

FOLKWAYS RECORDS: RIGHT NOW IS THE PAST – AND THE FUTURE

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Folkways Records was founded by Moses “Moe” Asch (b. Warsaw, 1905 – d. New York, 1986; son of famed Polish-Jewish writer Sholem Asch) in New York in 1948, and he ran the record label until his death, issuing an incredible 2,168 titles – an average of *more than one new title every week for 36 years*.¹ It was not his first phonograph record company. Moe Asch had a degree in radio electronics from Germany, where he studied in the 1920s, later moving to New York permanently, where he worked under the legendary electronics inventor Lee de Forest and then for RCA records, and afterwards started his own firm, Radio Laboratories, in the 1930s (Olmstead 1999: 40).²

His first record company, Asch Records, was founded in 1940 and lasted until 1948, when it went bankrupt.³ Asch Records was eclectic; e.g., it was the only source of Yiddish recordings in the USA during World War 2, as well as the sole US distributor

1. The breadth and depth of this output could not possibly be covered in anything less than a massive, book-length monograph. I will refer to it only generally.
2. Olmstead’s doctoral dissertation *‘We Shall Overcome’: Economic Stress, Articulation and the Life of Folkways Records and Service Corp., 1948–1969* is the primary source on the history of Folkways Records, and it forms the basis of his book *Folkways Records: Moses Asch and His Encyclopedia of Sound* (Routledge, 2013). As his dissertation supervisor was Moe Asch’s son Michael, the information can be considered reliable, though overwhelmingly positive. I personally would like to know what artists like Woody Guthrie thought of their music being repackaged and sold by Asch repeatedly, over decades, and whether they continued to receive royalties; and if so, at what rates. The dissertation does state that Asch supported the Seeger family, including concert promotion, for many years (p. 105–106). Yet Olmstead quotes Pete Seeger, who asked Asch if it were true that he paid other artists a flat 100-dollar fee to use their work in perpetuity, which Asch admitted was mostly true – for on the other hand, whatever profits Asch made went back into the company, to produce and distribute artists (and genres) who were not and never would be “bestsellers”, but who probably would never have had their work produced and distributed – not just nationally, but internationally – without Asch (p. 181).
3. The bankruptcy primarily had to do with DISC issuing a Nat King Cole 1946 Christmas album, only to suffer a post-war lack of shellac, which meant the records did not get

of recordings from the Soviet Union (an important ally) during the war. Asch also founded DISC Company of America in 1945, another precursor to Folkways.

The three are intertwined because Asch was the sole owner of all three, and he also kept the physical master recordings (and the rights, in the vast majority of cases) to reproduce them. However, it is Folkways Records which became the legendary source of folk/blues/world music from its inception until the present day. I can think of no American folk/blues/world music fan or musician who does not own a Folkways recording – and if they don't now, they surely will. As recognition of his accomplishments, Moe Asch was elected posthumously to the Blues Hall of Fame in 2019.

Asch was not only technically-savvy, but he was also innovative: starting with DISC and continuing with Folkways, he was quick to use the new LP format, his was one of the first record companies to use cover art, and one of the first to produce liner notes for its records, providing scholarly information and background (what today we might call ethnomusicology) to those who bought the records (Olmstead 1999: 53).⁴

He also had good (and rather omnivorous) taste, which he dated to picking up a copy of John A. Lomax's book *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1922) in a West Bank bookstall in Paris in 1923 (Olmstead 1999: 40). Asch had an appreciation for country, jazz, blues, calypso, folk, "primitive" (mostly what we would now call "world music"), spoken word, soundscapes, educational discs, etc. – even rock (Folkways released *The Fugs*). His recordings of artists are now part of the Great American Songbook – classics by the likes of Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, and Pete Seeger.⁵ And he also recorded oddities, e.g. *Snoopycat – The Adventures of Marian*

to shops until January 1947 (Olmstead 1999: 64); and finally with Asch's "Jazz at the Philharmonic" series, also likely due to the high fee Cole asked for (\$10,000) – and got (Olmstead 1999: 57). These were lessons not lost on Asch: 1) Keep to small, safe production runs; and 2) Keep with small, "hungry" artists.

4. All the liner notes have been archived by Smithsonian Folkways and are available for free download (see Sources): an astounding archive for musicologists, musicians, and fans.
5. Cf. for example the Wikipedia entry on Woody Guthrie's Asch recordings (recorded 1944–49): <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Asch_Recordings>.

Anderson's Cat Snoopy by the opera great (Folkways FC7770, 1963); and Bob Dylan as his blues persona “Blind Boy Grunt” in the 1960s, although the sessions could not be released due to Dylan’s contract with Columbia Records (Olmstead 1999: 85), just to name two.

Asch’s sales techniques were also innovative, focussing on schools and small record shops, as well as mail order. He kept his business small: just himself, a full-time secretary, an outside accountant, and outside salesmen.⁶

His insistence that no Folkways record ever went out of print was not only unique, but unprecedented, and impossible to match. He was able to do this by pressing records in small batches, with small companies. And his philosophy behind Folkways remains in place to this day: you can order a copy of any Folkways record ever made – though now mainly in digital form. In this respect, Folkways’ output is something like a hologram, unchanging and intact, with surprising depth. You can go back into the past, right now, and sample what other artists heard in their day to find out what influenced them: for example, where did the 1950s Liverpool skiffle band The Quarrymen stumble upon “skiffle” music? From Folkways FA2610: *American Skiffle Bands* (1957). You can download that same album yourself today and imagine you are teenage George Harrison, and how that might have helped make you into a future Beatle.

It could be argued that had it not been for Moe Asch and Folkways, there would have been no “folk revival” in the USA or in the UK, as Folkways was the only place for contemporary folk and blues performers such as Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly to initially get recorded and released, and also the place for significant re-issues of “lost” recordings – most famously Harry Smith’s monumental, seminal *Anthology of American Folk Music* (FP 251, 252, 253; 1952): “[The] Anthology was our bible... We all knew every word of every song on it, including the ones we hated,” said folksinger Dave Van Ronk.⁷

6. Olmstead (1999: 102) states that hard-working and shrewd sales representative Larry Sockell was crucial to Folkways’ success.

7. See *Smithsonian* <<https://folkways.si.edu/anthology-of-american-folk-music/african-american-music-blues-old-time/music/album/smithsonian>>

It was, to all intents and purposes, what we now would call a “bootleg”, as Asch did not own the rights to any of the recordings on Smith’s *Anthology*; nevertheless, he had contacts with record companies and insider knowledge that the record companies who recorded the obscure 78 RPM discs in Smith’s selection probably no longer had the masters. So Folkways “lo-fi” version could not be bettered in terms of quality, and would barely register on the big companies’ radar: it was not a bestseller on its first release.⁸ And yet, “Wherever I go, the first thing they ask me, is [...] ‘Is the Anthology of American Folk Music still in print?’ Yes!!” (Asch 1961; quoted in Smithsonian Folkways 1997: unpaginated).

Asch was a visionary, but his relationship to the artists he recorded and published is a complicated one. His first record company went bankrupt on gambles to make a lot of money (see fn 3), so he decided to keep his business expenses as low as possible – including low or non-payment of royalties (see fn 2) and holding on to the master recordings. This is usually considered the practice of the worst thieves in the music business – it’s enough to vex billionaires such as Paul McCartney and Taylor Swift; but it also cheated artists living hand-to-mouth.

To avoid taxes, Asch marketed his records as “educational” recordings – selling them to schools and museums directly, and at educational conferences – which in a sense they were; but most importantly, educational materials are exempt from excise and warehousing taxes. This is what allowed Folkways to keep their records in stock, for decades at a time.

It is complicated. Folkways records certainly were educational – many were produced by educators and experts in their field. In addition to obviously educational releases such as *Speech after the Removal of the Larynx* (FX 6134, 1964), there are releases such as *Folk Songs of Maine* (FH 5323, 1959) by Edward “Sandy”

8. Rights were negotiated only after Asch’s death by the Smithsonian Institution, which then registered “Anthology of American Music” as a trademark (!). Cf. the entry at Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthology_of_American_Folk_Music> [accessed 10. 7. 2023]. Amazingly, Olmstead does not mention it – one of the landmarks in the history of American folk music – in his dissertation on Folkways at all (!).



Ives.⁹ The album is the result of the songs Ives collected in Maine (my home state) in the 1950s, most of them logging songs and sea shanties one hundred years older or more, then pieced together and recorded by Sandy himself, singing and accompanying himself on guitar. He also wrote the expert liner notes. It was an album that Sandy Ives paid for out of his own pocket, for fifty dollars. But rather than having been taken advantage of, he considered it the best fifty dollars he ever spent. It made his reputation: he went on to found the Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History at the University of Maine. The album preserved for posterity a group of songs about ways of life which have vanished. It defines Maine culturally. And any person or school or museum who was interested could buy it, at a low price, forever.

These are songs as social capital, in the sense that Jiří Plocek (2022: 266–277) describes. And I would argue recordings of human work in general – as Folkways also produced and distributed spoken word and instructional recordings – are social capital. The situation with Asch was very complex, as he was not a socialist in the sense of sociocultural capital rightly belonging to the state. For example, he was furious that the new state of Israel declared Jewish songs its

9. Sandy Ives was a mentor of mine, and my former boss at the Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, in Orono, USA. There is a direct line (a folk way?) which runs from Moe Asch to Sandy Ives, through me, to Náměšť nad Oslavou.

property (Olmstead 1999: 153). Nevertheless, Folkways as a body of work had (and has) tremendous social capital, as a historical repository of work, as a source of inspiration to musicians, as a source of pleasure to listeners; and in a twist of historical fate, after Asch's death it was bought and taken over by the Smithsonian Institution, the national museum of the USA.

In Tony Olmstead's opinion, Folkways operated as a "value converter" for this social capital (Olmstead 1999: 181). Asch was not greedy, paying his own salary last, after paying the bills and employees (ibid: 187); he was a true believer in Folkway's mission. Olmstead also discusses Folkways as a "spatial translator" (ibid: 181–182) – it imported world music to the USA, and it exported American music to the world, with distributors in the UK and Europe. As Rafael José de Menezes Bastos has put it, "Asch's career [...] culminated in his probable standing as the most important individual cultural broker of traditional music in the world" (Menezes Bastos 2007: 86). One could make a very good argument that the "folk revival" of the 1950s and 1960s in the USA and UK would not have happened without Folkways.

In 1987, the year after Asch's death, the Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways: as mentioned, all its 2,168 titles remain "in print", available for download. (It is not the only such label Smithsonian Folkways has acquired – e.g. Monitor Records, another New York record label, founded in 1956, which specialised in music from countries behind the Iron Curtain – including Czechoslovakia.)

Smithsonian Folkways' mission is not only about preserving the past, but definitely about making it "new": the label continues to be a major force on the folk music scene, releasing albums by cutting-edge folk musicians of today, such as Jake Blount. (And it pays them royalties!).

Jake Blount (b. 1995) is a young Black American multi-instrumental genre-queer musician, whose album *The New Faith* (SFW40247, 2022) "tells an Afrofuturist story set in a far-future world devastated by climate change"¹⁰ where the survivors meet

10. See Smithsonian <<https://folkways.si.edu/jake-blount/the-new-faith>> [accessed 10. 7. 2023].



and sing spirituals – standards – with traditional instruments, but in a futuristic soundscape. Blount could probably find a more “commercial” record label, but he records there due to the past tradition – for example, Asch released Josh White’s albums of spirituals, preserving the spiritual tradition – and due to the future – like White’s, Blount’s recordings will be secure, available as long as the Smithsonian is here. His “post-modern” spirituals are further proof that folk music continues to matter to people: it has never been “retro”, it still has meaning and import.

Let us close with Moe’s own words:

As Director, I have tried to create an atmosphere where all recordings are treated equally regardless of the sales statistics. My obligation is to see that Folkways remains a depository of the sounds and music of the world and that these remain available to all. The real owners of Folkways Records are the people that perform and create what we have recorded and not the people that issue and sell the product. The obligation of the company is to maintain the office, the warehouse, the billing and collection of funds, to pay the rent and telephone, etc. Folkways succeeds when it becomes the invisible conduit from the world to the ears of human beings.

Moses Asch, “Folkways Records
– A Declaration of Purpose” (1980s)¹¹

11. Excerpt, qtd in Olmstead, p. i.

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Summary

Folkways Records was founded by Moses Asch in New York in 1948, and he ran the record label and music publishing house until his death, issuing an incredible 2,168 titles – more than one a month, for 36 years. It could be argued that had it not been for Asch and Folkways, there would have been no “folk revival” in the USA or UK, as Folkways was the only place for “unknown” contemporary performers such as Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly, and the place for significant re-issues of “lost” recordings – like Harry Smith’s seminal *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952), for which Folkways did not have the rights. Folkways was also a source for world music. The Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways in 1987: all 2,168 titles remain “in print”, available for download. The past can still be accessed in its entirety, like a hologram. Smithsonian Folkways’ mission is not only about preserving the past, but about making it “new”: the label continues to be a major force, releasing albums by “cutting-edge” folk musicians of today – like Jake Blount, whose album *The New Faith* (2022) “tells an Afrofuturist story set in a far-future world devastated by climate change” where the survivors meet and sing spirituals – standards – with traditional instruments, but in a futuristic soundscape. Folk music has never been “retro”.

Key words: Moe Asch; Folkways; Smithsonian Folkways; Anthology of American Folk Music; social capital; Jake Blount