



Joe's Jottings #2: Folkways Records

By Joe "The Songfinder" Hickerson

Hello! Jotting Joe is back again. As promised in the last issue of Local Lore, I aim to give a brief history of Folkways Records and my involvement with it, and to review one of their recent releases. Folkways was founded by Moses Asch (1905-86) in New York City in 1948. Moe Asch, the son of author Sholem Asch, had established himself as an expert in recorded sound engineering by the 1930s. In 1939, he began to issue 78 rpm disc recordings on the Asch label, which included folk performers starting in 1942 (this was shortly after the Library of Congress began to issue selections from its Archive of American Folk Song for public sale in 1941-42). The Asch label lasted until 1945, and was replaced by the Disc label from 1946 to 1947. During this time, a number of his recordings were obtained and issued by Stinson Records in New York City, as part of financial assistance to Moe during these lean years. Moe then started the Folkways label in 1948 which lasted until 1986. Moe issued the sounds of the world, including myriad genres of music, spoken word, nature, and current events, totaling 2,168 LPs in all (all but one of which remained in print over the years).

I became aware of Folkways Records soon when I arrived at Oberlin College in 1953. I was soon ordering their LPs from my friend Stephen Lee Taller, who sold folk music LPs on campus at reduced rates. (At that time, this included all three record companies in the U.S. that specialized in folk music: Folkways, Stinson, and the brand new Elektra.) When Steve graduated in 1955, he kindly passed on to me his folk music functions at Oberlin: the record business, a folk show on WOBC-FM, and organizing the annual Pete Seeger concerts. He took me to the New York City offices of Moe Asch, Bob Harris, and Jac Holzman to facilitate the transition of selling their LPs on campus, and I tried to visit their offices, and subsequent companies, at least twice a year over the next 8 years.

In the summer of 1957, I was part of a group of Oberlin students called The Folksmiths (which also included PFS member Ruth Weiss Bolliger), who toured camps and resorts in the northeast teaching folksongs, dances, and the like, and taking orders for Folkways LPs and other relevant materials. In August we sent a demo tape of four songs to Moe, who agreed to record us at the end of our tour. Toshi and Pete Seeger kindly offered us the use of their barn in Beacon, New York, for two days of organizing and rehearsing for the event. We taped the songs for the LP in New York City on August 17. The LP (Folkways FA-2407, *We've Got Some Singing to Do*) was issued in February 1958. It is still available as a CD from yours truly. (As it turned out, this appears to be the first time "Kum Ba Yah" was issued on a published recording!)

In 1957-63, while pursuing a graduate degree in folklore and ethnomusicology at Indiana University in Bloomington, I continued to sell Folkways and other LPs on campus and expanded to a mailorder service. I also played many of these recordings on my folk show on WFIU-FM. I continued to visit Moe Asch and his able assistant, Marian Distler, during this time. On one such visit, in 1962, I found Moe conversing with Pete Seeger. Pete was urging Moe to issue an LP of 78 rpm recordings made in the 1920s-30s by the pioneer banjoist, Uncle Dave Macon. I volunteered to duplicate a bunch of these in the possession of Bob Hyland of Springfield, Ohio. This resulted in an LP on Moe's subsidiary label, RBF, issued in 1963. This also is still available as a custom CD.

My business relationship with Folkways ended in 1963 when I began working at the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress (LC/FOLK), but my friendship with Moe Asch continued. He once told me that if any of his LPs were not already at LC/FOLK, he would be happy to donate them to the collections. And so he did!

In 1987, the Smithsonian Institution purchased the Folkways enterprise from the Asch family. In 1988 they began the Smithsonian Folkways label to re-issue material from the Folkways catalog, as well as unissued items from the Folkways archive, and newly acquired field and studio recordings. Also, they have been offering custom CD copies of anything in the original Folkways catalog. The label's advisory board is chaired by Moe's son, anthropologist Michael Asch. You can find their website at www.folkways.si.edu

One of the current releases from Smithsonian Folkways is *Classic African American Songsters* (SFW CD 40211, 2014), cocompiled and produced by Barry Lee Pearson and Jeff Place. Pearson is a specialist in African American music at the University of Maryland, and Place is director of the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives at the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (and a former intern of mine at LC/FOLK!). The mastering was done by Pete Reiniger. This CD is the 23rd in their awardwinning "Classic" series, which has previously covered such genres as bluegrass, blues, maritime, mountain, and oldtime music. There are 21 tracks, ranging from recordings originally made in the 1940's through 2008, including five previously unreleased items. Pearson describes the "songster" appellation as "designating travelling African American singers with the ability to change repertoires to suit the tastes of different audiences." In other words, it covers much more than just the blues. Some of the performers may be familiar to you: John Jackson, Brownie McGhee, Lead Belly, Reverend Gary Davis, John Cephas & Phil Wiggins, Mississippi John Hurt, and Big Bill Broonzy. Many of the songs they sing have been in both black and white traditions, and range from anonymous folk origins to popular songs of the past 150 years. The one that intrigues me most at the moment is "Reno Factory" performed by Marvin Foddrell from Patrick County, Virginia. Foddrell's performance is understated and haunting, and the song is akin to "Riley (Raleigh) and Spencer," which I first encountered ca. 1965 as performed by Fields Ward.

The accompanying 40-page booklet contains an excellent introduction by Pearson and Place, and concise annotations to the 21 songs, along with statements by several of the performers. Two annotations especially intrigued me. (1) That for the Reverend Gary Davis's "Candy Man" speaks of Davis's influence on the repertoire of the band, Hot Tuna. This is especially true for the band's guitarist Jorma Kaukonen, who learned from fellow Antioch student, Ian Buchanan, himself a student of "The Rev." (2) The 1943 Nat King Cole song, "Straighten Up and Fly Right," which is performed here by Peg Leg Howell, became widely known to black and white audiences, and led to the name of a small British label, Flyright Records, which issued the Library of Congress Mississippi John Hurt sessions from July 1963 (my first project after arriving at LC/FOLK!) and similar recordings. I once had a telephone conversation with a

woman from Mississippi about these Hurt recordings. I mentioned "Flyright," but was not understood by the caller until I added: "As in 'Straighten Up and Fly Right'."

All-in-all, Classic American American Songsters is an exemplary production, both audially and textually. Not doubt there will be an award or two down the pike for this one. Way to go, Barry, Jeff, and Pete!