

## **Georgia Stomps, Atlanta Struts and Imperium Falls: Harry Smith Anthology Remixed**

When Harry Everett Smith (1923-1991) compiled the first volumes of his Anthology Of American Folk Music back in 1952, he set out to cast a spell over the Americas. "I felt social changes would result from it," he explained. "I'd been reading Plato's Republic. He's jabbering on about music, how you have to be careful about changing the music because it might upset or destroy the government. Everybody gets out of step, you are not to arbitrarily change it because you may undermine the Empire State Building." On February 20, 1991, he received a lifetime achievement award at the Grammys in New York. "I'm glad to say my dreams came true," he said. "I saw America changed through music."

As a practicing occultist (a renowned Kabbalist, a long-term student of Aleister Crowley's Thelemic system and a consecrated bishop of the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica) Smith had a magical way of intuiting obscure relationships between specific recordings of hillbilly holler, gospel reverie and slave-ship blues, dividing his first three volumes into Ballads, Social Music and Songs and alchemically colour-coding them to represent the elements of water, fire and air. The covers were dominated by an etching of "the celestial monochord", a divine instrument tuned by the hand of God, further highlighting the fact that these exactly compiled documents were much more than simply grab-bags of early folk recordings. Given the context, they feel more like elaborately constructed sigils, magical workings wherein all of the constituent parts add up to more than their individual attributes as they conspire to re-energise long-dormant mytho-poetic American forms.

What's particularly startling about hearing the recordings in the context of Smith's pansophic vision is just how avant garde and essentially \*out\* of time they sound. Like another important 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist, American Primitive guitarist John Fahey, Smith built his musical worldview around the more ephemeral, totemic and mythological aspects of the performers' sound, refusing mere displays of generic technique in favour of the kind of inspired, untutored musical devices that would tear tiny holes in the fabric of consensual space-time in order to allow glimpses of the future to break through. As such, the individual performers appear more like intermediaries between parallel natural and supernatural worlds than simply 'entertainers'. The wild, idiosyncratic deliveries that define the greatest performances across the set – all slurs, drones and hypnotics - combine with the decades of ghostly hiss that they remain buried under to effectively synthesise esoteric 'pre-literate' organisational patterns with highly evolved exoteric forms in a way that works to more accurately reflect the labyrinthine historical context and personal content of the songs while simultaneously fostering a profoundly affecting form of cross-cultural synchronism. They sound like they're being broadcast live across time.

That Smith was able to single out these performances as particularly 'magical' vibrations ties up with his parallel work in film, his art, his interest in linguistics and anthropology and his collections of such liminal cultural barometers as

found paper airplanes, Seminole textiles and Ukrainian Easter Eggs (at his death his collection of eggs ran to 30,000). In common with the esoteric organisational logic displayed across the Anthology, Smith's collections feel like attempts to map the flux of ancient-modern consciousness in its most 'ephemeral' manifestations, a mathematics of the soul that would compute synaesthetic correspondences between temporally and geographically isolated outposts of humanity through seeming incalculables like rhythms, arcs, colours, movement, patterns of circle and line, all of which were deep organising factors - the very weights and cogs used to measure and perhaps even generate experience – that remained inaccessible to the conscious mind. In Smith's art and in his archival work he attempted to map the unconscious using its most overlooked regulatory aspects, its rhythms and sounds, its automata. The whole of his life's work seems united by a desire to uncover this Ur-language, this system of signs that would reconcile above and below - microcosm and macrocosm - thereby highlighting the common source and essential inter-relatedness of everything.

There also exists a constant dialectic between synchronicity and forcing the hand of chance in Smith's work, a deep faith in the weight of will and improvisation to spontaneously birth form. Early films were soundtracked by a constantly revolving selection of music, all of which seemed to extemporaneously manifest subtle rhythmic or tonal relationships to the movement and thematic concerns of the visuals, a process that's made particularly overt in Smith's constant reassembling of his films using edits from different pieces in order to suggest new, constantly unfolding readings. Smith also made use of the psychoactive and ceremonial potential of combined and repeated visual and sonic imagery, with an early film like *Message From The Sun* - made in the 1940s using stencils, Vaseline and paint applied directly to 16mm film - a beautiful example of early psychedelic animation and one that has been described as something approaching "a visual music".

Examined from all of these angles, Smith's Anthology presents a host of potential jumping off points for contemporary underground musicians and has consequently taken on totemic significance for players coming out of the whole free folk/New Weird America continuum. In its inspired grouping of marginalised, disenfranchised and otherwise unassimilated voices from the past it projects a collective vision of an alternative America, an imagined nation that flies in the face of the prevailing corporate-Industrial vision of a monocultural New American Century. This was music created by – and for – real people, music that was birthed in the singular circumstances of their life and the experience of their specific communities, well before musical styles were standardised and airbrushed into generic assembly line forms marketed towards the tastes of a phantom average. It was also music that blurred the lines between Western concepts of 'primitive' and 'avant garde', where idiosyncratic phrasing, awkward 'off' rhythms and untutored vocal stylings served to further bolster the personal impact of the music, mixing common folk tongue with wildly experimental stylings.

For anyone growing up in the wake of the CD boom, re-discovering this music gave them a form of permission to express themselves as themselves, to

inherit these primal folk traditions not as some kind of ossified, fully-formed mould in which to pour their soul but as a liberating non-tradition, a still-feral outsider strain that lay stress more on the improvised non-musicianly aspects of the music, an approach that implied a community of individuals playing their own songs in all of their broken-down grace. So performers like C. Spencer Yeh, John Olson, Karen Constance, Heather Leigh, Christina Carter and Marcia Bassett – despite making music that might superficially seem to have little in common with the sonic environs of The Carter Family or Dock Boggs – can be seen to be once more picking up the trails of a continuum that goes right back to the earliest folk forms, a music that treasures improvisation and spontaneity as its key operating principles, one that speaks in alphabets flexible enough to use noise, drones, primitive electronics and homemade instruments in order to further the expressive palette in a way that would more accurately mirror the arc of the individual player's own experience. Through handmade CD-R and cassette releases this community avoids mainstream channels of dissemination, working along principles that more resemble the exchange of folk art than the factory line aesthetics of mainstream music. But most of all this is a music that has repercussions, a music that demands to be lived, that's as serious as your life. A music that would see everyone walking out of step, together.

**David Keenan, Glasgow, April 2006.**