

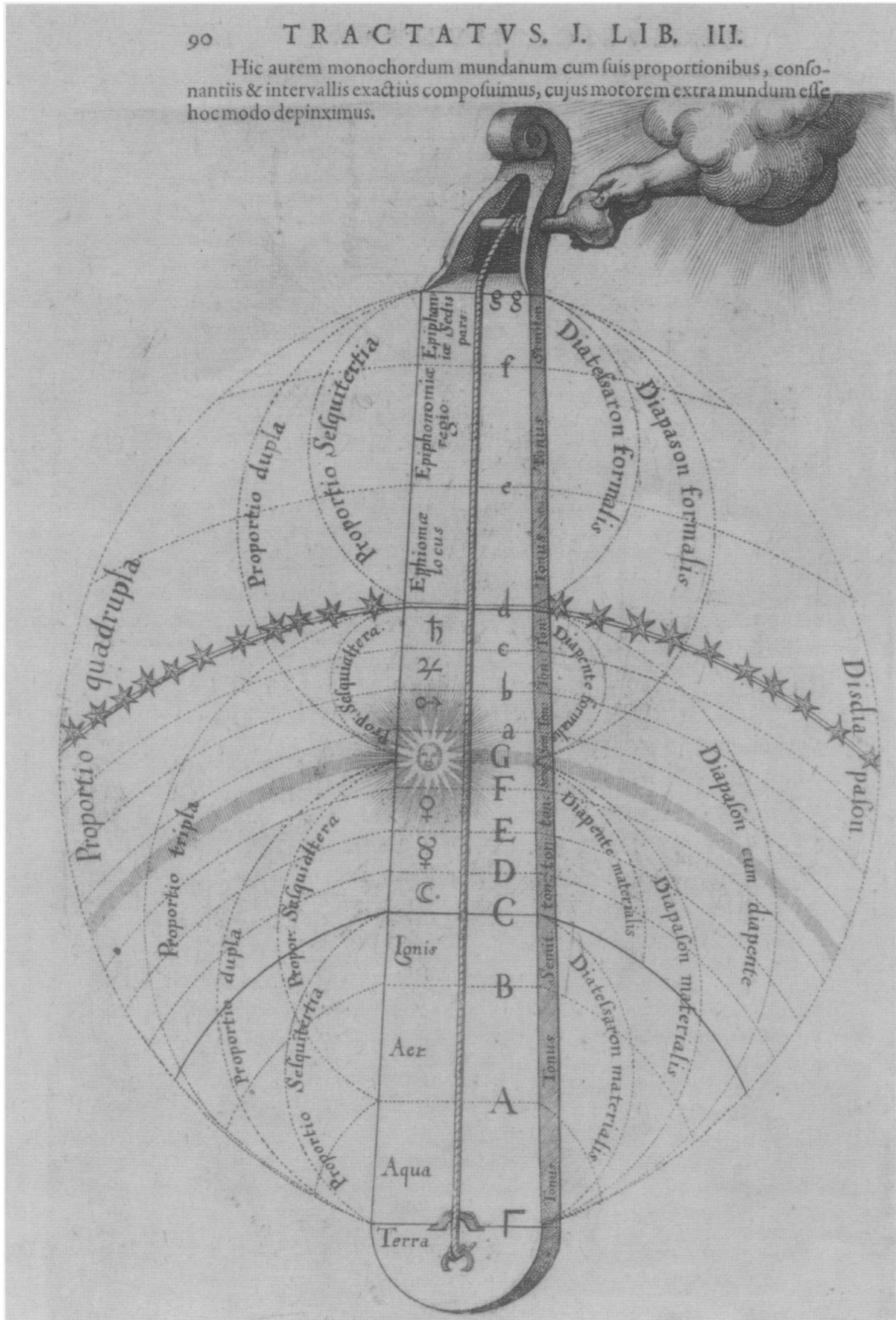
There is a sense in which this issue grows out of a day-long symposium and concert sponsored by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles on 21 April 2001. The topic around which that day was focused was the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, collected mostly in the 1940s and published in 1952 by a 29-year-old man called Harry Smith, a man Greil Marcus has described as 'an autodidact, experimental film-maker, dope fiend and alcoholic, freeloader and fabulist'. During that day at the Getty various artists, musicologists, film historians and cultural theorists discussed and reminisced about this singular character of the American avant-garde, showed his abstract animations and collage films, and described his eccentric activities such as collecting and cataloguing paper airplanes found on the streets of New York City.

It might seem exorbitant to claim that this was the seed for an issue of a journal still at the time firmly rooted in London; an issue not actually discussed and planned until the Fall of 2002. But the strange trajectory of thought as it encounters any work of art makes the case simple and even obvious. For as the editorial discussion took shape, two names began to come together in our minds – Kenneth Anger and Richard Wright – and we began to search for an understanding of what made this conjunction so compelling. It was not because of any obvious formal similarity, but more a case of shared attitude, a determined placing of the creative self at odds with mainstream culture, a sense of working from elsewhere. Suddenly I found myself thinking of Harry Smith, and proposing that the missing term might be found in music.

What was I thinking? Smith's anthology is a compendium of recordings of the music of Appalachia made between 1927, when electronic recording made accurate music reproduction possible, and 1932, when the Depression halted folk-music sales. Its historical significance lies in its being the founding document of the folk revival of the late 50s/early 60s, and therefore of much of what happened in rock music thereafter. Bob Dylan's work is unthinkable without it, and so is Kurt Cobain's. A case could be made that the widespread acceptance of rap would not have been possible without the previous acceptance of the music Smith collected. The Anthology was published at the very moment – during the McCarthy witch-hunts and the Korean War – when American mainstream culture was morphing into the paranoid conformism of mass consumerism. In contradiction to that enforced conformity, Smith's weird collection of music offered a portrait of an alternate America, a place that embraced the modern – for the new technology made it possible for the songs to live – and celebrated the more particular fears of being human. And more, these songs transcended the individual stories told to offer a raw version of the American narrative, of the terror and displacement of the immigrant experience, the struggle between willfulness and fate. The songs tell stories and hint at other meanings, they offer strings of metaphor but refuse explanation: they remain a series of riddles.

*The whole bizarre package made the familiar strange, the never known into the forgotten, and the forgotten into a collective memory that teased any single listener's conscious mind.*  
Greil Marcus, *The Old, Weird America*

Hic autem monochordum mundanum cum suis proportionibus, consonantiis & intervallis exactius composuimus, cujus motorem extra mundum esse hoc modo depinximus.



The Anthology collected 84 performances on six LPs, organised in three two-record sets. Each set has the same cover image, an etching of a 'monochord', a simple box and string instrument used for tuning and as a timer until the late 19th century, and each cover is printed in a different colour. Thus the entire collection is defined by three monochromes – blue, red, green – which is to say that it is presented in terms legible to the world of modern art. But Smith's work also comes disguised as an academic treatise, with detailed notes on each recording, performer, composer, accompanying musicians, plus a one-line summary of each song. The result is an uncomfortable hybrid, part art, part literature, part social anthropology but wholly music; a mongrel cultural form designed to turn various hierarchies on end.

The songs Smith collected invoke and describe a world ruled by fate, or at least by powers beyond the control of ordinary people. Most are chronicles of passivity, regret, fear, acceptance, isolation, wish for mastery, lack of control. Many have a tinge of the absurd, if not the macabre. These are tales of murder and disaster, of decent craftsmen replaced by machines, of moving on to where the work is. They mostly recount being cheated by love, or by a man, and finding solace, or revenge, in death. The singers deliver spooky versions of supernatural old English and Scottish stories of murder and suicide in which love is a disease and death the cure. As Marcus notes, they offer 'a chronology of British fable and American happenstance', mostly tied to historical incident, but not historical drama. They dissolve a known history of wars and elections into a sort of national dream, a flux of desire and punishment, sin and luck, joke and humour. The Anthology is an occult document, a record of an almost forgotten past, the strange uprooted, isolated and fearful culture of the immigrant. The culture of longing and hopefulness, familiar strains and anxious presentiments. It offers the voices of old Europe in a new world, at once violent, crazy and comic. A new experience of everyday life, transformed into myth, revealing that life is but a joke.

When not making the wall installations for which he is known, Richard Wright plays this music, or at least the old Scots and Irish versions. Thus it suddenly seemed useful to consider The Handsome Family, a duo who make it their business to update the songs Smith had once collected. Anger, of course, was a pioneer in using popular music as part of the overall collage of his film work, and his practice seemed to have some bearing on the sophisticated montages of Jeremy Blake. Jutta Koether's multi-faceted production, encompassing painting, writing and performance all strenuously delivered from an outside position, seemed to exist in the same universe as Smith's. Soon an issue appeared to be taking shape.

This shape developed from an idea about a body of work that Bruce Connor has described as 'a confrontation with another culture, or another view of the world, that might include arcane, or unknown, or unfamiliar views of the world, hidden within these words, melodies and harmonies'. This view of the world, antagonistic to certainty, distrustful of surface, and sensitive to what lies beneath, can be described as a gothic view; a view that, as Richard Flood demonstrates so beautifully, has its beginnings in the early years of the modern era, when the exercise of reason brought the promise of enlightenment, but also of terror. This was when we first heard the idea of personal liberty articulated, and were first introduced to its costs. This was when we first heard the demand for an art that would express and explore individual desire in relation to these ideas of personal freedom. This is the era of William Blake, the Marquis de Sade, Laurence Sterne and Horace Walpole.

The art forms they devised delivered something more visceral than the measured beauty expected by the cultured taste of the time. What they offered was an illicit delight in the emotional charge arising from tales of unknown horror. But this was never a simple matter of telling scary stories, for part of the pleasure was also encoded in the recognition of the effect, the acknowledgement of the structure of artifice and

representation. The first theorist to note this new trend, Edmund Burke, identified it as a necessary therapy, a means to revive a culture frozen in conventionality. He argued that an art devoted to an idea of beauty provided a space of contemplation, not challenge, and was therefore a passive force. On the other hand, the terrors of the sublime exercised the imagination, and so encouraged a more vigorous and forward-looking view of the world. Imaginative horror was thus posited as a necessary and moral purgative. (Burke of course became horrified when the revolutionists in Paris took his theories literally and made 'terror the order of the day' as they sought to create a modern state devoted to liberty and equality.)

So a thread, enriched with shock value and special effects, connecting the traditional ballads of medieval Scotland to some aspects of high-culture production in late-eighteenth-century Europe, to the songs of early modern Appalachia, to horror movies. An area of investigation that plumbs the depths of folk memory, and yet attaches itself to serious aesthetic theory. A mode of work both singularly pure in its avant-garde intentions, and knowingly populist in its reach. A kind of artwork that expresses the will to power and the resistance to that power.

I started writing this over the many weekends that were each described as being the last weekend before war, and now finish it as Baghdad falls under siege. For two weeks we have witnessed the conflation of private terror and state power, represented as spectacle on the 24-hour news channels. Hundreds of thousands protest and are ignored. It is no longer only the immigrant and the artist who feel the strangeness of a culture, who feel isolated and far from home. Perhaps this issue will provide comfort in knowing that we are not alone.