

Moe Asch: An Entrepreneur for the Ages

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."

—Moses Asch, founder of Folkways Records on his company's "Declaration of Purpose"

The finances of the five major record label groups are such a closely guarded secret that the three that would like to merge in some combination of two (Warner Music Group, EMI and Bertelsmann) are reportedly hesitating to divulge their accounting methods so that they don't shortchange their value during due diligence if and when a deal ever happens.

Moses (Moe) Asch, the founder of Folkways Records, is probably rolling in his grave. He died in 1986, the same year he sold his company to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.

Asch's legacy as an entrepreneur has been chronicled in a fascinating new book, *Folkways Records: Moses Asch and His Encyclopedia of Sound* (Routledge), written by Tony Olmsted. Asch, whose first two attempts in the 1940s at running a record company went bankrupt, started out as a recording studio owner whose mission was to record for posterity all types of musicians no matter how popular they were or what their potential to sell records was. His catalog included not only folk, jazz and blues music, but also spoken word, religious services and nature sounds.

"To fulfill his mission to release all the world's music, Moe had to deal with the essential features of the creation of the recorded product: the manufacture of the record and then its distribution and sales," writes Olmsted. "These mundane facts of life are rarely documented for most labels, big or small."

Folkways company documents made available to Olmsted (reprinted in the book's appendices) detail such minutiae as the royalties Asch paid on every release in the catalog; its most important retail accounts; balance sheets; profit and loss statements; accounts payable and receivables; and the terms of license agreements he struck with overseas distributors.

What was especially unusual about Folkways is that every release in its catalog of more than 2,200 LPs



Here was a guy who didn't see any problem with reissuing out-of-print records. The music needed to be heard.

stayed in print on vinyl, utilizing the services of numerous pressing plants that could fulfill his periodic needs for short runs on such esoteric titles as *Sounds & Ultra Sounds of the Bottle-Nosed Dolphin*. But the catalog also includes incendiary recordings from American folk music pillars the likes of Woody

Guthrie, Lead Belly and Pete Seeger.

Smithsonian Folkways now carries out Asch's mission of keeping everything in print through recordable CD technology.

Asch was quite a character, who most likely would have sided with unauthorized-MP3 file-sharers. For here was a guy who didn't see any problem with reissuing early Guthrie recordings, which RCA originally pressed on 78rpm but not LP—he believed he was doing a public service. RCA amazingly let him get away with it, and eventually admitted that the label should have been putting out the records itself.

Writes Olmsted: "The charge of 'piracy' that was leveled against Asch rankled him. He did not view it as an act of piracy to reissue...rather he saw it as an issue of freedom of expression for the artist whose work could not be heard because it was unjustly held by the original recording company."

Asch also provided value in the packaging of his records, inserting in every release a booklet with liner notes that provided insight into the recording sessions and an analysis of the music, something that the record industry is only now coming to grips with, as EMI's Ted Cohen pointed out in the last issue of *Medialine*.

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The news that the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) has clamped down on the practice of distributing screeners of the films up for Oscar award consideration is the knee-jerk sort of reaction one expects from Jack Valenti & Co.

Yes, piracy is a problem, and illegal file-sharing via broadband looms for Hollywood. But hadn't the MPAA heard that DVDs are copy protected? The promotional screeners generally are no-frills versions that don't even have DVD chapter stops; most contain an intermittent scroll across the screen that asks viewers to call an 800 number and report if they had purchased the copy.

Furthermore, stores that sell used DVDs don't buy screeners for fear of being the target of the MPAA wrath. (That doesn't stop the stores from buying promotional pre-release CDs, but that's another story.)

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