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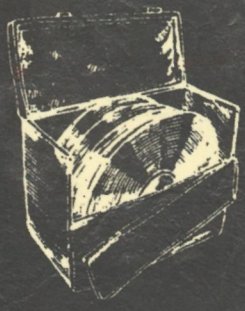

The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World's Rarest 78 rpm Records

AMANDA PETRUSICH

Also by Amanda Petrusich

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For my parents, John and Linda Petrusich

hard and grooved, like the surface of a 78. MaryEllen is standing nearby, smiling gamely, her purse tucked tightly under her arm. In the background, a pair of hunched men in trench coats and fedoras—collectors, presumably—are gesturing at each other. The far wall is lined with crates of records. I bit down on my lower lip. It looked almost exactly like I'd hoped it would.

// Ten //

I Saw America Changed Through Music

Harry Smith, The Anthology of American Folk Music, *Tinctures, the Celestial Monochord, "Anything Shaped Like a Hamburger," Allen Ginsberg, the New York Public Library, 50 MILES ELBOW ROOM*

In 1952, eight years after James McKune ferried "Some These Days I'll Be Gone" back to the Brooklyn YMCA, a twenty-nine-year-old collector named Harry Everett Smith squirreled himself away in a two-room office at 111 West Forty-Seventh Street, chewing on peyote buttons and compiling a six-LP compendium for Folkways Records. *The Anthology of American Folk Music*, which was released by Folkways in 1952 and reissued on CD by the Smithsonian in 1997, was culled exclusively from Smith's 78 collection and contains only songs issued between 1927 and 1932, that fruitful five-year span between the advent of electrical recording and the apex of the Great Depression. Despite its self-imposed parameters, Smith's anthology is generous in its definition of folk music: child ballads, spirituals, Alabamans playing Hawaiian steel guitar, fiddlers, Charley Patton as the Masked Marvel, Appalachian coal miners, Cajun accordionists, the Carter Family, jug stompers, string

bands, church congregations, and Uncle Dave Macon—mouth open, banjo wedged behind his knee, hollering "Kill yourself!"—all appear. Taken as a whole (and that's the entire point), the *Anthology* is a wild and instructive portrait of a young country working itself out via song.

It's also deeply confounding. There are times when I have clung to it as a kind of last hope, believing that it's an object that unlocks other objects; there are other times when I have found it solipsistic and nonsensical and inherently ill conceived. Whatever the *Anthology* offers, it's not revealed quickly.

Like most serious collectors, Harry Smith got going early. The arc of his life is both predictable—as if, like a river, it could have only ever led to one place—and meandering. He was born on May 29, 1923, the son of a boat captain and a schoolteacher, theosophists who encouraged his burgeoning interest in ethnography. He spent a good chunk of his high school years studying the tribal ceremonies of the Lummi Indians in his hometown of Bellingham, Washington, and started amassing 78s around the same time. The first one he bought was by Tommy McClennan, a rough-voiced blues singer who recorded in Chicago in the early 1940s. ("It sounded strange and I looked for others," Smith later said of it.)

In his early twenties, Smith was just undersized enough to be able to crawl inside the fuselage of an airplane, and after six months working for Boeing as an engine degreaser, he decamped to San Francisco, then Berkeley, and finally New York City, where, in desperate need of cash for things like food and shelter, he tried to pitch his record collection wholesale to Folkways Records. Instead, cofounder Moe Asch persuaded him to produce a multidisc compilation for the label. Asch's biographer, Peter Goldsmith, suggests that Smith's "appearance and manner" might have reminded Asch of his pal and partner Woody Guthrie, another charmingly arrogant polymath who recorded for Folkways in the 1940s. (Incidentally, Guthrie—who spent a good percentage of 1952 in a state psychiatric ward—adored the *Anthology*, and in a letter to Asch admitted to playing it "several hundreds of times.") In a 1972

Sing Out! interview with Ethel Raim and Bob Norman, Asch confirmed his admiration for Smith's purview, saying "[Smith] understood the content of the records. He knew their relationship to folk music, their relationship to English literature, and their relationship to the world." Smith was paid $200 for his work on the *Anthology* and promised a twenty-cent royalty for each copy sold.

Although he's now equally beloved for his experimental films, paintings, and animations, Smith is about as close as the practice of 78 collecting has ever come to producing a known cult figure. (These days Robert Crumb also qualifies, but his collecting is far more incidental to his legacy.) Smith, who died in 1991 in room 328 of the Chelsea Hotel in New York, a building already infamous for its output of body bags, was the kind of guy who designed his own tarot cards. He was a dedicated mystic, a consecrated bishop in the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica (a fraternal organization based on Aleister Crowley's *The Book of the Law*), and, supposedly, an initiated Lummi shaman. He palled around with folks like Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Allen Ginsberg, and Gregory Corso, and was eventually appointed "Shaman in Residence" at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, a Buddhist-inspired university founded by an exiled Tibetan *tulku*. Along with records and rare books, which he arranged on his shelves by height, Smith collected Seminole textiles, hand-decorated Ukrainian Easter eggs, and anything shaped like a hamburger. He lived with a goldfish in a series of tiny apartments crammed with ephemera (quilts, weavings, clay models, mounted string figures, women's dresses). In 1984 he donated "the largest known paper airplane collection in the world"—sourced exclusively from the streets of New York City—to the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC. Smith was also an obsessive chronicler of found sound, be it the peyote songs of the Kiowa Indians or the wheezing vagrants of the Lower East Side; one Fourth of July he recorded every single noise he encountered.

In almost all the photos I've seen of Harry Smith, he's wearing plastic-framed, thick-lensed eyeglasses and sporting a robust, scraggly

beard. His skin looks papery but his eyes are sharp, narrowed, and alive under two drooping lids. In my favorite shot, taken by Ginsberg in 1985, he's pouring whole milk from a cardboard carton into a glass jar ("transforming milk into milk," Ginsberg noted). His face is approximately 80 percent glasses. Atop his head, little tufts of white hair wisp to the left, the consistency of fresh spiderweb. He appears to be about ten thousand years old.

Cantankerous and exacting in the manner of most collectors, Smith often bickered with his peers about money or objects. He would demand to borrow a book or record and then refuse to give it back. As his archivist and friend Rani Singh told me, he was constantly informing people that their belongings were better off in his collection. ("'It should be in my collection, it shouldn't be in your collection,'" she recalled him saying.) His compulsions were driven by a fierce internal logic; Smith was painstaking in his pursuit of proper serialization, even if it meant pilfering other people's most beloved shit. Things, he believed, belonged next to other things—like sentences in a story, books along a shelf, songs on an LP. "He was looking for undercurrents. He was looking for ideas that were disappearing, nuances that were disappearing, trying to make connections not just among 78s from Georgia or North Carolina versus upper New York State or Canada, but connections between the string figures that he was interested in from all cultures across the world," Singh said. "He was comparing string figures to tarot cards to 78 records to creation myths to all these other things and finding the things that link all of us as humans together."

It's still hard to quantify the cultural impact of the *Anthology*. In the liner notes to its Smithsonian reissue, John Fahey wrote: "Had he never done anything with his life but this *Anthology*, Harry Smith would still have borne the mark of genius across his forehead. I'd match the *Anthology* up against any other single compendium of important information ever assembled. Dead Sea Scrolls? Nah. I'll take the *Anthology*. Make no mistake: there was no 'folk' canon before Smith's work. That he had compiled such a definitive document only became apparent

much later, of course. We record-collecting types, sifting through many more records than he did, eventually reached the same conclusions: these were the true goods."

There's also no satisfying term for what Smith did. Both "compiler" and "curator" feel too removed, too impersonal. Smith didn't just corral a bunch of parts, he dreamed a whole. While I'll admit to a tendency toward certain flights of sentimentality—and while I don't want to discount either Smith's intentionality or his authorship—I also don't think it's so preposterous to believe that these records were delivered to Smith for this precise purpose and that he ordered them as a poet orders words on a page, channeling, building meaning from nothing, becoming a physical conduit for a spiritual truth. That Smith understood how to place these records in useful dialogue is a function of his expertise and experience, but there is also a sense, here, of a story that needed telling. That's not an unfamiliar feeling for most 78 collectors.

In *The Old, Weird America*, Greil Marcus calls the *Anthology* "an occult document disguised as an academic treatise on stylistic shifts within an archaic musicology." I think that costume is essential to its premise; although it might seem counterintuitive, the illusion of authority allows the *Anthology* both its insularity and its limitations. Anyone who attempts to use it as an objective textbook—as the definitive, omnipotent document implied by its title—will be devastated by its shortcomings. It's a wonky portrait of America at nearly all stages in its development. It contains no field recordings sourced from the Library of Congress or anywhere else and excludes entire communities of citizens, including Native Americans, immigrants, and (with a few exceptions) people who lived in the northern half of the United States. Per Smith's vision, every track on the *Anthology* was professionally rendered and released, an oddly normative and antiacademic approach to something as intrinsically noncommercial as folk music. Smith clearly wanted to exalt the records people actually hunted down, bought, and cherished, just as he did.

While the *Anthology* isn't comprehensive, it's still a self-wrought

universe with its own logic and revelations. It encourages—maybe even requires—its listeners to devise their own (personal, imperfect) explanations for how and why people sing. It's all in here, Smith is saying, and if you can accept the *Anthology* on faith, as the sacred text he clearly envisioned, its world might open up to you, become your own.

Smith divided his eighty-four tracks into three categories, a kind of holy triumvirate: Social Music, Ballads, and Songs. All six records (two for each section) were collected under a cover illustration of a celestial monochord, an ancient, one-stringed instrument that vaguely resembles a mountain dulcimer. Here, the monochord is being tuned by the hand of God, which is stretching down from an illuminated cloud. The picture was drawn by the Belgian engraver Theodor de Bry and first published in Robert Fludd's *The History of the Macrocosm and the Microcosm* sometime between 1617 and 1619. When properly played, the celestial monochord is supposed to unite the base elements of air, water, fire, and earth. The drawing is an allusion, certainly, to Smith and Fludd's shared belief in serialization—in linking everything to everything else.

In the most basic sense, what Smith did with the *Anthology* will be familiar to anyone who has ever crafted or received a fussed-over mix tape from a paramour or a pal. As the rock critic Rob Sheffield wrote in his 2007 memoir, *Love Is a Mix Tape*, "It's a fundamental human need to pass music around." And of the mix tape, specifically: "There is always a reason to make one." The idea, of course, is that music can be arranged in such a way that it communicates something new and vital—something impossible to say in any other way.

"The whole purpose is to have some kind of series of things," Smith himself announced in a 1969 *Sing Out!* interview with John Cohen, and indeed, much of the *Anthology*'s lingering effect has been attributed to Smith's sequencing. Previously, these tracks were islands, isolated platters of shellac that existed independently of anything else: even flipping over a 78 required disruptive action. Shifting the medium from the one-

song-per-side 78 to the long-playing vinyl album allowed, finally, for songs to be juxtaposed in deliberate ways. It's possible now, of course, to dump all eighty-four tracks onto one digital playlist and experience the entire *Anthology* uninterrupted, but I still prefer to acknowledge the demarcations between its three sections—to play it as Smith did.

The *Anthology*'s rubric was entirely Smith's own. He deemed extramusical qualifiers (race, style, chronology) irrelevant, and rarely does the actual content of a song explain or justify its placement. Sometimes tracks by the same artist are lumped together; sometimes they're not. Its blueprint isn't obviously rendered or easily parsed, and the collection's narrative, insomuch as one exists, is deliberately obscured. As such, the *Anthology* can feel like the musical equivalent of shouting *cellar door*, a phrase trumpeted for its ethereal beauty—it's affecting in ways that have nothing to do with literal meaning. It can also be supremely frustrating. Like a good poem, nothing makes sense until everything makes sense.

"To me, what's in plain sight is that the *Anthology* induces you to look for some underlying, organizing principle," Kurt Gegenhuber, the author of my favorite *Anthology*-based website, The Celestial Monochord, offered. "To some, it may be natural to seek stories when looking for order, but the *Anthology*'s main effect is to seduce us into all sorts of hard, sense-making work. What I see as important is the way the cuts *refuse* to legibly lead to each other. Discontinuity and the lack of context seem to me crucial to the *Anthology*. Throughout, the MO is for each cut to just materialize out of some dark forest and float before you like a disembodied face, hang there for a few minutes, and then fade to black. And then that memory is dispersed by the next cut, which hypnotizes you all over again. The sequencing gives each cut a context of no context."

That so much of this material is so strange (try to make literal or metaphoric sense of, say, Bascom Lamar Lunsford's "I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground"), performed wildly and linked together according to some unspoken pedagogy, means the *Anthology* is disorienting long

before it's revelatory. I can only imagine what it sounded like sixty years ago. Gegenhuber, for one, believes that Smith inadvertently foresaw—or even created—the way people now listen to long-playing records, devouring them as whole texts and not just indiscriminate strings of songs. "You might say the *Anthology* was the first draft of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (or *Highway 61 Revisited*), since 'listening' to albums [now means] falling into very close 'reading,'" he said.

The *Anthology* does contain a few concrete arcs to keep listeners grounded. Over the course of six LPs, for example, Smith slowly builds a not entirely surprising argument about the harshness and futility of work in the face of things like love and home. It culminates, for me, with Mississippi John Hurt's generous, mesmeric performance of "Spike Driver Blues" on the final side of the final LP. Even now, the whole thing (from the Williamson Brothers and Curry's "Gonna Die with a Hammer in My Hand" to the Carolina Tar Heels' "Got the Farm Land Blues" to Uncle Dave Macon's "Buddy Won't You Roll Down the Line") makes me panic that I and every gainfully employed person I know should actually be subscribing to some unsustainable hobo ethos. "Take this hammer and carry it to the captain, tell him I'm gone, tell him I'm gone," Hurt sings, his voice eerily, tellingly placid. It's a declaration of autonomy that also suggests a deep reordering of basic priorities. It's fearless, and I can't think of another musical moment that makes me want to kick my laptop out a window more. When I first heard about a friend who quit her office job via petulant Post-it—"I'm outta here," she scrawled, affixing the note to her computer, a bold if indulgent decree—my first thought was how proud Harry Smith would be.

Elsewhere, there are clear lessons about love and fidelity and revenge. There is an extraordinary amount of bad behavior. It turns out people have always been doing the same ugly and beautiful things to each other. Nearly any emotion you can imagine feeling—lust, contempt, rage, satisfaction, jealousy, love, loneliness, joy, exhaustion, guilt, unbearable sadness—is articulated and slotted onto Smith's continuum.

It's impossible for me to believe that Smith, who fancied himself a bit of an alchemist, didn't engineer this thing specifically for those sorts of reactions. Ultimately, the *Anthology* is about sewing together self-made worlds—establishing a supernarrative of the human condition. I understand how that might sound absurd. An eccentric, possibly hallucinating twenty-nine-year-old pawing through a pile of records and deciding which ones and in what order they should play isn't exactly comparable, say, to Albert Einstein defining relativity. But Smith's role in the creation of the *Anthology* did reposition the collector, rather than the critic or scholar, as an architect of canons, an arbiter, a storyteller. He sussed a narrative from incongruous parts and presented it as an edifying fable. Practically, there is a parallel, certainly, to the songs contained therein, which are often based, at least in part, on other songs—a new work from old work, a tapestry from string.

It's not unusual, then, for the *Anthology* to elicit a dramatic response. "I've met dozens of people who heard the *Anthology* and ran off to join some circus or other," Gegenhuber said. "For [folklorists and musicians like] Mike Seeger, John Cohen, and many others, the response was to learn to play, yourself, its songs and styles, and go looking for Boggs, Ashley, Hurt, et cetera. For still others, the *Anthology* induced the record-collecting response, which seems to be about sense making."

Accordingly, even otherwise-reasonable authors go a little loopy when writing about the *Anthology*'s inexplicable allure. In *When We Were Good*, Robert Cantwell's treatise on the folk revival, he describes it as "strange, even sinister: a closet-like enclosure from which the world is shut out, spangled with occult symbols whose meaning we have not yet learned, fitted to an obscure design or purpose and harboring a vague threat, like the gypsy's tent or the funhouse, that by some unknown force will subject us to an ordeal over which we have no control and which will leave us permanently marked." (Yikes!) Marcus, meanwhile, conjures a place called Smithville, and in describing the first side of Songs, writes: "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!"

I understand—deeply—the impulse toward hyperbole, the desire to speak of the *Anthology* as a contained spiritual experience that incites certain epiphanies. It is, after all, a thing you can inhabit if you want to: there are alehouses to drink in and Stetson hats to bicker over and corn to hoe and people to marry and love and betray and maybe murder.

Then there's Smith, a welcome little Virgil, typing his short, all-caps headline-style summaries (they are stylistically reminiscent, at times, of the descriptions included in Lomax's "List of American Folk Songs on Commercial Records") that mostly make me snicker but occasionally make me gulp. Like the synopsis he cobbled together for Rev. F. W. McGee's "Fifty Miles of Elbow Room," a spastic, lyrically unintelligible gospel song that I think is about heaven, or at least some heavenly analog (it appears to be based on the New Jerusalem as seen by John in Revelation 21:9): "WHEN GATES WIDE ON OTHER SIDE ROOM FOR YOU, ME. FOUR SQUARE CITY, JASPER WALLS, LIMITS 1200 MILES. ON RIGHT HAND, ON LEFT HAND 50 MILES ELBOW ROOM." It's Smith reducing a song to its weird essence—to the best, most universal truth contained therein.

At the very least, the *Anthology* contextualized—if not accelerated—the folk revival of the 1950s and '60s, coaching new fans about the genre's recorded precedents. The songs Smith included may have only been twenty to twenty-five years old, but they were hardly accessible (or even known) to noncollectors in 1952. Now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, it seems deeply bizarre to think that cultural artifacts could become extinct so quickly (for example, in 2011 I heard Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'," a song first released thirty years before, approximately eight thousand times without trying), but the bulk of these tracks were either half forgotten or entirely unheard of by the time Smith polished them up for rerelease. In a 1993 interview with the

music producer Hal Willner, Ginsberg called the *Anthology* a "historic bomb in American folk music," claiming that "it turned on Peter Paul and Mary, turned on the whole folk music world at that time, including Ramblin' Jack Elliott and everyone else, because it was this treasure of American blues [and] mountain musics. Happy Traum, everybody, including Dylan, [were] affected by it up to Jerry Garcia, who learned blues from Harry Smith's records."

By the mid-1980s, Smith was living in a flophouse on the Bowery, intermittently boozing himself into comas. He was toothless save a few decayed, abscess-ridden molars, and because of an injury sustained while ripping a feeding tube out of his mouth (after one particularly gnarly drinking binge, he'd ended up in St. Vincent's hospital, connected to a cornucopia of machines), he could eat only pea soup and mashed bananas, and not, apparently, without a good deal of gurgling. Prior to his arrival on the Bowery, he'd been shacked up in a tiny, book-stuffed room at the Hotel Breslin on Twenty-Ninth Street and Broadway, then home to the indigent elderly and the welfare bound, now repurposed as the modish Ace Hotel. (Its popular restaurant—I mean gastropub—presently serves a twenty-one-dollar hamburger; model types with expensive laptops are often draped around the lobby.) According to Ginsberg, the scene there was such: "And in the bathroom he had a little birdie that he fed and talked to and let out of his cage all the time. And when his little birds died he put their bodies in the freezer. He'd keep them for various Alchemical purposes, along with a bottle which he said was several years' deposits of his semen, which he was also using for whatever magic structures."

In 1988, Ginsberg helped bring Smith to the Naropa Institute, where Smith studied and lectured and cleaned up a bit: he quit drinking (he still self-medicated freely, smoking weed and ingesting, as Rani Singh writes in "Harry Smith, an Ethnographic Modernist in America," "whatever combination of Sinequan and Valium he found in his jacket pocket") and began aggressively chronicling found sounds (church bells, children jumping rope, cows). He gained thirty invigorating

pounds on an ambitious diet of bee pollen, raw hamburger, ice cream, instant coffee, and Ensure. He lived and worked in a cabin with an index card—DO NOT DISTURB, I AM EITHER SLEEPING OR WORKING—posted semipermanently to the front door. Singh, who first met Smith while she was studying with Ginsberg at Naropa, called his years in Colorado "relatively tranquil."

For someone so invested in interdependencies, there's little evidence of Smith sustaining a significant romantic relationship in his lifetime. Singh described him as asexual. "I just think that he was more of an intellect. He lived in his head more than in his body," she said. He was also a relentless hustler, prone to harrowing fits of rage, and particular about his habits and beliefs. In "The Alchemical Image" (which originally appeared in the catalog for "The Heavenly Tree Grows Downward," a 2002 exhibition of Smith's selected visual works), the curator Raymond Foye wrote: "The cardinal rule in listening to records with Harry was NO TALKING. Absolutely none, whatsoever, until the record was finished. Hanging out with Harry was always characterized by a mixture of pleasure and fear. Several of his visitors were unstable, armed, and dangerous, and Harry's anger could clear a room. A gouache that took three painstaking weeks to complete might be torn up in a flash. There were always his sudden mood swings, and, of course, his drinking."

By the time Smith ended up back at the Chelsea, in 1990, he was living on food stamps and Social Security and a yearly donation from Jerry Garcia, who had publicly declared the *Anthology* the primary source of his understanding of the blues (the Grateful Dead frequently performed songs from the collection). One day, according to Ginsberg, Smith said, "I am dying," threw up blood, and fell over. His body was taken to the morgue at St. Vincent's, where Ginsberg later "pulled him out of the wall on this giant drawer. His face was somewhat twisted up, there was a little blood on his whitish beard. So I sat and did the traditional Tibetan liturgy, refuge liturgy, and then spent an hour meditating."

Like James McKune's ill-fated 78s, no one knows exactly what happened to Harry Smith's record collection. At some point Smith donated a good portion of it to the New York Public Library, where it was eventually integrated into the general collection. Before its absorption, it was cataloged and stealthily taped by the musicians and folklorists Ralph Rinzler and Mike Seeger. In *Music from the True Vine*, his biography of Seeger, Bill Malone describes how, in 1956, Rinzler and Seeger taped "hundreds of 78 rpm records from Harry Smith's unrecorded collection . . . Working as volunteers, Ralph cataloged over 1,000 records on three-by-five cards while Mike recorded his favorites on his reel-to-reel recording machine. When told to cease his recording, Mike then smuggled out scores of records in a suitcase—including many highly choice items from the Columbia and RCA Victor catalogs—which he then taped at Ralph's home in Passaic [New Jersey]." In a 2007 interview with Ray Allen, Seeger recalled their caper: "That evening we went out with my tape recorder and the box [of records]. So the guard at the door said, 'Oh, I want to look at the box.' So Ralph went into kind of like a frenzied dance, looking for a card or something to show him. So he got the guard, who was like this 60-year-old, like a cop doing his retirement, so flustered and confused, and I just walked out with the box." The pilfered recordings were dutifully returned the next day, but their bootlegged tapes were passed around folk circles for years like a talisman, or a secret.

Moe Asch eventually bought or otherwise obtained whatever records Smith didn't give to the library. They were similarly assimilated into the Folkways archive and became the property of the Smithsonian in 1986, after Asch died and his family coordinated the institution's acquisition of the label (the Smithsonian agreed to keep all 2,168 Folkways titles, including the *Anthology*, in print indefinitely). According to Folkways archivist Jeff Place, they still have "a few thousand" of Smith's records "mixed in with the rest of the 78 library," but when they began

work on the reissue in the late 1990s, they could only locate one of the 78s—Bill and Belle Reed's "Old Lady and the Devil"—that Smith had used to source the *Anthology*. "We had to go find the rest," Place said, which meant knocking on collectors' doors (records were borrowed from Joe Bussard, Dick Spottswood, Don Kent, and Dave Freeman) or, in some cases, reusing the original master tapes Asch and Smith made of the *Anthology* prior to its release.

Although that seems pat enough—Smith's collection was broken up and deserialized, sure, but it was relocated to two relatively safe places—the story of what actually happened to his 78s still gets muttered between collectors as a warning, an illuminating parable with a worrying end. Chris King was the first to tell it to me. "By the time [Smith] had basically exhausted his mental faculties or his ability to manage his collection, he had amassed over thirteen thousand 78s, which would be a lot of hillbilly, a lot of blues, and a lot of ethnic music," King explained. At some point, well after Smith had submitted the bulk of his records to the library for safekeeping, Richard Nevins had received a call to purchase a few Fiddlin' John Carson records plucked directly from Smith's collection and marked as such. But how had they become separated from everything else? King heard that the library had junked most of Smith's donation. "Deacquisitioned. It was all put in a Dumpster and destroyed." He shrugged. "So basically thirteen thousand 78s and a man's life—just snuffed away, just like that, in a Dumpster."

When I e-mailed Nevins to see what he knew, he was more optimistic about the collection's fate: "As far as I know, the collection never left the NY library and should still be there—but it was at their Lincoln Center musical branch. I have about four or five 12″ 78s from Harry's collection that I got from [the collector] Eugene Earle—don't know why they were separated. The bottom line, though, is who cares where the collection is at—there's little or anything in it that doesn't reside in many other collections. It was Harry's insight and good taste as an LP compiler that was special, not his actual collection."

Nevins was right, of course, but I was still curious. I figured there was no way anyone could know exactly which records Smith had amassed over all that time, especially if his collection was as monstrous and diverse as many people claimed it was. It seemed plausible that, given Smith's pedigree as a listener, his collection could have contained any number of unheralded masterpieces. My nosiness manifested as a flurry of correspondence: first, I wrote to the folklorist and filmmaker John Cohen to see if he had a list of the records Seeger and Rinzler had recorded and cataloged (I knew he still owned a copy of the reel-to-reel tapes they'd made), so I could at least see if the library had copies of those songs. I sent a similar e-mail to Steve Weiss at the Southern Folklife Collection, which acquired Mike Seeger's papers in 1991 (Seeger died in Lexington, Virginia, in 2009, at age seventy-six), and another to Place at the Folkways office, which holds Rinzler's (Rinzler died in Washington, DC, in 1994, a few days shy of his sixtieth birthday). Although neither collection had been cataloged for research yet, Weiss and Place both told me I was welcome to sort through their physical archives—to look for a list, for a rogue stack of yellowing index cards, for a record—if I thought it might help. I did: I wanted, badly, to know what Seeger and Rinzler knew, to hear what they'd heard. Seeger's widow, Alexia Smith, told me the pair had even considered putting together a companion to the *Anthology* based on the rest of Smith's collection. "Near the end of Ralph's life, he and Mike made a selection of cuts from these tapes—songs and tunes not included in Smith's *Anthology*—for a CD, which never got made," she wrote. "I'm aghast to think Harry Smith's record collection may have been 'integrated' or sold."

I also contacted my source at the New York Public Library, a publicist named Jonathan Pace whom I'd worked with on a few library-related stories for the *New York Times*. Pace referred me to Jonathan Hiam, curator of the American Music Collection at the Library of the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, who offered to give me a private tour of the recordings archive. Within minutes of receiving his e-mail, I

began imagining the grand moral dilemma I'd face when, alone in some unswept corner—having descended an obscured, rickety staircase to an unmarked catacomb deep below Sixty-Fifth Street, insulated from the day tourists thronging Damrosch Park and lit by the orange flush of a single Edison bulb—I discovered a stack of unheard Smith-owned 78s in a crumbling cardboard box. Would I stuff them into my backpack and climb out the bathroom window? It would be a noble reclamation. Possibly even heroic.

I also sent a note to John Mhiripiri, the director of the Anthology Film Archives; I knew they had ended up with a rogue box of Smith's paper airplanes, and I reasoned there might be some other pieces there, too. "Anthology has been storing the bulk of Harry Smith's collections since his materials were packed, labeled, etc., following his death in 1991. This includes one box of his paper airplane collection (in addition to the many books, records, Ukrainian Easter eggs, string figures, etc)," Mhiripiri replied. "The collections are mostly in off-site storage, however I am open to making the airplanes available for you to view, provided that Rani [Singh] agrees, there is no super-urgent deadline, and that it could be done within a specific timeframe, ideally not exceeding an hour." I accepted his conditions and forwarded consent from Singh. Mhiripiri told me to call him again in two weeks.

I had a research stake in untangling Smith's material legacy, but I was also becoming dangerously interested in just getting my hands on some of his stuff, which had started to seem like the most obvious way to discern any useful information about his life and work. Besides, it irked me the way Smith's records were strewn about, lodged in random, private enclaves, estranged. I saw myself battling back a classic collector urge: the desire to gather and serialize. To position everything in relation to everything else. To slot like among like. To write a story.

I met Jonathan Hiam at the security desk of the performing arts library on an especially glaring Monday morning. He led me downstairs to the

archive. The New York Public Library's record collection is not, it turns out, stored in a damp, underground tomb, but is organized by label on big, white rolling shelves in a fluorescent-lit and well-ventilated basement. While we wandered through the collection, I resisted the urge to throw my jacket on the ground and start pulling 78s from the shelves, chucking their paper sleeves into the air, like a chimpanzee devouring a pile of ripe bananas. I wanted to hear everything, immediately.

Hiam told me he'd been looking into the acquisition of Smith's collection, but that the library's early donation records had been inconsistently kept. Now the process is streamlined and well documented, but it wasn't always: records came in and they were put on the shelf. Maybe a carbon copy of an acceptance note was slotted into a folder somewhere, maybe not. For some reason, Hiam said, there was virtually no information about music donated between 1958 and 1968. Smith's 78s may or may not have been marked with his initials. The library likely sent Smith a letter of receipt, and someone probably filed a copy of it somewhere (which would provide at least a date and the size of the donation; Hiam thought it was unlikely it would be itemized), but finding it would take some time. He promised me he'd try.

The library's several hundred thousand 78s aren't technically in circulation—you can't check one out and tote it home—but patrons can request to hear whatever they want while they're in the building. The retrieval process is delightfully weird, and after I'd browsed the contents of the archive with Hiam, I was keyed up to try it. Per Hiam's instructions, I located the lone microfiche machine on the second floor, which is positioned behind the reference librarian's desk and requires the rather brazen unhooking of a temporary railing to access. There, I thumbed through a Rolodex, compiled in 1985, of purple microfiche negatives listing the library's archived records ("You might be one of three women who have sat here," Hiam snickered after he spotted me settling in). I picked a random track from the *Anthology*—Chubby Parker's "King Kong Kitchie Kitchie Ki-Me-O," a whistle-heavy novelty song from 1928—found the appropriate slide (they're organized

alphabetically by performer), and slid it into the base of the Micron 780A (a gray, boxy machine that incites brief, Proustian flashbacks to 1989). After wiggling the reader around for a bit, I found an entry for the record, complete with matrix and serial numbers. I wondered, immediately, if this was Smith's copy—the ur-copy, as it were, maybe even with a tiny "H.E.S." carved into the label!—and eagerly filled out a paper slip, pressing hard enough to ensure the carbon copy was legible. I rode the elevator back up to the third floor and tentatively handed it to the clerk at the A/V playback desk. He told me to take a seat. "This might take a while," he warned.

"Like ten minutes?" I ventured.

"Maybe more than ten minutes."

Once the slip is submitted, a call is placed to a librarian in the basement, who rises from his or her desk and starts scouring the shelves. Because the microfiche hasn't been updated since 1985, and because these records are so infrequently accessed (some have likely remained untouched since their acquisition), this process can be vexing. Records aren't always where they're supposed to be. When the requested 78 is finally located, it's carried to a dark, studio-like room where an audio engineer places it on a turntable, makes any necessary adjustments (changing the speed, weighting the tone arm, equalizing the playback), and pipes it upstairs to the waiting patron, who sits in an ergonomic office chair and listens on a cushy pair of studio headphones.

I waited a while, fiddling with the buttons of my coat. I watched a boneless old man in an oversize blazer repeatedly fall asleep and startle awake: tipping to the right, popping back up, drooping left, up. Every few minutes, the A/V clerk trudged over and told me they were working on it. Hiam appeared, smiled, and apologized. After forty-five minutes, I started to feel a little guilty. I had a perfectly playable CD of "King Kong Kitchie Kitchie Ki-Me-O" at home. I also had an MP3 of the song on the iPhone shoved in the back pocket of my jeans. I owned two physical copies of the *Anthology*. Besides, this particular 78 might not actually be Smith's, and even if it were, I wouldn't be able to touch it,

and besides, what exactly did I think I was going to learn by listening to it this way? I told the A/V clerk that it was okay, I'd come back another time. "We have to find it anyway," he said.

"I know," I answered.

I took the elevator back down to Lincoln Center. A guard searched my bag on the way out. All he uncovered was a half-eaten granola bar.

I realized fairly quickly that flying south to claw around for Ralph Rinzler's index cards and Mike Seeger's bootleg tapes was a useless errand. I told a lot of people not to worry about it, and nearly all of them appeared relieved. I no longer knew why I was so preoccupied with gathering or in any other way quantifying Harry Smith's 78s—what I thought they could tell me about music or art or humankind, how I thought they might augment or guide my own experience of collecting.

My prying did yield one interesting footnote. The New York Public Library presently holds an uncataloged copy of the Cincinnati Jug Band's "Newport Blues," an instrumental cut recorded for Paramount in 1929 and included on the second disc of the *Anthology*. I only learned of its existence after spotting it in a display case at an NYPL event, and gasping. Hiam helped me arrange to have an archival transfer of the record sent to Chris King, who had previously suggested that he could listen to a good transfer, compare it to his original first-pressing LPs of the *Anthology*, and tell me if the NYPL's copy was, in fact, the source copy—if it had "Smith's DNA on it," as he put it. A few days after he received the CD from the library, King sent me a note. "I'm very certain that the copy of 'Newport Blues' (PMT-12743/21100-2) that was used on Smith's collection (from the original first pressing of the LP set, Vol. 2 Social Music, Dances No. 2, Band 40) is the same copy that is held in the NYPL," he wrote. "The main evidence is that on the CD transfer, there is a rather predictable non-musical artifact found at thirty-five seconds, forty-one seconds, forty-two seconds, and forty-three seconds that corresponds identically with a more muted non-musical artifact

found at the same time spreads on Smith's track. This non-musical artifact is above the frequency range of the normal ambient surface noise that an N-Paramount of this time period would have. I think it must be a pressing bubble or other defect in the shellac pressing, possibly caused by the use of ground up chairs or bovine bones, maybe both."

A few weeks later, on a trip through Virginia, I stopped by King's studio to hear the comparison for myself. He made a braised pork shoulder in veal sauce, and after supper we carried cups of red wine into his music room. He played me the CD transfer; I noted its particular crackles. He played me the LP; I noted its particular crackles. I looked up and nodded. As far as I could tell, King's assessment was sound. I knew, at least, where one of Smith's records was.

I still can't quite explain why the *Anthology* has endured in the way it has, why it matters so much to people, why it matters so much to me. New musicians still routinely find their way to it; in the last decade, I've interviewed scads of emerging bands, folksy and not, who vehemently cite it as an influence, to the point where I'm suspicious of their intentions and nervous about the *Anthology*'s sudden muscle, its ability to indicate a certain kind of cool. Between 1999 and 2001, Hal Willner, working with the gloomy Australian rock musician Nick Cave, staged a series of tribute concerts to Smith and the *Anthology* in London, New York, and Los Angeles. A slew of contemporary artists—Steve Earle, Wilco, Beck, Sonic Youth, Lou Reed, Van Dyke Parks, Elvis Costello, Philip Glass, and plenty more—signed on to pay homage to Smith's work. The results were collected as *The Harry Smith Project: The Anthology of American Folk Music Revisited*, a two-CD, two-DVD boxed set that's a perfectly passable tribute, if low on surprises.

When I asked her about the *Anthology*'s continued vigor, Singh told me flatly that she thought it was magic. "He was a magician, he was interested in magic," she said. "As you said before, [it's in] the juxtaposition of songs—one song next to another, they rub up next to each other and they create this frisson that's almost a third thing. You know you're in the company of really true, good art when there's just something else that's there. There's this spark that you remember afterwards that's unexplainable in a way. And the *Anthology* is that for me and so many people. It's so many undiscovered worlds," she continued. "And it's the weirdest thing, every time you listen to it—and I've listened to it hundreds and hundreds of times—you think, Wait, was that song there before? Were they next to one another? How could that be?"

Singh believes Smith's vision—his philosophy, his narrative, his fingerprints—was paramount to the set's survival. "Anybody can make a mix tape, for God's sake," she snorted. "Everybody does. Every old boyfriend makes a mix tape and thinks it's a perfect expression of their love."

For years, rumors circulated that, following Smith's cremation, a handful of his acolytes blended his ashes with wine and chugged him down. Even if this is untrue—and his longtime companion and so-called spiritual wife, Rosebud Feliu Pettet, told me it was nonsense—I can still understand the desire to internalize a guy who believed so deeply in internalization. The *Anthology* works best when you consume it whole. Marcus called it a lingua franca—a password that grants access to a mystical folk brotherhood, a shibboleth—but I like to think of it as more personal and self-actualizing, like the EAT ME cake in *Alice in Wonderland*.

Smith received a Chairman's Merit Award at the Grammys in 1991, just nine months before he died. He was honored for his work on the *Anthology* and "his ongoing insight into the relationship between artistry and society, his deep commitment to presenting folk music as a vehicle for social change." It took two adult men to help Smith onstage to accept his certificate. At one point his foot swung for a stair and missed, like a dog's leg thrashing at some phantom, unreachable itch.

"I have arthritis, so I had to have this young man help me up here," he said when he arrived at the podium. He smiled, happy and calm in a tiny tuxedo, no tie. His long white hair was pulled into a ponytail. "I'm glad to say that my dreams came true," he declared.

"I saw America changed through music."