

Folkways Records and the Ethics of Collecting: Some Personal Reflections¹

MICHAEL ASCH

Abstract: In this article, anthropologist Michael Asch recounts fascinating histories surrounding the genesis of Folkways Records, focusing on aspects of diversity, selection, and ethics. He illustrates the discussion by invoking pertinent anthropological and folklore paradigms.

Folkways Records and Service Corporation, unarguably the most unique recording company ever to exist, was founded in 1948 by my father, Moses Asch. . In the 38 years of operation, between 1948 and 1986 when my father died, Folkways produced over 2100 albums, an average of more than one per week – a feat accomplished with a labour force that never exceeded a handful of people. Furthermore, he rarely took a record out of print, and then never for commercial reasons.

It was a record catalogue of staggering diversity and eclecticism. To give you a sense of the breadth of this collection, here are just a few of the familiar names found on the label: Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Phil Ochs, Jean Ritchie, Mary Lou Williams, Ella Jenkins, The Carter Family, Lucinda Williams, Janis Ian, Martin Luther King, Bertold Brecht, Margaret Mead, Langston Hughes, W. E. B. DuBois, and Bob Dylan (under the pseudonym Blind Boy Grunt). Significantly, Folkways also included a vast repertoire of lesser-known artists important to such genres as blues, bluegrass, old-time, and country, and contains many of the most iconic songs in the American folk repertoire: Guthrie singing “This Land is Your Land,” Seeger leading “We Shall Overcome,” and Lead Belly’s “Midnight Special.” The Folkways’ corpus also includes instructional, documentary and soundscape recordings ranging from learning folk guitar to self-examination of the breast; recordings of the sounds of birds, frogs, steam engines; sounds of the office and the junkyard;

and speeches, lectures and interviews, ranging from abolitionists such as Sojourner Truth to writers such as Henry Miller.

Folkways represents perhaps the largest catalogue of music from around the world on a single label – Bosnia, Cuba, Iran, Russia, Japan, Mali, and contains about 140 albums of Canadian material of which about 100 were produced by Montreal impresario, the late Sam Gesser (Dalen 2006: 2-3). These albums include the music of First Nations and of settlers from virtually every province and territory as well as children's songs, electronic music, dramas, satire, and poetry (including that of Leonard Cohen). It is an inescapable fact that in every sense, Folkways is a collection – a unique collection – and the life



Figure 1. Album cover, *Healing songs of the North American Indians* (FE 4251, SFQ 04251) is reproduced here courtesy of the Moses and Frances Asch collection (Folkways Records), the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, Smithsonian Collection.

work of a unique person, Moses Asch.

This contribution is an attempt to provide an account of the values – the ethics – that guided the development of this “collection” and the experiences of its founder and director that gave foundation and shape to those ethics. To set the context, I will begin by situating my father’s collection “ethics” in the context of the problematics of collecting, cultural relativism and cultural appropriation as discussed in recent scholarship.

The Problematics of Collecting

The current view of collecting in anthropology is articulated by James Clifford in the following passage from his oft-cited essay, “On Collecting Art and Culture”:

With Franz Boas and the emergence of relativist anthropology an emphasis on placing objects in specific lived contexts was consolidated. The “cultures” thus represented could either be arranged in a modified evolutionary series or dispersed in synchronous “ethnographic presents.” The latter were times neither of antiquity nor of the twentieth century but rather representing the “authentic” context of the collected objects, often just prior to their collection or display. Both collector and salvage ethnographer could claim to be the last to rescue “the real thing.” Authenticity ... is produced by removing objects and customs from their current historical situation – a present-becoming-future. (1988: 228)

The ethic for collecting, Clifford implies, is the preservation of a dying piece of universal history for the benefit of posterity; and the image of the collector is that of the neutral, value-free documenter who searches for the authentic as though it could exist outside of colonialism and capitalism, and thus, in this telling, he is at worst complicit in these practices and at best ignoring the obvious.

It is fair to say that there were many collectors who adhered to this imperious point of view. However, I take issue with Clifford’s application of this characterization to Boas and those in his camp. For them, as I understand it, cultural relativism² was squarely about demonstrating the equal worth of all societies with a particular focus on the disenfranchised and excluded, and with an eye to making clear their status as agents in their destinies. This is less obvious in their ethnographic work. But an exclusive focus on their

academic scholarship ignores the evidence from their more popular writings of their deep engagement with the major political issues of their times. For example, Boas, as is clear in his book, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1938), and other of his popular works, was determined to refute the so-called findings of the superiority of “whites” gleaned from the then respectable pseudo-science called “scientific racism” by demonstrating that African Americans were fully equal in standing to other “races.” Similarly Boas’ student, the anthropologist Paul Radin, was fierce in his determination to make clear that indigenous peoples in North America were fully actualized human beings who have lived in complex societies since before the arrival of Europeans. Thus, in his most popular book, *Primitive Man as Philosopher* (1957), Radin refuted the so-called scientific conclusions advanced by such renowned scholars as Lucien Levy-Bruhl and Emile Durkheim that indigenous peoples were primitives who had yet to create sophisticated ways of life. A third example, of course, is found in the contributions of Margaret Mead, another of Boas’ students, who, as in *Sex and Temperament in Primitive Society*, persistently advanced the position that women in so-called less advanced societies did not need lessons on how to raise children.

Thus, in contrast to Clifford, I do not see the cultural relativists as neutral observers bent on recording the doomed ways of life of presumed losers to the invincible march of progress. Rather, I see them as politically committed to demonstrating through words, pictures and sounds the dignity and equality of standing of all cultures and especially those of the excluded; they intended expressly to repudiate any version of the narrative of Modernity that presumed the contrary.³ In this regard, their adoption of the ethnographic present was not a means to take these peoples outside of history, as Clifford suggests, but rather a technique to challenge any version of history that would portray the ways of Indigenous peoples and others as inauthentic, or relics of our past, or in some other way unworthy.

The frequently reproduced photograph shown on the cover of the Folkways album *Healing Songs of the North American Indians*⁴ evokes another dimension of importance to a discussion of the ethics of collecting: cultural appropriation (Figure 1). The woman in the photograph is the ethnographer and musicologist, Frances Densmore. She is shown seated beside an early recording device into which a Native American in full Plains regalia appears to be singing. It would appear to be a prima facie case of the appropriation of culture from an objectified, agent-less third party. But to conclude this requires us to make certain assumptions about the “Indian.” Who is he? Can we find out something about him or is he someone whose name has been long forgotten, if it were ever recorded? Fortunately, we do know something about him.

The man's name is "Mountain Chief," or Ninastoko. He is a renowned Blackfoot (Peigan) Elder and was their last hereditary leader.⁵ He was born in 1848 on the Old Man River in southern Alberta and died in Montana in 1942. In 1916, the year the photograph was taken, Mountain Chief was in correspondence with the U.S. Government regarding the status of an oil lease on their territories. Prior to that, in his late teens, Mountain Chief led war parties against the Crow and the Kutenai. He was the Chief who signed the Treaties of 1866 and 1895, the latter ceding the area that now comprises Glacier National Park, and met with US presidents McKinley, Taft, Theodore Roosevelt, and Wilson while working as a negotiator for his people. Clearly, this is a person who understood much about the world inhabited by Frances Densmore.

Another important piece of information is that Mountain Chief worked with General Hugh Scott for a number of years to record Plains' Indian sign language. In fact, the photo itself comes from General Scott's collection and is likely of Mountain Chief not singing, but listening to a recording and interpreting in sign language what he is hearing.⁶ This context indicates that Mountain Chief was willing to record aspects of his culture in terms that Western collectors could understand. Whether he was doing so on his own initiative or whether he shared in the motivations of Scott and Densmore or agreed to cooperate for other reasons, we cannot know from this scant evidence. However, the context of his life's work in service to his people gives us a good indication that Mountain Chief was an active agent, someone who would likely see his collaboration with these collectors as part of a project of his own making.

My point is this: The presumption that this image unambiguously captures an act of cultural appropriation can be maintained only so long as we rely solely on the presumed motivation of one active agent, Frances Densmore, to determine the underlying ethic. However, as we learn more about Mountain Chief we realize that, even were Densmore's attitude to be imperious and her objective to appropriate, this is not a complete reading of the encounter; for it emerges that Mountain Chief's participation may well have furthered his own objectives. Certainly the playing field is uneven; there is a power differential between the parties. But does that fact alone make the act apparently captured in this image one of cultural appropriation no more, no less, or does the agency of Mountain Chief mitigate against this conclusion? It seems to me that at the very least the inclusion of information on Mountain Chief requires that our understanding of this encounter become much more nuanced.⁷

My purpose in advancing this illustration is not to argue that cultural appropriation never occurred. We all know that it was and is still too common. But it does suggest that we cannot take for granted that this was the inevitable

consequence of such encounters. I am convinced that this caution must apply particularly in those cases where the collectors saw their work as in solidarity with the goals of those from whom they collected, and who carried with them the ethic of collaboration associated with Boas' version of cultural relativism. That is the context within which I am situating my discussion of Folkways and the ethics of collection, for, if nothing else, my father saw the recordings in his catalogue as the consequence of collaboration between himself and the many artists, collectors, musicians and producers with whom he worked.

The Locus of my father's political and social sensibilities

Family, geography and firsthand involvement with many of the monumental events and significant figures of the twentieth century forged my father's political sensibilities. He grew up in a world of avant-garde artists many of whom were friends and colleagues of his father, the novelist Sholem Asch. His parents' frequent trips abroad left him and his brothers in the care of his maternal aunt, Basha, who was a radical and friends with such notables as Maria Montessori.

As a young man, my father chose to train as a sound engineer in Germany where he took a particular interest in radio. When he returned to New York he became a radio technician. His interest in the phonograph record was stimulated by an opportunity to record singers for WEVD, a radio station in New York and, in his telling, by a prophetic conversation he had with Albert Einstein whom he met when recording an interview with my grandfather for later radio broadcast. My father, then a man in his thirties, asked Einstein for advice on the prospects of becoming a physicist, to which Einstein replied "you are too old." Einstein then advised him to continue what he was doing: document the world through recordings.

My father came to maturity in the period between the two World Wars, and was influenced profoundly by what had happened to "common people" during the Great Depression. From that experience, he drew inspiration from Roosevelt and the New Deal, and in that sense he was a Democrat with a capital D, but no doubt supported the Progressive Party's candidate, Henry Wallace, in 1948. That is, beyond being a New Deal Democrat, Moe was a "progressive," part of a community composed of social democrats, socialists, communists and anarchists who, while certainly in profound disagreement about the precise shape of the future, were all committed to creating a world without hunger, discrimination or exploitation. They were equally united in their condemnation of the economic system that had led to the First World War and the Great Depression, as well as the growth of fascism in Europe and particularly of Nazism

in Germany.

While my father did not broadcast his political location within this community (Goldsmith 1998), he made it clear to me that his principal sympathies lay with the form of anarchism associated with the Wobblies, the International Workers of the World. That is, like them, his vision of the future was:

... plain folk running society for their own benefit – without bosses, without politicians, without a coercive State, Army, Navy Air Force or Marines. But without hatred and suspicion of ‘foreigners,’ or the frequently all-encompassing guilt that because we are rich, someone wants to take our riches away from us. The belief in freedom and internationalism makes the Wobblies just about the most American ideal possible.... (Buhle 2005:2f)

Members of the progressive community included writers, scholars, artists, reformers, revolutionaries, and activists who, like the philosopher John Dewey, were influential at that time. One scholarly center for progressive activities was anthropology and included the aforementioned scholars and collectors, Paul Radin, Margaret Mead, and Franz Boas. Indeed, particularly during the Depression, collecting – especially from the rural south – was as much a political activity as an artistic expression for photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans and writers such as James Agee and John Steinbeck (e.g., Agee 2001).

Another factor that grounded my father’s values was where he lived. Progressive communities existed throughout the world, and among its principal centres were such major American cities as Chicago, San Francisco, and Philadelphia but I think it fair to say that its intellectual center was New York City. This was fueled by two factors. The first was that New York became the home to a very large proportion of intellectuals who fled Germany and other parts of Europe in the years prior to and during the Second World War. By settling in New York, these refugees made it the centre for anti-fascist politics and progressivist ideals.

Claude Lévi-Strauss gives us a sense of this remarkable time and place when, in a passage from his fascinating depiction of the city in his essay, “New York in 1941” (Lévi-Strauss 1985), he tells us that he was friends with such well known refugees as Dada artist Max Ernst, surrealist poet André Breton, and George Duthuit, art critic and son-in-law of Matisse, and rented an apartment in the same Greenwich Village building as another refugee, Claude Shannon, the inventor of the artificial brain. New York was a cosmopolitan centre in a world gone mad. This madness, he says, made it seem that not only people from

around the world, but “examples of the whole of humanity’s artistic legacy were present in New York” (262).

Lévi-Strauss also provides insight into the other fundamental characteristic that made New York a center for progressivism, and that is its particular cultural geography. As he says:

At the intersections of perfectly straight thoroughfares, which might have appeared to be jumbled up in a single geometric anonymity, the ethnic groups making up New York’s population had each chosen a niche: Harlem and Chinatown, of course, but also the Puerto Rican district (developing at that time around West 23rd Street), Little Italy (south of Washington Square), as well as Greek, Czech, German, Scandinavian, Finnish, and other neighborhoods, with their restaurants and their places of worship and entertainment. One changed countries every few blocks. (Lévi-Strauss 259)

Thus, as he saw it, “the social and cultural fabric of New York was riddled with holes. All you had to do was pick one and slip through if, like Alice, you wanted to get to the other side of the looking glass and find a world so enchanting that it seemed unreal” (261).

The final crucial factor in creating the ethic for Folkways was World War II, and particularly how progressives viewed it once the United States entered the War in 1941. As I understand it, while there were many reasons to support the war effort, singular among them was the desire to rid the world of fascism, racism, segregation and exploitation, and thus to create a world of peace, brotherhood, and equality; and all of this to be accomplished through collaboration with those many who, through their victimization by the existing world order, shared in this objective. This sentiment was well expressed in a verse from the song “Passing Through” penned by Richard Blakeslee in 1948 and used extensively in the Henry Wallace campaign:

I was at Franklin Roosevelt’s side
 Just a while before he died.
 He said one world must come out of World War II.
 Yankee, Russian, white or tan
 Lord, a man is just a man,
 We’re all brothers and
 We’re only passing through. (Seeger 1958a: 2)⁸

In short, the values that were to animate Folkways Records at its founding in 1948 derived from the firm belief in the equality of standing, and dignity of all peoples, with a special emphasis on those whom “society” most devalues and oppresses; a belief in a future world without poverty or discrimination; a place of peace and understanding between peoples achieved through working together, collaboratively, in solidarity. These values derived from my father’s lifelong association with progressives, and from the fact that the place in which he lived, New York City, with its juxtaposition of cultures and neighborhoods, exemplified in microcosm the kind of future world that they believed would emerge from the ashes of World War II.⁹

Folkways and the Ethics of Collecting

When my father founded Folkways Records in 1948, it was his third record company. The first was Asch Records founded in the 1930s, on which he released the first recordings of Lead Belly. The second was Disc Records, founded during World War II, on which, among many other important releases, appear the Granz’ *Jazz at the Philharmonic* recordings. While initially a success, Disc went bankrupt in 1947 when, as my father told me, he lost the anticipated Christmas sales due to a snowstorm in mid-December that delayed the release of a Nat King Cole Christmas album until after December 25th. Moe started Folkways with a loan of \$10,000 from his father and the goodwill of his assistant, Marian Distler, who agreed to be the “front” person so that he could get going while still under bankruptcy.

From the earliest days of Folkways, my father sought to put into practice the spirit of collaboration for the production of “progressive” material in support of his values. At the same time, I believe that the Folkways catalogue represents my father’s adaptation to new circumstances that were developing, since from its first days these progressive values were under attack.

In the late forties and throughout the 1950s, the right wing, supported by the U. S. government was relentless and very successful in convincing the American public that the central values of pre- and post-war progressives, as exemplified in the song “Passing Through,” were those espoused by the Soviet Union and, thus, Communist propaganda. The implication was clear: anyone who supported such values was at best anti-American and at worst, a member of the Communist Party or a “fellow-traveler.”

It was the period of the Red Scare. People lost their jobs, their reputations, and even their freedom because they were associated or even presumed to be associated with Communists. The litany of assaults is well known, but

here are a few: The 1949 Peekskill Riot, where progressives who had gathered for a Civil Rights benefit and to hear Paul Robeson sing were attacked by a mob, supported by the police – this in upstate New York, not Alabama; the Hollywood Blacklist; the “loyalty oaths” required of school teachers, civil servants and countless others for employment; and most infamous, the red baiting House Un-American Activities Committee and Senator Joseph McCarthy. The Communist witch hunts instilled justifiable fear (as well as remarkable defiance) among those under attack and penetrated deeply and effectively in both the cultural and academic communities.

The case of the folk group, The Weavers, gives a glimpse of the impact of the Red Scare¹⁰ on progressive recording artists. The group was formed in 1948 through a collaboration of Ronnie Gilbert, Fred Hellerman, Lee Hays, and Pete Seeger. The Weavers’ popularity was such that in August of 1950 their recording of Lead Belly’s “Goodnight Irene” reached number 1 on the Billboard Hit Parade. In the same year, however, the FBI placed them under surveillance. As the entry on Wikipedia continues, “Right-wing and anti-Communist groups protested at their performances and harassed promoters. As a result of the blacklisting, the Weavers lost radio airplay and the group’s popularity diminished rapidly. Decca terminated their recording contract.”¹¹ They disbanded in 1952.

Similarly, progressive academics were viewed with suspicion and felt the chill of the times. The period of the Red Scare, I believe, accounts for the excision of the values espoused by cultural relativism from academic discourse.¹² In short, by the early 1950s, many artists and academics lost hope for a new world based on progressive values. Rather, it was a time of realization that the very attitudes against which many had fought during the Second World were taking firm root in the United States.

Folkways became my father’s response to these new circumstances, for through it he created a place where the equality of standing that lies at the heart of cultural relativism’s political message could live in safety – if not in real life, then at least, symbolically. However, my father did not see the principles of cultural relativism as value neutral. As he said: “I ... came to own several tapes of songs by the Nazi SS troops, but I won’t issue them. I won’t issue propaganda or anything that is used against people.”¹³ In this he was following the sensibilities of the Wobblies as described above as well as advocating a view shared by many of his academic contemporaries in the field of anthropology.¹⁴ And, while the concept “against people” may be problematic as a universal lens¹⁵ with which to pass judgment, there is no question as to its applicability to the genocidal Nazi regime or to the perpetrators of the Red Scare.¹⁶ Thus, Folkways became the home for those who would “stand against”

those who “stand against” people.

This perspective is revealed in the Folkways catalogue in a number of ways. First, by the substantial number of albums with themes devoted to struggles against control by large corporations and/or the state. These run the gamut from union songs (Talking Union), songs of the Spanish Civil War, songs from Attica Prison, interviews with Angela Davis, Berthold Brecht’s testimony at the House Un-American Activities Committee and songs of the Civil Rights movement. Even the *Ballads of the American Revolution*, which might appear at first blush to run counter to this theme, in fact celebrates Americans for “standing against” those who would oppress. Second, there are the “urban” artists and collectors who appear on Folkways in the early years. Among the former are: Will Geer, Oscar Brand, Langston Hughes, Alan Lomax, Earl Robinson, Pete Seeger, and Tom Glazer, all of whom were blacklisted,¹⁷ many for refusing to name names in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee. In this way, Folkways was a place where those who were blacklisted could be heard and continue to be creative and political; a place for those “who stood against people.” Third, there is the name. In calling the company Folkways, a term that connotes recognition of and respect for the diversity of traditions that exist in the world,¹⁸ my father located himself as standing against those who sought to limit what was available in the market place to cultural expressions that conformed to the tastes and values of white, middle-class America as defined by Red Scare ideologues.

Put more broadly, Folkways represented a place where voices, otherwise silenced not only by political considerations but also by an economic system intent on maximizing profits to the exclusion of all else, could be heard. Hence, his proviso that he generally did not take on projects he thought had great commercial potential but gave serious consideration to worthy projects that, nevertheless, promised little commercial success. An album such as *Sounds of the JunkYard* (FW 6143) demonstrates this value.¹⁹

Of course, this implies that my father assumed that those who appeared on the label wanted their voices heard, and understood the economic terms of the association. He assumed that the recordings were not a product of cultural appropriation and were of limited commercial value. When materials were presented by a third party, as for example many of the recordings in the Ethnic Series or from the rural south, my father relied on the collector’s integrity as assurance that those recorded wanted to be heard and understood the limited economic benefits that would accrue to them. In those instances that I know of where this proved not to be the case, he removed the recording from the catalogue.

But how did he survive when other progressives faired so poorly? My

father's explanation was simple – it is the genius of capitalism in a liberal state that, if you do not seek subsidies, but make your living exclusively through entrepreneurial success, the state cannot stop you. Given that he received sufficient income to survive through the sales of records, and given that he was not motivated by the maximization of profits, he could survive. And thus when confronted by an FBI probe, as he told me, he could protest in all honesty that he was merely a business man seeking success in business -and what could be more American than that? Of course it was more complex than this. Factors such as a loyal and enthusiastic customer base and mutually supportive economic relationships with other small-scale businesses played a significant role.²⁰

Conclusions

As Director of Folkways records, my father was, if you will, the ultimate collector. In the following Declaration of Purpose written shortly before he died, he articulated his role and the values that guided him:²¹

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.

I know well that this statement rings true, even with regard to the ownership of the company. My father did not believe in private property. In this regard, he was more aligned with the anarchists than the New Deal Democrats. For example, when a publishing company asked whether it could use the name "Folkways," my father replied in the affirmative saying that "folkways" was only a word in the dictionary – he didn't own it! And on another occasion, he defended himself against legal threats arising from his recording of the national anthem of the United States from a copyrighted radio broadcast with the argument that the anthem, the Marine Band that played it and the airwaves

that carried it belonged to the people of the United States and not a private corporation. His accusers backed down.

He believed that he ought to take home a salary for the work he did, and nothing more; the profits were to enable the further production of materials. That is how he was able to produce so much with so few resources. Indeed, it was not until very late in his life, when his health began to fail, that he wondered how he might live if he couldn't work and first questioned whether he had obtained some credit in the company for the efforts he had put into it. Fortunately for my family's financial survival, my mother did not agree completely with his economic philosophy. Over the years she accumulated some savings that, along with the money he received when the company was sold, would have provided for both of them, had he survived.

On the other hand, his statement of purpose elides a very important matter: His uncritical acceptance of his own role as the hand guiding what would be selected for inclusion in his catalogue. But here, too, he remained remarkably consistent in his ethics and to the tenets of cultural relativism, for he largely relied on the integrity of those he trusted to arbitrate what would appear on the label. Where he departed decisively from this principle was in what would be excluded; here he was hard edged, unforgiving. I think this represents the approach of someone who, having seen the holocaust and the anti-human currents that developed in its aftermath, was determined to ensure that his practiced politics, if nothing else, meant that those who have come under threat of cultural genocide or worse would never have to share the Folkways stage with those who threaten them.

It is in these decisions concerning what to include and exclude from the catalogue that we find the clearest expression of the ethics of collecting represented by and within Folkways Records. 🍀

Notes

1. I would like to thank Margaret Asch, Tony Seeger, Atesh Sonneborn, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. This paper was first presented as a keynote address at the 51st Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music/Société Canadienne pour les traditions musicales. University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta November 2-4 2007. A version of this paper has been previously published in *Canadian Folk Music* (summer 2008, vol.42.2):1-8.

2. Recent research has questioned the conventional description of Boas and his students in the historiography of anthropology as cultural relativists (Saunders 2004). While I agree with this critique, I adhere to this term here because a

detailed discussion on this matter is beyond the scope of this text, and because the critique to which I refer does not apply to the aspects of this approach I discuss in it.

3. In this regard, Lewis says:

It is remarkable that the lifelong vocation of Boas, Benedict, Herskovits, Mead, and so many others, to combat racism and ethnocentrism, once recognized as a central element in American anthropology's legacy, is now either ignored or made to seem ignoble. (Lewis 1998:720)

4. March 1916 photograph of Frances Densmore and Mountain Chief from Harris & Ewing studio Washington D.C., the National Anthropological Archives collection, Smithsonian Institution.

5. <http://www.angelfire.com/ar/waakomimm/mountainchief.html>

6. According to Brown (2003:16), Mountain Chief is listening to a cylinder recorded by Walter McClintock in 1898. According to Smithsonian Archivist Daisy Njoku (2008), "he is not only listening to the recording, he is interpreting it in Plains sign language."

7. For a detailed discussion of complexities in interpreting Frances Densmore's motivations and the consequences of her activities, see Brown (2003:24-27)

8. Words from Seeger (1958b:2).

9. Lévi-Strauss seems aware of this conceptualization of the struggle over the future for he writes:

Naturally, we sensed that all these relics were being assaulted by a mass culture that was about to crush and bury them – a mass culture that, already far advanced in America, would reach Europe a few decades later. This may be the reason so many aspects of life in New York enthralled us: it set before our eyes a list of recipes thanks to which, in a society becoming each day ever more oppressive and inhuman, the people who find it decidedly intolerable can learn the thousand and one tricks offered, for a few brief moments, by the illusion that one has the power to escape. (Lévi-Strauss 1985:267)

However I would say that Lévi-Strauss's belief that escaping the power of modernity is illusionary does not reflect the mood of that time, which, as I grew up within it, projected a sensibility that moving beyond it was a tangible possibility, a moment to work towards. In that regard, I think we have the Lévi-Strauss of 1985 speaking back to the Lévi-Strauss of 1941. But what in my view is profound in his telling is his identification of the sense that ways of life and particularly those of the excluded were under assault, and that New York was seen as the incubator for a way of living that would overcome "a society becoming each day ever more oppressive and inhuman."

10. For more information see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Scare

11. Quote from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Weavers This point is discussed in detail in the 1982 film, *The Weavers: Wasn't That a Time!*, written by Lee Hays, directed by Jim Brown and produced by George Stony and The Weavers manager, Harold Leventhal. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0084894/>

fullcredits#cast.

12. At its height, academics avoided expressing the values of cultural relativism for fear of being fired as happened, for example, to anthropologist Gene Weltfish.

13. I know that the quote comes from an interview with my father. However, I have not been able to find the citation.

14. In 1947, the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association issued a statement opposing the text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (*American Anthropologist* 49: 539-543). As Sally Engle Merry describes it, the statement advocated a position quite similar to my father's:

The statement itself obliquely alluded to this problem by claiming that in states that deny citizens the right of participation in their governments or seek to conquer weaker peoples, underlying cultural values may provide a brake on these activities. This does not resolve the problem of where the boundary should be drawn between tolerance and places where it is necessary to fight intolerance, but it does show that there was a clear recognition among anthropologists in the 1940s that tolerance for cultural difference could not be asserted to the exclusion of all other ethical concerns. The critical point is this: the anthropological position was not the defense of all cultural practices but a more nuanced recognition that tolerance of difference was one of several important ethical considerations, as well as one under siege at that historical moment. Indeed, the statement's cultural relativism is based on an ethical assertion of both freedom and respect for cultural difference. (Merry 2003:57)

15. Merry (2003:58) argues that the belief that cultural relativism is incompatible with the notion of universal human rights "grows out of erroneous ideas about the concept of culture itself. If culture is thought of as a reified thing, as bounded and static, then cultural relativism means defending every practice and every belief at all costs." "But," she continues, "this is not the way contemporary anthropologists think about culture."

16. And, likely from my father's political perspective as expressed in the description of the Wobblies cited in the text, included bosses, politicians, a coercive State, Army, Navy, Air Force or Marines.

17. For further information see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hollywood_blacklist

18. According to the Encarta dictionary, Folkways is defined as: "traditional culture: the traditional customs and way of life pursued by a particular group of people." http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_561531851/folkways.html. The term itself comes from William Graham Sumner's book by the same name. In his preface, Sumner (1907:iii) says: "I have tried to treat all folkways, including those which are most opposite to our own, with truthfulness, but with dignity and due respect to our own conventions."

19. One could safely argue that this album would not have an appeal sufficiently broad to attract most record companies. Yet we must conclude that Moe issued it because he thought that the collector who recorded it had a compelling message to be heard and believed that it would attract an audience of sufficient size to ensure that over time he could recover his costs.

20. Important insights are provided in the late Peter Goldsmith's 1998 book *Making People's Music: Moe Asch and Folkways Records*, and especially in Tony Olmsted's detailed economic analysis of how Folkways survived in his 2003 book *Folkways Records: Moses Asch and his Encyclopedia of Sound*.

21. Quote from: http://www.smithsonianglobalsound.org/archives_15.aspx

References

- Agee, James (photos Walker Evans). 2001 [1941]. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Blakeslee, Richard. 1948. "Passing Through." Lyrics by Blakeslee. Copyright Sing Out Publications. (Copyright information comes from Logsdon [1994:29])
- Boas, Franz. 1938 [1911]. *The Mind of Primitive Man*. New York: Macmillan.
- Brown, Michael. 2003. *Who Owns Native Culture?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Buhle, Paul. 2005. "Introduction." In Buhle, Paul and Nicole Schulman (eds) *Wobblies!: A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World*. London: Verso Press.
- Clifford, James. 1988. "On Collecting Art and Culture." In *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. 215-251. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Dalen, Brenda. 2006. "Introduction" *Canadian Classic Songs* (liner notes). Album #SFW CD 40539. Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.
- Executive Board American Anthropology Association. 1947. "Statement on Human Rights." *American Anthropologist* 47(4 part 1):539-543.
- Goldsmith, Peter. 1998. *Making People's Music*. Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1985. "New York in 1941" in *The View from Afar*. 258-267. New York: Basic Books.
- Lewis, Herbert S. 1998. "The Misrepresentation of Anthropology and Its Consequences." *American Anthropologist* 100(3):716-731
- Logsdon, Guy. 1994. "Introduction." Cisco Houston: the Folkways Years – 1944-1961 SFW 40059. Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.
- Merry, Sally Engle. 2003. "Human Rights Law and the Demonization of Culture (And Anthropology Along the Way)." *PoLAR* 26 (1): 55-76.
- Njoku, Daisy. 2008. Personal Communication. Human Studies Film Archives,

- National Anthropological Archives, Museum Support Center, Smithsonian Institution.
- Olmsted, Tony. 2003. *Folkways Records: Moses Asch and his Encyclopedia of Sound*. New York: Routledge.
- Radin, Paul. 1957 [1927]. *Primitive Man as Philosopher*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Saunders, Barbara. 2004. "Not a Cultural Relativist: The Boasian Legacy and Burden." In Barbara Saunders and Lea Zuyderhoudt (editors) *The Challenges of Native American Studies: Essays in Celebration of the Twenty-Fifth Indian Workshop*. 107-124. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Seeger, Pete. 1958a. "Notes on Background of Songs." *Pete Seeger at Carnegie Hall with Sonny Terry*. FA 2412. New York: Folkways Records and Service Corporation.
- . 1958b. "Liner Notes." *Love songs for Friends and Foes*. FA 2453. New York: Folkways Records and Service Corporation.
- Sumner, William Graham. 1907 (2002). *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc.