



Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music: America changed through music

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Released in 1952, *The Anthology of American Folk Music* was the singular vision of the enigmatic artist, musicologist, and collector Harry Smith (1923–1991). A collection of eighty-four commercial recordings of American vernacular and folk music originally issued between 1927 and 1932, the *Anthology* featured an eclectic and idiosyncratic mixture of blues and hillbilly songs, ballads old and new, dance music, gospel, and numerous other performances less easy to classify.

Where previous collections of folk music, both printed and recorded, had privileged field recordings and oral transmission, Smith purposefully shaped his collection from previously released commercial records, pointedly blurring established racial boundaries in his selection and organisation of performances. Indeed, more than just a ground-breaking collection of old recordings, the *Anthology* was itself a kind of performance on the part of its creator.

Over the six decades of its existence, however, it has continued to exert considerable influence on generations of musicians, artists, and writers. It has been credited with inspiring the North American folk revival—"The *Anthology* was our bible", asserted Dave Van Ronk in 1991, "We all knew every word of every song on it"—and with profoundly influencing Bob Dylan. After its 1997 release on CD by Smithsonian Folkways, it came to be closely associated with the so-called Americana and Alt-Country movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Following its sixtieth birthday, and now available as a digital download and rereleased on vinyl, it is once again a prominent icon in numerous musical currents and popular culture more generally.

This is the first book devoted to such a vital piece of the large and complex story of American music and its enduring value in American life. Reflecting the intrinsic interdisciplinarity of Smith's original project, this collection contains a variety of new perspectives on all aspects of the *Anthology*.

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