

music

this week's essential reading

{ 'How to make an intelligent blockbuster and not alienate people', Mark Kermode, *The Observer*

Gathered forgottens

A collector of musical memorabilia has resurrected an impressively unorthodox array of American photographs, songs and sound-effects from the early part of the last century, writes Andy Battaglia

What did it sound like to walk on ice in 1936? How would a one-armed man play guitar? When would music on music sensibly lend itself to the mention of things such as moth wings and a lovesick frog?

All of these are questions answered, or at least addressed, by a curious new collection of old-time photographs and songs called ... *I Listen to the Wind That Obliterates My Traces*. It might seem like an unlikely lot to have covered, but then, the past tends to be strange.

Particularly the past as present in the US in the 1920s and '30s, the period that provides the bulk of the music gathered on the collection's two CDs. That was the era when recording technology, and records themselves, began to find their place in US popular culture. It was also a bit of a mirage, though, as rationing related to the Second World War would soon cause the materials needed to manufacture records to become scarce. And so it was: the dramatic birth of a medium that temporarily stalled, leaving a mysterious prologue to the eventual mass-music age discarded in what often gets called – especially rightly in this case – the dustbin of history.

By fixing his focus as he has, Steve Roden, who compiled *Listen to the Wind*, casts himself in good company. In an essay introducing the set, he alludes to Harry Smith, whose epochal *Anthology of American Folk Music* introduced scores of budding folkies in the 1950s and '60s



... I Listen to the Wind that Obliterates My Traces

Dust-to-Digital

to an eccentric body of traditional songs that had been all but forgotten. Tunes about murder, treachery, revenge, surreal characters with vegetables for heads – such was the purview, strange as it could be, of Smith's resurrectionist project.

Roden's aims are more modest, born from the playful manias and idiosyncrasies of an avid collector. In his essay introducing the set, he alludes to Harry Smith, whose epochal *Anthology of American Folk Music* introduced scores of budding folkies in the 1950s and '60s

That personal aspect lends the set a peculiar staying power, both in its unorthodox selection of recordings and especially in the many old photographs that attend them. Some of the photographs date back even further, to 1880, and all of them depict people communing with music, either as players, listeners or some impressionistic mix of the two. All of the images are presented with no information, no captions, no commentary – nothing but an image with some or other obvious or oblique musical application and a chance to imagine what might have been going on inside them.

Indeed, *Listen to the Wind* is at least as much a photography book as it is a musical compendium. The CDs come packaged in the front and back covers of a handsome hardbound volume and, with the exception of the introductory essay and some quotations and notes scattered throughout, the photographs are very much in the foreground. There's one of a man who seems to be blind playing a hurdy-gurdy. Another features a family dressed up and gone outside to take an odd portrait next to their prized gramophone. Yet another shows a shifty performer rubbing the rims of resonant wine glasses. Still another captures a strange moment when a woeful woman has put down her banjo to pet what seems to be a cat lying in the grass – alive or dead, it's hard to say.

And then there's a picture of a one-armed man with a guitar, whose means of playing will have to remain a mystery for the ages. The best part about that one, however, is that the supposed guitarist was also presented as a one-man band, with a horn around his neck, a pedal to beat a drum, access to a bunch of bells, and a tambourine on one ankle.

Such a weird and wily cast of char-

acters seems to suit Roden, who himself comes across as a bit of an eccentric. He works as a sound-artist on his own and from his home in California he managed to get his project into the good graces of Dust-to-Digital, a record label in Atlanta given to bold historical exhumation. Among its lauded releases are a compilation of old 78-rpm records from Thailand, a set of Christmas songs dating back to 1917 and a survey of a fiery musical preacher named Rev Johnny L "Hurricane" Jones. There's an awful lot, each new release seems to shout, left in the coffers of the past.

And all of it stands to be recon-

stituted by the whims of those who gather it. In his essay, Roden strikes a poetic tone that gets at the allure of accreting strange, surprising finds for a collector bent on redrawing his own conceptions of

the past. He writes about fixating on a 1928 recording he found of the old folk song *Froggie Went a-Courtin'*, and carries its lyrics, involving an ill-fated moth, through to a meditation on the experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage, who in the 1960s made an abstract movie from the projection of light through a vast collection of moth wings.

It's that kind of connection, far-reaching and wide, that informs Roden's unusual relationship with the records and photographs he finds at flea markets, estate sales and wherever else such things can be discovered. Upon finding a copy of the frog song and giving himself over to the potential power of it, he writes (in his deferential lower-case style), "The record stared silently back, knowing full well that i was unworthy of the remarkable pres-

ence hidden beneath its unremarkable and very scratched surface". There are a lot of remarkable presences in the sounds gathered for *Listen to the Wind*, which opens with a howl of wind from a 76-year-old sound-effects record and wanders through gospel, folk, blues, country, religious songs, secular songs, cosmic songs and so on. All of it is weird, as – come to think of it – all music is when stripped of its familiarising aspects of time and place. And even the most familiar songs sound strange. A version of the iconic Americana song *John Henry* by John Jacob Niles sounds like a wispy representation of what a singer might hear in his head when thinking about a song in the shower. A blues-strewn take on *Blue Blazes Blue* makes one wonder if the drawing, despondent performer, Emery Glen, forgot

headphones to what would have been some of the earliest radios around. Or the one of an eager fiddler who appears maybe to have been already dead for a few years when he struck his fatal pose. There's something undeniably haunting in *Listen to the Wind*, in its garbled snatches of historical sounds and the unkempt, chemical strangeness of early photographs left to deteriorate. But there's something almost overwhelmingly affirming in it too, in its procession of recorded or photographed characters who turned to music for whatever reason – out of desire, restlessness, hope, desperation. Or maybe just to bide the time.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Artforum*, *Spin* and *Pitchfork*.



A cast of curious characters populates Steve Roden's eclectic collection. Courtesy of Dust-to-Digital