

SIDEDOOR (S09E08) - RECORDING THE WORLD

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Lizzie: Okay, imagine for a moment a future world. In this version of the future, the Earth's changing climate has caused crop failures. Food shortages and lack of clean water lead to civil unrest then nuclear conflict. Eventually, global civilization collapses.

Jake Blount: *And after the dust settles, people have to migrate either north or south, depending on your hemisphere, getting closer to the poles.*

Lizzie: In this dystopian vision of the future, artist Jake Blount imagines that Black Americans have migrated from the American South up the coast to Maine.

Jake Blount: *So they migrated up there, they got kind of detained on this island off the coast there, and kind of built their own way of life.*

Lizzie: On an island once populated by wealthy vacationers, these refugees make a new life for themselves. You can imagine what it might look like: makeshift plumbing to capture rainwater, golf courses tilled into farms. Jake Blount says he's most interested in what this future might sound like.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Jake Blount - "Take Me to the Water": [singing] Take me to the water/Take me to the water/Take me to the water to be baptized.]

Lizzie: *So who do we hear singing?*

Jake Blount: *So you hear the descendants of the people that migrated up there, and the songs that they carried up with them from the South.*

Lizzie: Jake Blount is a musician and a scholar of Black American music, and his album, "The New Faith" is like a sonic postcard from a future world, but the songs themselves are actually from the past.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Jake Blount - "The Downward Road"]

Jake Blount: *I mean, the song is old.*

Lizzie: *How old is it? Do we know?*

Jake Blount: *I don't think we know. You know, that's kind of the thing with a lot of these songs is that they come from way far back because nobody knows who wrote them or when.*

Lizzie: This spiritual, "The Downward Road," has likely been sung in one form or another for over 300 years. And yet ...

Jake Blount: *It's funny. I really did not have to dig far or change very much to make those songs quite germane.*

Lizzie: Jake takes traditional folk songs and reinterprets them as folk music of today—or even tomorrow.

Jake Blount: *The melody is mostly the same. The words are mostly the same, but a little bit different in the specifics.*

Lizzie: *Mm-hmm.*

Jake Blount: *And then I added the rap verses.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Jake Blount - "The Downward Road"]

Lizzie: This song features rapper Demeanor.

Jake Blount: *I don't think there's a future of folk music that doesn't involve rap, because it's the most popular form of folk music right now. There's no way that people who are inheriting things from us now would not inherit that as well.*

Lizzie: Now to find these traditional songs, Jake goes to the archives.

Jake Blount: *For anybody who's interested in folk music, there are a few obvious kind of repositories of old recordings that everyone goes to to listen to, and Folkways is one of the most important ones.*

Lizzie: One of the places Jake goes for inspiration is right here at the Smithsonian. So this time on Sidedoor, we're diving into that archive to see what else we can find. And it's gonna be weird.

Lizzie: What began 75 years ago as one man's ambition to document every possible human—and non-human—expression of sound lives on today in Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. What does it mean to collect and preserve sound? And how can the sounds of yesterday carry us into tomorrow? That's coming up after the break.

Lizzie: What would it be like to collect every sound you heard in a single hour of your life? What about all the sounds in a whole day? Okay that's a lot of sounds. So what if you wanted to record every sound in the world?

Lizzie: That's what Moses Asch set out to do in 1948. And you can't talk about Folkways recordings without talking about Moses Asch.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie: Moses Asch, who went by "Moe," did not say goodbye before he hung up the phone, or for that matter, bother answering the standard, "Hello, how are you?" at the beginning of a call.

Michael Asch: *But no, he just rushed through that, ignored it, pretended that didn't happen and launched into the conversation.*

Lizzie: Moe Asch's son, Michael, says his dad didn't have time for niceties.

Michael Asch: *Big mission, big mission. And "Who are you anyway? What's your information?"*

Lizzie: *[laughs] "What do you want?"*

Michael Asch: *He was very gruff.*

Lizzie: *Do we know, like, what motivated him? Why did he want to record all the world's sounds?*

Michael Asch: *Well, I'm glad we have an hour, but I'll see what I can do.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

[MUSIC]

Lizzie: Moe Asch's philosophy on life was colored by his background as an immigrant to the United States. He was born in Warsaw, and as a kid he moved with his family to New York City 1915.

Lizzie: As a young man he became interested in radio engineering, and in the 1930s opened a radio repair business called "Radio Labs."

Jeff Place: *Early on he got involved in, you know, installing public address systems for theaters, and radio repair and radio gear.*

Lizzie: This is Smithsonian archivist Jeff Place. He says Moe's office was in the same building as the left-leaning radio station, WEVD—named for the socialist leader and labor activist Eugene V. Debs.

Michael Asch: *So he did some work for them.*

Lizzie: Recording mostly Jewish music to broadcast for air. And it was around that time in 1939 that Moe had an encounter he would later say changed his life. See, his father, Sholem Asch, was a famous Yiddish novelist and playwright. He was well known in the Jewish community. And in the 1930s, with the Nazi Party gaining power in Germany, he asked for Moe's help with a recording project.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Pete Seeger: And his father said, "Moe, you bought a recording machine. Will it fit in the trunk of my car?" And Moe says, "I think so, why?"]

Lizzie: Here's how folk singer Pete Seeger heard the story, and retold it in an interview with Smithsonian Folkways. He says Moe's father told him ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Pete Seeger: "We've got to drive to Princeton, New Jersey, and record a very short, two or three minute message from Dr. Einstein urging American Jews to help their relatives get out of Germany now.]

Lizzie: "Dr. Einstein" meaning Albert Einstein.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Pete Seeger: So they drove to Princeton, they recorded the short message, and over supper, Dr. Einstein says, "Well, young Mr. Asch, are you a writer like your father?"]

Michael Asch: "Well, you Mr. Asch, you know? Why are you doing this? What are you doing? What's your life?" You know, I have heard so many versions of this.

Lizzie: [laughs]

Michael Asch: And my dad was really good at creating myths. Now what conversation he and Einstein had at that point is all up to his word for it.

Lizzie: Accounts vary, but in most of the versions I've heard, Moe tells Einstein that he installs audio systems for a living, but that he'd recently started getting into recording.

Michael Asch: So he told him that he was recording this music, and ...

Jeff Place: ... and Einstein was totally enthusiastic.

Michael Asch: Einstein said that's a great thing to do, you should keep on doing it.

Lizzie: And I mean, if Einstein thinks you have a good idea, you gotta run with it.

Michael Asch: Now I don't know whether Einstein would talk like that to anybody. I have no idea. Was he a very direct person? Some young man comes to him and he says, "I'm gonna tell you the future of your life!" That doesn't strike me as an "Einstein thing."

Lizzie: [laughs] Not very "Einstein-esque?"

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Michael Asch: *Well, not in my imagination of—he might have said, "Good boy. I'm glad you're doing what you're doing."*

Lizzie: Embellishments aside, the gist of the story is that Albert Einstein himself encouraged Moe to embark on this grand documentary project: to collect the world's sounds, starting with the sounds he saw as the most threatened.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie: Now in the 1940s, major record labels were recording big band music, pop and classical. Asch wanted to record what wasn't already being documented: music local to the communities around him.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Bagelman Sisters - "Zug Favros (Tell Me Why)"]

Jeff Place: *He was in a heavily Jewish neighborhood. Asch discovered that people wanted to come in and buy, like, Jewish records and songs. So he found a little niche. so he started making records of Jewish music and he sold it to his customers.*

Lizzie: That was his first record label.

Jeff Place: *But he was this little tiny independent label. There weren't too many around at that point. And that label, Asch Records, went out of business, and he started another label called DISC that also went out of business.*

Lizzie: After his second outfit went bankrupt, the banks made it clear they weren't going to fund any more of Moe Asch's record labels. Like, "Nice try, guy. Clearly, this is not the business for you." But in 1948, Asch teamed up with Marian Distler, his former secretary and business partner, to start a new label. This one was called Folkways Recordings and Service Corporation."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie: Now Asch had learned from his failures, and ironically, the thing that had tanked his last label was a would-be hit Christmas record he'd made of Nat King Cole. After pressing thousands of them, a snowstorm led to a missed Christmas deadline, and left Asch in a deep hole with tons of unsold records, ultimately putting him out of business. So ...

Michael Asch: *He vowed never to try a hit record. Every time he got close to a hit, he found someone who could buy the masters from him and they could make the hit, but he got rid of it from his catalog. Absolutely.*

Lizzie: And this new no-hit-wonder strategy—it kind of worked.

Michael Asch: *And this shows you what kind of a maverick he was. He said, "Capitalism is a wonderful, wonderful system, so long as you don't believe in the profit motive."*

Lizzie: *Huh. Wait, how does that work?*

Michael Asch: *Exactly!*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: In a 1970 interview, Moe himself said that he saw the label ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Moses Asch: *Not as a business, but as a documentation as a depository. I don't think that many people could go into where I sit and operate the thing as a business without seeing the dollar one way or the other and saying "Why carry on a thing that you may lose \$200-300 a year." It's a problem. I haven't got the answer."]*

Lizzie: The goal wasn't to make a lot of money. It was to make just enough money to keep his documentary project going. And he didn't take an encyclopedist's approach, going A to B to C.

Jeff Place: *He just started recording people.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Mary Lou Williams - "Little Joe (Take 2)"]

Lizzie: Moe threw open the door of his Manhattan studio to nearly anyone with something to say—especially those who weren't being recorded anywhere else.

Jeff Place: *So he fell in with this entire, like, New York in that era, you know, the Harlem Renaissance. If—you know, he got to work with Langston Hughes.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Langston Hughes - "Youth"]

Lizzie: This is a recording of Langston Hughes reading his poem "Youth," in the 1950s.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Langston Hughes: *Yesterday, a night-gone thing / A sun-down name. And dawn to-day / Broad arch above the road we came, We march. Americans together. We march.]*

Jeff Place: *And Mary Lou Williams.*

Lizzie: In the words of jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams, Moe gave artists so much freedom, "If you only burped, Moe recorded it."

[ARCHIVE CLIP, [Mary Lou Williams - "Play it Momma"]

Jeff Place: *Leadbelly.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Leadbelly: I'm gonna sing this song and hit an accordion.]

Jeff Place: *James P. Johnson.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, James P. Johnson - "Hesitation Blues"]

Jeff Place: *All these people kind of gravitated towards Mo's studio.*

Michael Asch: *At the beginning, it was African American and world music. It was music of singers who are blacklisted because of McCarthy. That's where he built the heart of his catalog. Then it was the Civil Rights Movement. And being the one place where everything was recorded, because he accepted that. It was the gay movement.*

Lizzie: Folkways attracted performers who couldn't get a foot in the door in more commercial settings, which meant the label was recording the music, poetry and speeches of people at the margins of mainstream society.

Lizzie: Moe would pay artists a small fee up front. Then he'd press a couple hundred records and tuck them away in his catalog. But he wasn't just recording music and famous poets—Asch was building a depository of sounds. And these sounds came from all over. Some of his best contributors and customers were educators.

Lizzie: It would go like this ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Pete Seeger: Suppose he got a phone call ...]

Lizzie: Folk singer Pete Seeger again. He recorded several albums with Folkways and knew Asch pretty well. He says, Moe might get a phone call from an academic ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Pete Seeger: "I'm Professor so and so, and I just returned from Northern Afghanistan with some recordings. My students keep wanting to listen to them, but I haven't time to make copies, would you be interested in putting out a recording?"]

Lizzie: After vetting the guy, Moe would lay out his terms.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Pete Seeger: "You must send me five or ten pages of information about the music, telling what it means, perhaps translations of some of the songs. And I hope pictures."]

Lizzie: These would become the liner notes—an important part of any Folkways album. Moe believed the listener needed to understand the context of what they were hearing: what it was, where it came from, when it was recorded. So he'd ask the professor to write up a whole booklet of notes to go with the record.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Pete Seeger: "And I will give you \$100. And that will be all the money you will ever get from me, but I can promise you that as long as I'm alive, and I hope afterwards, your record will never go out of print."]

Lizzie: Meaning future copies could always be made. Moe believed if the quality of the content was good, the inventory could sell forever—unlike major labels, which got rid of records as soon as they became unpopular.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Pete Seeger: Well, the professor's delighted! "Oh! Yes, they'll stay in print. Wonderful!" So a month later, Moe has a new record out: "Religious Music of Northern Afghanistan." Or something like that. [laughs]]

Jeff Place: And then it ended up in the catalog, and he'd fill one of those holes he was looking for.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Pete Seeger: And it sells five copies a year.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Ustad Mohammad - "Shakal and naghma in the melodic mode of bopali (bhupali)"]

Lizzie: To Moe, it didn't matter how well an album sold. As he said himself ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Moses Asch: I decided that I would become like an encyclopedia. You don't eliminate A because nobody buys A. Just keep B because B is popular, right?]

Lizzie: In fact, Asch was all about the unpopular stuff. As Jeff Place says ...

Jeff Place: Moses Asch was the king of the niche. I mean, he explored every niche possible.

Lizzie: There were instructional recordings.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: This recording is specially designed to help people who have problems taking tests.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Handwriting analysis is a way of analyzing basic personality traits.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: [infant crying] You have just heard 15 seconds of a baby's cry. what would you do?]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Relax, and with a pleasant smile, go to sleep. You want to have a good sleep.]

Lizzie: There were documentary sounds.

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[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sounds of the Office - "telephone rings"]

Jeff Place: *Sounds of, like, telephones, sounds of the office. And there was a sounds of medicine thing, sounds of operations.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sounds of Operations - "Then we go straight in. Put a little tension on it, gentle tension. And then feel where your track goes."]

Jeff Place: *You know, heartbeats. "Speech After Removal of the Larynx," it's somebody's who's like, singing with one of those voice box things, and making noises.*

Jeff Place: *There was a guy who did a record where he was communicating with animals by playing music to them. So he's actually playing a song, you know, sitting in a pen with 400 turkeys, which are all gobbling and stuff like that while he plays this one folk song.*

Lizzie: *It was actually only 300 turkeys—which is still a lot of turkeys! For the record, this guy, Jim Nollman, also played cello for 12 wolves and electric guitar with 20 orca whales. But there's one animal that nearly broke Moe's no-hits rule—a sleeper hit.*

[croaking of frogs]

Lizzie: *All right. What about these frogs, Jeff?*

Jeff Place: *Well, you know, Moe Asch had all these scientists and people who approached him with projects, but there was a guy in New York City named Charles Bogart.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Charles Bogart: The deep, bass voice of the American bullfrog can be heard from coast to coast since its introduction west of the Rocky Mountains.]

Jeff Place: *Renowned herpetologist, and herpetologists are people who study amphibians. And he—he had all these recordings of frogs. And so they put out a record. I think it might have, I don't know, 60 or 70 frog noises on it.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Charles Bogart: That was the voice of the barking tree frog, Hyla gratiosa. In some species, the air is rapidly forced back and forth over the...]

Jeff Place: *It sold, you know? It became kind of part of the textbook for herpetologists, would-be herpetologists all over the country for years.*

Lizzie: *The obscurity of these recordings made them valuable.*

Michael Asch: *What people didn't understand was that there was a sales potential in these because the only place they could hear them is on a Folkways record, right? Before the internet.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Pete Seeger: *He went around to conventions, Convention of the American Library Association, The Music Educators National Conference, and he'd rent a table, spread out some records.]*

Lizzie: Folk singer Pete Seeger says where other labels were marketing directly to consumers, Asch marketed to libraries and educators.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Pete Seeger: *And teachers, or people attending the convention would walk by and say, "My! I didn't know records like this were available." And pretty soon their name and address was on Moses Asch's mailing list. And every year they'd get a new catalog.]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Pete Seeger - "Skip To My Lou"]

Lizzie: For nearly 40 years, Moses Asch worked seven days a week adding to his catalog.

Lizzie: *How far did Moses actually get in his quest to record all the world's sounds?*

Jeff Place: *I'd say Moses Asch got pretty far along in his encyclopedia. Starting in 1948 until, you know, 1986 when he died, he put out 2,200 albums, which we figure was about one a week.*

Lizzie: One album a week, for nearly 40 years! In 1980, nearing the end of his life, Moe Asch wrote a "Declaration of Purpose" that summed up his philosophy. He wrote, "Folkways succeeds when it becomes the invisible conduit from the world to the ears of human beings."

Lizzie: Moe Asch continued to work right up until his death in 1986. Afterward, his wife sold the Folkways label and its entire catalog to the Smithsonian. But what happens when you put an active record label together with a bunch of museums? Well, you never know til you try.

Lizzie: That's coming up after the break.

Lizzie: When Moe Asch's lifelong collection of recordings arrived at the Smithsonian, it was a little overwhelming.

Jeff Place: *The guy wasn't really well organized.*

Lizzie: In addition to the 2,200 albums in the catalog, there were 4,000 extra reel-to-reels, LPs, and boxes and boxes of—who really knows what?

Jeff Place: *It was almost as if he took his life and then threw it out of the window of an airplane, and then people randomly picked up pieces of paper on the ground and put them in a box.*

Lizzie: *[laughs] Oh my God!*

Jeff Place: *You open up a box and find a Time Magazine, and then receipt from his laundromat. And then underneath it a set of Woody Guthrie lyrics, handwritten in his pen. You know, it was like that!*

Lizzie: *Wow! So your job was to go through all of that, and catalog it and figure out how to preserve it and make it accessible?*

Jeff Place: *Yep!*

Lizzie: This was the late 1980s. After the Smithsonian bought its first and only record label, Folkways Recordings, they hired two people to oversee it. Jeff Place ...

Jeff Place: *I was the archivist that got hired. And Tony Seeger, Pete Seeger's nephew, who is a very famous ethnomusicologist was hired as the curator/director.*

Tony Seeger: *When I arrived, Jeff Place was threading his way through piles of boxes. And so the first part of it was just getting control and finding where things were.*

Lizzie: As the first director of Smithsonian Folkways, Tony Seeger had a big job.

Tony Seeger: *My job was to figure out how to turn a commercial record company into something that makes sense at a national museum.*

Lizzie: Not an easy thing, as it turned out.

Tony Seeger: *It was a challenge. And I kicked myself around the block for taking it. For the first two years, it was a really hard thing to do.*

Lizzie: For starters, the record label came with a few terms and conditions.

Jeff Place: *The deal was we had to keep every record in print, including "Speech After the Removal of the Larynx," even if it sold one every 10 years. Because Moe wanted it.*

Lizzie: As part of the deal, the Smithsonian committed to keeping every recording available to the public. The Folkways catalog wasn't just an archive, it was made to be shared.

Tony Seeger: *That was why Folkways was such an opportunity: it came with contracts. We could, in fact, make copies. We could send it around the world. So that was part of the attraction of Folkways and what made it very different from an archive, because it was a public archive, it was a published archive.*

Lizzie: Here were recordings of the people for the people! So noble! But practically speaking, a real pain in the butt.

Jeff Place: *When Smithsonian took over Folkways in 1987, there were 170,000 vinyl records in a warehouse. And that was about the time everybody wanted CDs and nobody wanted records.*

Lizzie: To keep the archive accessible meant keeping pace with technology—from records to CDs to mp3s. If somebody wrote in wanting a recording, Folkways had to get it to them. Be it music, poetry, speeches, or ...

[frog sounds]

Tony Seeger: *Oh, I reissued the frog record on the—what was it?—the 50th anniversary of Folkways, because it's such a strange recording that I couldn't resist it.*

Jeff Place: *We put it out, and we were kind of kidding, you know, we're still keeping the old tradition of Folkways alive by putting out these kinds of projects. But somehow the college music society or whatever got hold of it and all the college stations started playing frog of the day.*

Lizzie: *What? [laughs]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, college radio DJ]: *Hey, everybody out there at Sidedoor University, we got something coming up that's gonna get you hippin' and a-hoppin', bippin' and a-boppin'. It is time for Frog of the Day! [frog sounds]*

Tony Seeger: *It was in high rotation on college radio.*

Lizzie: People just can't get enough of these frogs.

Jeff Place: *We're actually working on reissuing it on vinyl at the moment.*

Lizzie: *Really? On vinyl?*

Jeff Place: *Yeah. Yeah.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: Amendment: LPs to CDs to mp3s and back to vinyl.

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Lizzie: *The hip kids are gonna love this.*

Jeff Place: *Oh yeah.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: Over the past 35 years, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings has grown far beyond its two-man staff and navigated changing technology and shifts in the music industry, ushering a 75-year-old record collection into the digital age, where some people are streaming music while others still listen to CDs in their cars, or vinyl on their mid-century modern turntables—you know who you are.

Maureen Loughran: *These are our challenges about how do we reach all of these different audiences in the different formats that they are engaging with.*

Lizzie: Today, Maureen Loughran is the director and curator of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. She says besides getting the sounds of the collection out into the world, a big part of carrying on Asch's legacy is adding new sounds to the collection.

Maureen Loughran: *Moe also described the catalog as a mosaic of contemporary expression. And if we're really thinking about contemporary expression, we're thinking about, well, what are people doing today?*

Jeff Place: *You know, for something to be a Smithsonian Folkways record, it has to be a certain thing. It's not a singer-songwriter's latest album.*

Lizzie: *Mm-hmm.*

Jeff Place: *It really has, you know, the booklets.*

Lizzie: The liner notes.

Jeff Place: *You have to have something that demands having a booklet and a story.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Jake Blount - "City Called Heaven"]

Lizzie: When Jake Blount got a call from Smithsonian Folkways in 2020, he'd already scoured the collection for the folk songs of his ancestors that would inspire his own work.

Jake Blount: *The center of my mission as an artist is to create a kind of feedback loop there, that I am receiving things from this old documentation from this body of work that exists and has been passed down. And then to give something back to that repository.*

Lizzie: Folkways wanted to know if he wanted to make an album to add to the collection.

Jeff Place: *Jake's record is just right in line with all the kinds of things that have come out on Folkways and Smithsonian Folkways for 75 years.*

Lizzie: The song we're hearing now is from Jake Blount's dystopian futuristic album "The New Faith." But 60 years ago, the song you are hearing was sung by civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Fannie Lou Hamer - "City Called Heaven"]

Lizzie: This is the only known, publicly available recording of Hamer singing. Smithsonian Folkways re-released it in 2015.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Fannie Lou Hamer - "City Called Heaven"]

Jake Blount: *That Fannie Lou Hamer song melodically is not like anything else I know. Word-wise is not like anything else that I have engaged with.*

Tony Seeger: *People build new things based on a past.*

Lizzie: Tony Seeger says ...

Tony Seeger: *One of the roles that archives and companies like Folkways play is that has the past available from which you can create your own future. If people can't hear their own sounds and don't know their own pasts, it's really very hard to build a future that hasn't been created for you by somebody else.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Fannie Lou Hamer - "City Called Heaven"]

Lizzie: Folkways is still home for artists with a message, something specific to say. Which may not sound like anything else you've heard. But that is the whole point.

Jake Blount: *For Folkways to call and say, "You know, we want to hear your weird ideas. We want to hear the thing that you want to do, but you don't feel like you're gonna be allowed to do. I mean, it is unheard of for a record label to do that in this day and age. I mean, one of the biggest problems in our industry is that record labels want a safe bet. Folkways asked for it, and I just, like, never stop thinking about how—how different that is from every other label I know.*

Lizzie: True to its roots, Folkways isn't about making hits.

Jake Blount: *One of the things that's very cool about being on Folkways as a traditional musician is knowing as I create the work that it's like entering the canon that I learned all my songs from. And that 100, 200 years from now when some other Black queer person who wants to learn about their ancestors goes digging for songs, they will find mine.*

Lizzie: 75 years ago, Moe Asch set out to document all the sounds of his time. And through Folkways recordings, he began what would become a multi-generational, ongoing conversation, connecting us with ancestors in the past—and the future—through sounds.

Maureen Loughran: *Like Moe was saying, the contemporary expressions.*

Lizzie: Director Maureen Loughran says that Folkways exists today to keep that conversation alive.

Maureen Loughran: *And the expression can be the sounds around us. It's not just the human voice expressing itself, but it can be the sounds around us that are expressing things. Just like the frogs, right? [laughs] They're expressing things. They're telling their friends certain things. Like, all of these sounds help us understand what our world is and what our world means to us.*

Lizzie: *It always comes back to the frogs!*

Maureen Loughran: *Always comes back to the frogs.*

[frog sounds]

Lizzie: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

Lizzie: Special thanks to Michael Asch, Jeff Place, Tony Seeger, Maureen Loughran and Jake Blount.

Lizzie: This year is the 75th anniversary of Folkways, and we're celebrating with a bunch of concerts on the National Mall during this summer's annual Folklife Festival. Jake Blount will be performing, as well as a whole bunch of other wonderful artists. If you're in town, come on down! That's happening from June 29 to July 9. We'll link to more information in our newsletter! Subscribe at [SI.edu/sidedoor](https://si.edu/sidedoor).

Lizzie: The world of sound is at your fingertips. Go check out the full Folkway catalog online at [Folkways.si.edu](https://folkways.si.edu). You can find Jake's entire album, "The New Faith,"—which I highly, highly recommend doing—and you can learn more about Jake and the influences behind each song in the liner notes—note the liner notes—on the Folkways website.

Lizzie: Thanks also to all the folks at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, especially Jonathan Williger and Will Griffin. You guys are the best.

Lizzie: Our podcast is produced by James Morrison and me, Lizzie Peabody. Our wonderful associate producer is Nathalie Boyd. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant. Tami O'Neill writes our newsletter. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Fact-checking by Adam Bisno. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder, but most of the music in this episode was from Folkways Recordings.

Lizzie: If you have a pitch for us, send an email at [sidedoor \(@\) si.edu](mailto:sidedoor@si.edu). And if you have a favorite frog sound, please, oh please tweet it [@SidedoorPod](https://twitter.com/SidedoorPod). If you want to sponsor our show, please visit [sponsorship \(@\) prx.org](https://prx.org).

Lizzie: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

Lizzie: *What is your favorite frog sound?*

Maureen Loughran: *It's—it's called "The Chorus of the Spadefoot Toads." What I love about this track is that there's a little green toad who keeps interrupting all of the spade toads. And he's sort of saying, "Hey, guys. Guys, I have something to say. Move over." Sometimes I feel like I am that frog, like, "Hey! Hey! Hey!"*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

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