nineteen ninety-eight is the 100th anniversary of Paul Robeson’s birth. But have you tried finding a Paul Robeson CD in a record store? I did, and the clerks kept telling me, “We may have something near Sinatra.” They didn’t.

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“The Americans do not care about preserving their culture,” Albert Einstein told Moses Asch more than fifty years ago. “It will be a Polish Jew like yourself who will do it.”

Asch, the immigrant son of novelist Sholem Asch and a lifelong devotee of socialism and multiculturalism, after the former and before the latter was fashionable, founded Folkways Records on May Day, 1948. He had told Einstein he wanted to forge a company that would “describe the human race, the sound it makes, what it creates.” Folkways released 2,168 albums—about one a week—during Asch’s lifetime. Every one was kept in print. Without Moe Asch, Americans might never have heard some of the most daring and powerful songs of Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Pete Seeger, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee and Big Bill Broonzy.

But Asch’s success was the exception that proved the rule. Working out of cramped, chaotic offices on West 46th Street, he seldom made any money and even more seldomly paid any of his artists. Together with the vagrant, drug-addled, bohemian record collector Harry Smith, in 1952 he released the now legendary Anthology of American Folk Music, filled with backwoods bluegrass and country blues. Believing himself to be embarking on a sacred mission (fired by numerous peyote buttons), Smith did not even bother getting permission from the rightful owners of the songs, much less the artists or their estates.

Asch and Smith were obsessed with the political possibilities of cultural syncretism. Harry Smith’s Anthology, which finally won two Grammys last year for its beautifully packaged CD version, included any number of strange factoids about the musicians in question, but never a word about race.

While the Anthology’s sales were small, its influence was enormous. (The New York Times dismissed its eighty-four songs as “flat and undistinguished.” Flat and undistinguished? Look who’s talking.) More than any other single document, Smith’s Anthology helped inspire the folk explosion of the early sixties, which in turn gave rock and roll its social and intellectual edge. When Bob Dylan made history by “going electric” at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, thereby horrifying his audience but redirecting the slow train of American popular culture, the song he chose was “Maggie’s Farm,” itself a homage to the Bently Boys’ “Down on Penny’s Farm,” No. 25 on the Anthology.

Following Asch’s death in 1986 the Folkways catalogue moved to the Smithsonian Institution, where archivist Tony Seeger (Pete’s nephew) oversees all 2,168 records, with more to come. We are now getting new/old releases from Seeger, Guthrie and Leadbelly, as well as the 1957 classic Sounds of North American Frogs (call 800-410-9815 or go to www.si.edu/folkways for a catalogue).

Folkways is the good news. The bad news is that America today provides less and less room for such eccentrics and the profit-shy music they preserve. Recently the same Smithsonian Institution that provided a home to Folkways took the destructive step of shutting down another bastion of cultural preservation: the Smithsonian Collection of Recordings.

Over the years, this tiny office has produced not only the million-selling, five-CD “Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz” but also fantastic compilations of American popular songs, folk music, country music and, most recently, jazz singing. Unlike Harry Smith, they did it all with permission. Robert O’Meally, the Columbia University English professor who oversaw the creation of the jazz singers collection, calls the decision to destroy the division “an abominable mistake” and “a disgrace.” These boxed sets, he points out, “are kinds of traveling museums. We can go to artists and say, ‘We know you have a deal, but this is something different. We are creating a portable museum.’” Michael Lang, who oversees archival re-releases for the jazz label Verve, concurs. “They were a neutral country,” notes Lang. “They were able to go to Sony or Verve and say, ‘We want key tracks.’ It is much tougher for me to give a key Ella track to Sony or for Sony to give us a key Miles track were we to try to do the same thing.”

The Smithsonian made a calculated financial decision. Crappy souvenirs from the museum’s “Star Wars” exhibition sell much better in its gift shop than painstakingly compiled musical histories. Without the Smithsonian, much of the material in question will remain available—dedicated archivists at places like Verve, Blue Note, Impulse!, Columbia Legacy and the wonderfully adventurist Rhino are given some latitude, as Lang puts it, “between capitalistic concerns and our role as the archivists of American culture,” but the balance is by definition a tenuous one. When Rhino released a seven-CD John Coltrane boxed set, it did not expect the set to carry its freight financially, though it did. The record companies’ best intentions, moreover, coupled with the effort of every enterprising university music archivist and anthropologist, cannot replace the cross-cultural connections forged by Smithsonian collections. On The Jazz Singers, O’Meally notes, you can hear Shirley Horn’s voice drawing on Miles Davis’s trumpet, itself influenced by the voice of Billie Holiday, who learned from listening to Lester Young’s sax, who in turn drank at the well of the great Louis Armstrong. No one else but the Smithsonian can put them all together in one musical home.

Wynton Marsalis has just released yet another stunning collection, called The Midnight Blues: Standard Time Vol. 5. It draws on compositions by Rogers, Hart, Berlin, Loesser, the Gershwins and the trumpeter himself. Marsalis did not learn about these composers in the library. Instead, a still-vibrant culture was passed down to him by committed teachers who treasured it.

The Smithsonian has just taken a pickax to a foundation stone of America’s most democratic art form. Call them at (202) 287-3738 and ask—politely—that they reconsider.
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