is the starting point.

As long as seven hundred years ago, the English were singing that the cuckoo heralded the coming of summer, and yet the bird was hated. Its cry was reviled through the centuries as oppressive, repetitious, maniacally boring, a cry to drive you crazy, a cry that was already crazy, befitting a bird that was insane. The cuckoo—the true, "parasitic" cuckoo, which despite Holmes's choice of it for national bird is not found in the United States—lays its eggs in the nests of other birds. It is a kind of scavenger in reverse: violating the natural order of things, it is by its own nature an outsider, a creature that cannot belong. Depositing its orphans, leaving its progeny to be raised by others, to grow up as imposters in another's house—as America filled itself up with slaves, indentured servants, convicts, hustlers, adventurers, the ambitious and the greedy, the fleeing and the hated, who took or were given new,

imposters' names—the cuckoo becomes the other and sees all other creatures as other. If the host bird removes a cuckoo's egg from its nest, the cuckoo may take revenge, killing all of the host's eggs or chicks; in the same manner, as new Americans drove out or exterminated the Indians, when the cuckoo egg hatches the newborn may drive out any other nestlings or destroy any other eggs. As a creature alienated from its own nature, the cuckoo serves as the specter of the alienation of each from all.

If this is the theme of the song, then rather than the antinarrative many find in folk-lyric performances, what is present in Clarence Ashley's performance—the axis on which Smith's *Anthology* seems to turn, or maybe the proud anthem of Smithville, sung every night at sundown—is a master narrative: a narrative of American willfulness and fatedness, a narrative implied but altogether missing, replaced instead by hints and gestures, code words and winks, a whole music of secret handshakes. Just as there is a certain historical impersonation on "Ballads," with Virginian Kelly Harrell singing as Charles Guiteau on the scaffold, recounting his assassination of President Garfield, and on "Social Music" there are no individuals, only townfolk indistinguishable from their fellows, on "Songs," where the premise is that one is singing as oneself, the mask goes on, the most profound mask of all, transparent and impenetrable. Who is singing? Who *are* these people? If you could put your hand through the mask you would feel nothing but air.

"The Coo Coo Bird" seems to assume a shared history among its listeners, to take in the countless volumes of what does not need to be said, and yet as Ashley sings the song it is almost a

dare. That's how it feels; but who or what is being dared, or why, is completely unclear. "Oh, the coo coo / She's a pretty bird / And she warbles, as she flies," Ashley begins. "And it never / Hollers coo coo / Till the fourth day / Of July." It is usual to dismiss this as not even a metaphor, merely a rhyme. But that is because as a metaphor this verse can be understood but never explained; because it can place the listener, pull the listener's feet right out from under, but cannot itself be placed. Ashley's voice can be solemn, wry, crafty, and blank all at once; his song is not an argument, it is a riddle.

Imagine that in 1929 this was a riddle Clarence Ashley took pleasure putting before the country. Part of the charge in the music on the *Anthology of American Folk Music*—its reach across time, carrying such individualistic flair, in T. J. Clark's phrase such collective vehemence—comes from the fact that, for the first time, people from isolated, scorned, forgotten, disdained communities and cultures had the chance to speak to each other and to the nation at large. A great uproar of voices that were at once old and new was heard, as happens only occasionally in democratic cultures—but always, when it happens, with a sense of explosion, of energies contained for generations bursting out all at once. The story is in the numbers. When the first record approximating a blues, Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues," was released, in 1920, it sold a million copies in its first year; it was the same in 1923, with the record that revealed what would soon become the hillbilly market. As Smith noted in the foreword to his *Anthology* booklet,

> Ralph Peer, of Okeh Records, went to Atlanta with portable equipment and a record dealer there offered to buy 1,000 copies if Peer would record the singing of circus barker "Fiddling" John Carson. "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" and "The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow" were cut, and according to Peer "It was so bad that we didn't even put a serial number on the records, thinking that when the local dealer got his supply that would be the end of it. We sent him 1,000 records which he got on Thursday. That night he called New York on the phone and ordered 5,000 more sent by express and 10,000 by freight. When the national sale got to 500,000 we were so ashamed we had 'Fiddling' John come up to New York and do a re-recording of the numbers."

Many copies of these records were bought by people without phonographs. They bought the discs as talismans of their own existence; they could hold these objects in their hands and feel their own lives dramatized. In such an act, people discovered the modern world: the thrill of mechanical reproduction. "Something that had survived orally for a very long time suddenly turned into something that Sears Roebuck sold," Smith said in 1968, "and you could order it from Pakistan or wherever you might be"—such as Deep River, North Carolina, or Bristol, Tennessee. Why was it inexpressibly more exciting to hear a song you could hear next door or at a dance next Saturday night coming out of a box? Precisely because you could have heard it next door, or even played it yourself—but not with the distancing of representation, which made a magic mirror, and produced the shock of self-recognition. What one saw in the mirror was a bigger, more various, less finished, less fated self than one had ever seen before. "We cannot escape our life in these fascist bodies," Camille Paglia wrote in *Sexual Personae*; as a black ten-inch 78 turned, for a moment one

could. One could experience a freedom from one's physical body, and from one's social body—the mask you wore to go about in public among those who thought they knew you, an unchosen mask of nervousness and tradition, the mask that, when worn too long, makes the face behind it shrivel up and rot away. For some, a spinning record opened up the possibility that one might say anything, in any voice, with any face, the singer's mask now a sign of mastery.

For a few years, this possibility became a fact—and, exposing a hidden republic, a democratic event. The special energy of such an event must have been part of what Harry Smith heard in the commercially vital years of the late 1920s, when all but fifteen of the recordings on the *Anthology of American Folk Music* were recorded, and why he orchestrated the event as a conversation, the folk music of people attempting to connect to other people, to take their money, to feel their presence, to change their minds, even to change the music, to take it places—places in the nation, places in the heart—it had never been. "I don't think that you can say that folk culture was doing such and such, and that in popular culture these things became disseminated—although I used to think that was the case," Smith said to John Cohen in 1968. "I now believe that the dissemination of music affects the quality. As you increase the critical audience of any music, the level goes up." "Doesn't it also go down," Cohen said, "because it has to appeal to a more divergent range of people?" "I don't think they're that divergent," Smith said, changing from folklorist to democratic theorist. "There isn't that much difference between one person and another."

There is, though—and that is why the spirit of the democratic event dramatized in Smith's *Anthology* has its own peculiar, for some irresistible, cast. In the tension between the one and the many, that democracy reveals itself on the *Anthology*—because to a great degree the music Smith wove together was not exactly made by a folk. It was made by willful, ornery, displaced, unsatisfied, ambitious individuals (almost all of them men, because it was men and not women who were permitted to exhibit such traits in public): contingent individuals who were trying to use the resources of their communities to stand out from those communities, or to escape them, even if they never left home.

These were people who had summoned the nerve to attend auditions held by scouts from northern record companies, or who had formed bands and tried to get their fellow men and women, people just like them, to pay attention to them as if they were not quite just like them. These were people who, if only for a moment, looked beyond the farms and mines to which they were almost certainly chained. The stories they would later tell of journeying to New York to record are almost all the same. *How,* one singer after another would recall asking himself—as the singers spoke in the 1960s, when folklorists and fans and record collectors had tracked down the *Anthology*'s survivors, Ashley, Boggs, John Hurt, Sleepy John Estes, Furry Lewis, Eck Robertson, Buell Kazee, so many more—*how,* they remembered asking themselves, as they arrived in New York City in the 1920s like tourists from some foreign land, *how* could they keep hold of their pride, speak their piece as if they knew their neighbors would hear, but also as if they imagined the nation itself might actually acknowledge their existence: myself, Clarence Ashley, yes, but

also everyone I know, and those I don't know, my ancestors, and those I'll leave behind?

It is this spirit—the pride of knowledge to pass on, which is also a fear for the disappearance of that knowledge and of its proper language, and, a step past that fear, a looming up of an imagined America one never dared imagine before, whole and complete in a single image—that makes a whole of the *Anthology of American Folk Music*. It is the suspicion that there is, somewhere, a perfectly, absolutely metaphorical America—an arena of rights and obligations, freedoms and restraints, crime and punishment, love and death, humor and tragedy, speech and silence—that makes kin of Mark Merlis's Tom Slater, F. O. Matthiessen, and Harry Smith, and all those he brought forth so long after they stepped forward to say their piece.

What is Smithville? It is a small town whose citizens are not distinguishable by race. There are no masters and no slaves. The prison population is large, and most are part of it at one time or another. While some may escape justice, they do not remain among their fellow citizens; executions take place in public. There are, after all, a lot of murders here—crimes of passion, of cynicism, of mere reflex—and also suicides. Here both murder and suicide are rituals, acts instantly transformed into legend, facts that in all their specificity transform everyday life into myth, or reveal that at its highest pitch life is a joke. Thus humor abounds, most of it cruel: as the citizens love to sing, "Roosevelt's in the White House, he's doing his best / McKinley's in the graveyard, he's taking his rest." There

is a constant war between the messengers of god and ghosts and demons, dancers and drinkers, and, for all anyone knows, between god's messengers and god himself—no one has ever seen him, but then no one has ever seen a cuckoo either. The town is simultaneously a seamless web of connections and an anarchy of separations: who would ever shake hands with Dock Boggs, who sounds as if his bones are coming through his skin every time he opens his mouth? And yet who can turn away from the dissatisfaction in his voice, the refusal ever to be satisfied with the things of this world or the promises of the next?

This is Smithville. Here is a mystical body of the republic, a kind of public secret: a declaration of what sort of wishes and fears lie behind any public act, a declaration of a weird but clearly recognizable America within the America of the exercise of institutional majoritarian power. Here the cadence of Clarence Ashley's banjo is both counterpoint and contradiction to any law; here everyone calls upon the will and everyone believes in fate. It is a democracy of manners—a democracy, finally, of how people carry themselves, of how they appear in public. The ruling question of public life is not that of the distribution of material goods or the governance of moral affairs, but that of how people plumb their souls and then present their discoveries, their true selves, to others—unless, as happens here often enough, the fear of not belonging, or the wish for true proof that one does belong, takes over, and people assume the mask that makes them indistinguishable from anyone else. But in Smithville that mask never stays on for long.

God reigns here, but his rule can be refused. His gaze cannot be escaped; his hand, maybe. You can bet: you can stake a

probably real exile on a probably imaginary homecoming. Or you can take yourself out of the game, and wait for a death god will ignore; then you, like so many others, already dead but still speaking, will take your place in the bend of a note in "The Coo Coo Bird." It's limbo, but it's not bad; on the fourth day of July you get to holler.

F I V E

KILL DEVIL HILLS

. . . street by street, block by block, step by step, door by door, all that's left of the old America is under siege. I catch sight of it from time to time: a fleeting glimpse at the top of the stairs, or outside rustling in the bushes. This is the old America of legend and distant memory, that invested no faith in the wisdom of history and no hope in the sham of the future, the old America that invented itself all over from the ground up every single day. . . . the America where no precaution is sufficient and nothing will protect you, no passport or traveling papers, no opportune crucifix or gas soaked torch, no sunglasses or decoder box or cyanide capsule, no ejector seat or live wire or secret identity or reconstructed tissues or unmarked grave or faked death. It's the America that was originally made for those who believed in nothing else, not because they believed there *was* nothing else but because for them, without America, nothing else was worth believing.

—Steve Erickson, *Amnesiascope*, 1996

"I could really believe in god when I heard Bob Dylan on the radio," Harry Smith once told Paul Nelson. Some years later, in 1976, an NYU student who had just seen *Heaven and Earth Magic* called Smith at the Chelsea Hotel, asking for an

immediate interview ("I have to do a paper"); he caught Smith in a particularly unbelieving frame of mind. "When I was younger," Smith said, rambling, lonely, "I thought that the feelings that went through me were—that I would outgrow them, that the anxiety or panic or whatever it is called would disappear, but you sort of suspect it at thirty-five, [and] when you get to be fifty you definitely know you're stuck with your neuroses, or whatever you want to classify them as—demons, completed ceremonies, any old damn thing."

The basement tapes are not completed ceremonies. There are rituals forming, as bland tunes break out into a haze of jokes and doubt, but no rite takes a finished shape. Like the records Smith collected, the known and unknown basement tapes together make a town—a town that is also a country, an imagined America with a past and a future, neither of which seems quite as imaginary as any act taking place in the present of the songs. Erickson's old America is palpable here, because that country is defined solely by the way it can be made up, or can rise up, on any given day, whole and complete in a single phrase or metaphor, melody or harmony.

Smithville folk would recognize this place—the jail is full, and some people still remember when the Fourth of July was the biggest day of the year—but they might have trouble keeping up. For one thing, this town is more drunk. For another, while some people here say they see god as the children of Israel saw him, "by day in a pillar of a cloud," "by night in a pillar of fire," there are no churches, save for the church the man who recites "Sign on the Cross" inhabits in his own mind, a church with no address. The Bible is everywhere,

but less invoked than tested against the happenstance of ordinary affairs or invasions of the uncanny. Though more blasphemous than Smithville—blasphemous in the sense of a refusal to grant god, or any force larger than appetite or inconvenience, the slightest claim on one's attention—comes with the whiskey—this town might be even more religious, because here people can read fate out of the weather. Fate is less suspended, as it is in those Smithville singalongs "Sugar Baby" and "East Virginia," than looming, rushing forward—unless, as occasionally happens, someone here is rushing to meet fate. Sometimes it can seem as if the whole population is made up of Casey Joneses and John Henrys: daredevil stoics, like the hard-luck wrangler in "Hills of Mexico," the half-bored, half-threatening character in "Apple Suckling Tree," the squinting mystic of "This Wheel's on Fire," or the map-hopper in "Lo and Behold!" People here are restless, but while the citizens are always hitting the road, they seem to carry the air over the town with them, to the point where the place-names that dot their songs—Wichita, Williams Point, Tupelo, Mink Muscle Creek, Blueberry Hill—soon enough feel as recognizable as street signs and as interchangeable as signposts.

People talk funny here. Instead of the language of allegory and home truth that rules in Smithville, the currency is the shaggy dog story, from tragic parable to slapstick sermon, sometimes the one hiding inside the other. Every time you turn your head, ordinary speech cracks into word play that makes fitting "Coo Coo Bird" verses together feel about as tricky as stacking baby blocks. The native tongue is close enough to English to give you the illusion you're following a story

anywhere else—the bet that anything can be transformed. The towns are like outposts on the same frontier, perhaps even in sight of each other over some unmarked borderline. Each place might be a tall tale to the other, people in Smithville laughing over the confusions of life on the other side, people on the other side baffled by the certainties of life in Smithville. Even a riddle like "The Coo Coo Bird" can feel like certainty in the town the basement tapes make.

Feeling the ground beneath your feet, as you likely would listening to "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere," "Million Dollar Bash," "See that My Grave Is Kept Clean," or for that matter "I Am a Teenage Prayer," you might call that town Union, after the town in Connecticut, or the one in Nebraska, Oregon, Maine, Mississippi, South Carolina, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee. Feeling the ground pulled out from under you, as you can listening to "Hills of Mexico," "The Bells of Rhymney," or "Lo and Behold!" you might call the town Kill Devil Hills, after perhaps the most ambitiously named spot in the U.S.A., a North Carolina hamlet a few miles down from Kitty Hawk, where the Wright Brothers first found their wings. If the balance tips to Kill Devil Hills, it might be because you can imagine that no place with a name like that could fail to deliver the visions demanded in "Lo and Behold!"—or deny anything.

Associated Press dispatches, February 21, 1995:

SUSAN SMITH WAS MOLESTED BY STEPFATHER

Union, S.C.—Susan Smith, who is accused of drowning her two young sons, was molested by her stepfather when she was 16, the man admitted in court papers unsealed yesterday. . . . According to court papers released yesterday, Beverly Russell abused Smith by "participating in open-mouth kissing, fondling her breasts and by the stepfather placing the minor's hand on him in and about the genital area." Russell was never charged with a crime.

TOWN STUNNED BY SLAYINGS OF THREE CHILDREN

Kill Devil Hills, N.C.—Residents left flowers and notes on the blackened spot of pavement where the bodies of three slain children were found in a burning van. Their father committed suicide nearby.

Even Police Chief James Gradeless, a 20-year law enforcement veteran who also served with Special Forces in Vietnam, was shaken by what he saw this weekend.

"It's not a Kill Devil Hills story," Gradeless said yesterday. "It's an American story. It bothers all of our consciences because somewhere, some place, society has failed to prevent this kind of thing from happening."

The question of why some crimes once instantly turned into legends while in our day, as for years now, the most irreducible crimes seem to disappear from consciousness as instantly as they appear in the news is also the question of what spirit it is that animates the basement tapes—the way they seem to float in time. Turning on elemental, symbolic incidents of transcendence and transgression, primal dramas were enacted in the sort of songs, dances, ballads, sermons, and hymns out of which Harry Smith made a nation; they were enacted in the languages he brought together. By definition, these primal dramas—acts of founding, acts that founded not merely a nation but a local version of the human condition—remained unfinished. The basement tapes can

be heard as an attempt to reinhabit this dramatically unfinished world, as if sparked by a suspicion that the languages of the time in which the basement tunes were fashioned—the political languages of right and left, the aesthetic languages of corruption and purity—were by comparison to those Smith gathered impoverished, unable to describe the crimes that were making the time, which is to say incapable of preserving their memory.

Recognizing that there might be such a thing as a primal drama, you might find yourself drawn away from the events of your own time—the war abroad, the war at home—even if, opening the day's paper, you could read the Constitution and the Bible as truth or lie between every other line. Accepting that such a drama must remain unfinished, you might find yourself less impressed by the crimes of your own time than you once were, and drawn to the possibility of fashioning a country of your own—a country where both you and the old voices that spoke to you might converse and feel at home. To fashion such a country would not make the crimes that might have driven you out of your time less burdensome; it might make them more so, just as dreams can weigh more heavily on the soul than events.

In such a venture, the cost of vision is ambiguity. An old language is suddenly alive with imagery, but while it can name anything for what it is, it can no longer hold narrative. In the country where this language is spoken, crimes will no longer vanish as soon as they occur, as with, say, "HIGHWAY BEHEADING"—

USA Today, July 24—Eric Star Smith, 34, is to be arraigned today on charges he stabbed and beheaded his 14-year-old son on an

Estancia, N.M., roadside Friday while the boy's brother and passing drivers watched. Smith, of Parker, Ariz., was on a weekend fishing trip with his sons when he decided they were possessed by the devil, authorities said. Police chased Smith for 40 miles, during which he threw the head of son Eric Jr. out the window. The chase ended when Smith crashed his van into a retaining wall in Albuquerque.

—but in their constancy they will carry neither names nor faces. They will not turn into legends; they will turn into myths.

"A myth is a public dream," Joseph Campbell once said. Not so long ago, in the rural South and the farm states of the Midwest, the most common form of myth was the weather report—because whether it was a question of a good year for wheat or cotton, or getting caught out of doors at the wrong time, the weather was a matter of life and death. Because it was also a question that had to be talked over every day, there was little point raising your voice over it. Take that beloved American story, that Gothic weather report, about a girl swept off a Kansas farm by a tornado and dropped down into another world as the killer of a witch. There is a way in which Dorothy's adventures in the land of Oz are really about the frustrations of a young woman who wants more than anything to escape from a language in which every vocal sound has been so polished in taciturn mouths that neither a laugh nor a scream can be made, let alone heard, let alone paid any mind.

Such a way of speaking, or not speaking, gives rise to a belief that something is being left unsaid—or denied. Recounting a

sentences, the story caught in his throat, along with all the stories untold and lives unlived. In the late 1920s Dock Boggs and Bascom Lamar Lunsford were two mountain singers recording traditional songs for the same New York record company, and a quarter century later Boggs's "Sugar Baby" and Lunsford's "I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground" would appear side by side on the *Anthology of American Folk Music*; in between, in 1939, Lunsford sang in the White House for President and Mrs. Roosevelt and King George VI.

Boggs quit the mines after his records were released, drew crowds to schools and houses, formed the Cumberland Mountain Entertainers, and signed a booking agent, but the records sold mostly where he carried them. Boggs recorded only four more songs in the 1920s—generic blues and sentimental parlor lyrics written by a Richlands, Virginia, variety store owner named W. E. Myers. Myers would send his ballets, or poems, to musicians he liked, hoping they would put his words to music. He'd release the results on his own Lonesome Ace label, which featured both a picture of *The Spirit of St. Louis* and the slogan "WITHOUT A YODEL," because Myers loved Charles Lindbergh and he hated yodeling. Boggs cut "Will Sweethearts Know Each Other There," "Old Rub Alcohol Blues," and two other Myers efforts in Chicago in 1929; then the Depression destroyed the southern economy and Myers went bankrupt. Boggs pressed on, writing to record companies, traveling to Atlanta for a session with Okeh, which shut down just before he arrived, finally surrendering when a recording date with Victor in Louisville fell through because Boggs, knocking on the doors of his now-penniless friends and relatives, could not raise the train fare. He drank hard, leaving

home, even leaving the state for a week at a time, running to where no one would recognize him on the last day of a ten-day drunk, always returning home, where his wife looked right through him. Days like the one in Jenkins became less frequent, more precious in memory and less valuable as life. Again and again his wife gave him an ultimatum: she refused to sleep with him unless he gave up his music, and finally, not long into the 1930s, he did.

Already, though, he had set down a handful of performances so strangely demanding as to lead a listener to measure what he or she knew of the American voice—any emblematic American voice, Huckleberry Finn's, Robert Johnson's, Franklin Roosevelt's, Barbara Jordan's—against Boggs's, to see if what one knew could pass his test. Already, he had created a small body of work so dissonant that like black gravity it can seem to suck into itself whatever music might be brought to bear upon it. Already, as Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote of a Shaker acolyte nearly a hundred years before, he "had joined in the sacred dance, every step of which is believed to alienate the enthusiast from earth."

In "Country Blues," a Brunswick disc that first reappeared as the seventy-third selection on the *Anthology of American Folk Music*—a Smithville password that presses and pulls inside such Kill Devil Hills standards as "Hills of Mexico" and "This Wheel's on Fire"—a wastrel antes up to pay the piper one last time. As he looks back across the ruins of his life he is guilty but distant even from his sins, let alone their punishment, and there is more foreboding in the distance than in the guilt. Perhaps that is what makes the singer's testimony even more convincing than it has to be.

cryptically perfect phrase, both as themselves and as a particularly American strain of fairy folk—he had learned something about persistence and renewal. Or he might have been saying something simpler, and harder: I saw a vanishing. He was present to witness an extinction, to see the last members of a species disappear. Thus it was left to him to say what went out of the world when the traditional people left the stage.

Where the past is in the basement tapes—what the past is—has more to do with this sort of question than with the question of any direct transmission of style or manner from one performer to another. In the basement tapes, an uncompleted world was haphazardly constructed out of the past, out of Smith's *Anthology* and its like, out of the responses people like Bob Dylan, Mike Seeger, and so many more brought to that music, its stories, and to the world—another country—implicit within it. The uncompleted world of the basement tapes was a fantasy beginning in artifacts refashioned by real people, dimly apprehended figures who out of the kettle of the folk revival appeared in the flesh to send an unexpected message. The vanished world they incarnated—as history, a set of facts and an indistinct romance; as a set of artifacts, as a work of art, complete and finished—was going to die, and you were going to be the last witness. Through your own performance, whenever it might take place, in 1963, 1965, or 1966, in 1967, 1992, or 1993, through its success or failure, you were to sign your name to the death certificate. You were to certify that a certain race of people had vanished from the earth, which was also a way of testifying that they once had been at large upon it—and as a result of your witnessing,

what traces these people might have left behind were to be lodged in you.

It's a possibility that instantly raises its own question. What will go out of the world with *you*? This is the sense of loss and finality that is a bridge to the sense of tragedy in "Tears of Rage" and "I'm Not There." The past that drives these songs is this past.

The playfulness, the lowered stakes of Kill Devil Hills when measured against Smithville, is the only right backdrop for tragedy here: an arena where tragedy can be discovered and yet not claim the whole of life. It will throw the rest of life into relief: only tragedy can justify a place with a name like this, can give its pleasures memory, its drunks true sleep.

Smithville is definitively settled, and in Smithville there is no tragedy because there is no guilt. Fatalism overshadows everything else. Kill Devil Hills is not only unfinished, it is transitory. At times it can feel less like a town than a depot, a stopping-off point, like so many earlier American towns—not the utopian seventeenth-century Puritan communities, with so many masked against their inability to live up to their word to follow god's, or the scattered, multiplying perfectionist settlements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but the frontier towns, with the guilt and doubt of utopians and perfectionists no less present in their air than the free rapaciousness of traders, con artists, and killers, all walking streets where a mask was just part of the wardrobe. Here fatalism is nothing to the daredevil. Everything seems open, any turn can be made at any time—at least until a certain dead end is reached, and then no mask, no secret identity, no change of name or face will protect you, and for a moment all masks come off.

elected to the presidency. Bob Dylan would play at the Inaugural, with Clinton sitting only a few feet away, grinning as if he knew what it meant to have this man even unspokenly dedicate a song to him, but if it was any song, it was none of these.

World Gone Wrong (Columbia). Released October 26, 1993. Again old folk songs—"Two Soldiers," "Jack-a-Roe," "Lone Pilgrim"—performed solo, and old blues, twisted and snapped by an adept's guitar playing—"World Gone Wrong," "Blood in My Eyes," "Delia." In fact the songs were raceless, Smithville songs, again a remapping of a lost world always secretly present, biding its time, having long ago issued its warnings, always containing knowledge of how things were certain to turn out. The music was about lust and defeat; here if you never know when the former will appear, you know the latter will never disappear. "Dylan revels in the blind fatalism of the music, its endless capacity for renewal in the face of catastrophe and despair," Howard Hampton wrote in the December 7, 1993, issue of the *Village Voice*. "These performances invert the conventions of careerist wisdom: they make his output of the last 10–20 years sound like a desperately nostalgic play for acceptance instead of the other way around. The affectations that have hobbled his voice and blunted his instincts are set aside, in their stead is gravity, pitch-black humor, distended common sense." On the previous record there had not been a word about what the songs were or where they came from; here Dylan wrote long and tangled essays on each, full of acknowledgment and leaping with interpretations no one else would have had the nerve to make, and the challenge was to hear in the songs even a fraction of what the singer heard. In almost every case, Dylan hurried the past of the songs forward as a critique of the present—a present that, its poverty exposed by the past Dylan carried, was also presented as an open question, which is to say unjudged. As Bob Dylan had said nearly thirty years before, all his songs really ended with "Good luck."

ANTHOLOGY TO WILEY

Anthology of American Folk Music (Folkways, 1952).* Compiled by Harry Smith. Scheduled for reissue in 1997 on Smithsonian/Folkways as three cds, with original cover art.

Clarence Ashley. Ashley's recordings from the 1920s and '30s have never been collected in one place. His "The Coo Coo Bird" (1929) can be found on the anthology *Folksongs: Old Time Country Music/USA/1926–1944* (Frémeaux & Associés, France), which also includes Buell Kazee's "East Virginia" and "The Wagonner's Lad," Bascom Lamar Lunsford's "I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground," Dock Boggs's "Pretty Polly" and "Down South Blues," Dick Justice's "Henry Lee," and Frank Hutchison's "Stackalee." His 1929 "Dark Hollow Blues" (a version of "East Virginia") is on the anthology *Old-Time Mountain Ballads* (County), which also includes "Charles Giteau" by Kelly Harrell and Uncle Dave Macon's "John Henry"; his 1930 "House Carpenter," included on Smith's *Anthology*, is on the anthology *Country: Nashville—Dallas—Hollywood* (Frémeaux & Associés, France); his 1931 "Haunted Road Blues" is on the anthology *A Whiter Shade of Blues: White Country Blues 1926–1936* (Columbia Legacy), which also includes numbers by Frank Hutchison (see below). Ashley's 1960s recordings include "House Carpenter," "Little Sadie," and "The Coo Coo Bird" on the anthology *Old-Time Music at Newport* (Vanguard lp, 1963), which also includes three performances by Dock Boggs (see below), and the essential *Doc Watson and Clarence Ashley: The Original Folkways Recordings, 1960–1962* (Smithsonian/Folkways). The video anthology *Legends of Old Time*

*Though most of the nearly 2200 lps originally issued by Folkways between 1947 and 1987 have not been reissued on cd, all are available as specially boxed cassettes, with photocopies of original cover art and liner notes, from Smithsonian/Folkways, Center for Folklife Programs, 955 L'Enfant Plaza S.W., 2600, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560, tel. 202/287-3262.

Music (Vestapol/Rounder) includes an unforgettable Ashley performance of "The Cuckoo," with accompaniment by fiddler Fred Price and guitarists Clint Howard and Tex Isley, alongside an interview with folklorist D. K. Wilgus. Ashley describes "The Coo Coo Bird" as a "lassy-makin' song"—the kind of song you sing when you're making molasses—and the kind of song New York record men demanded when he first recorded it. Wilgus: "When you were making records, how much did the people who were making the records know about this music?" Ashley: "How much did they know about it?" "That's right." "Not anything." "Well, how did they know what to record?" "Well, they was just looking for something and hoping they'd find it. In other words, they wasn't musicians; they didn't have the talent, and they didn't have the *feeling*—and they wouldn't know whether you was in tune or out of tune." Or, as Emma Bell Miles put it in "Some Real American Music," in her *The Spirit of the Mountains* (1905):

> . . . the mother is crooning over her work, some old ballad of an eerie sadness and the indefinable charm of unlooked-for minor endings, something she learned as a child from a grandmother whose grandmother again brought it from Ireland or Scotland. As she bends above the loom, sending the shuttle back and forth, her voice goes on softly, interrupted by the thump of the batten:
>
> The cuckoo's a pretty bird, she sings as she flies . . .
>
> The loom stands in the porch, shaded by hops and honeysuckle, making with the woman's figure a cool silhouette against the sunshine. Thump—thump—thump! What does she know of lords and ladies, of cuckoo and nightingale? These are mere words to the mountain people; they will often stop to apologize, when asked to sing to a stranger, for the lack of "sense" in the lines; but they dare not alter a syllable; the song is too anciently received.

Sister Mildred Barker with Sister Ethel Peacock, Elsie McCool, Della Haskell, Marie Burgess, Frances Carr, and other Members of the United Society of Shakers, Sabbathday Lake, Maine. "Come Life, Shaker Life," composed 1835 by Elder Issachar Bates. On *Early Shaker Spirituals*, recorded 1963 (Rounder). With extensive notes by Daniel W. Patterson.

Dock Boggs. 1927 and 1929 recordings are collected on *Dock Boggs: His Twelve Original Recordings* (RBF Folkways lp), with a comprehensive and powerful essay by Barry O'Connell. Later recordings, all produced by Mike Seeger, are *Dock Boggs—Legendary Banjo Player and Singer* (Folkways lp, 1963), which includes Boggs's first recording of "Oh Death"; *Excerpts from Interviews with Dock Boggs*, recorded by Seeger in 1963 (Folkways lp, 1964); *Dock Boggs Vol. 2* (Folkways lp, 1965); and *Dock Boggs, Vol. 3* (Folkways lp, 1970). The anthology *Old-Time Music at Newport* (Vanguard lp, 1963) includes Boggs's performances of "Oh Death," "Drunkard's Lone Child," and "Sugar Baby" (with John Cohen). *New Lost City Ramblers and Friends* (Vanguard) includes a different Boggs Newport performance of "Oh Death" (accompaniment by Mike Seeger); *Georgia Sea Island Singers* (New World) features a powerful a cappella gospel version of the song by Bessie Jones, recorded in 1960 by Alan Lomax. The video anthology *Shady Grove: Old Time Music from North Carolina, Virginia, and Kentucky* (Vestapol/Rounder) includes 1966 footage of Boggs performing "Pretty Polly," "Country Blues," and the parlor tune "I Hope I Live a Few More Days." For first versions of Boggs's work, see, for Rosa Henderson's "Down South Blues," her *Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Vol. 1: 1923* (Document, Austria); and for Sara Martin's "Sugar Blues," her *Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Vol. 1: 1922–23* (Document, Austria).

Richard "Rabbit" Brown. For his "James Alley Blues" plus "Never Let the Same Bee Sting You Twice," "I'm Not Jealous," "Mystery of the Dunbar Child," and "Sinking of the Titanic"