

"The American Songster" Dom Flemons Explores History of the American West With Collection of African American Cowboy Songs

'Black Cowboys' Due Out March 23 on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings



'Black Cowboys' is the new album from multi-instrumentalist, songwriter, and co-founding member of the GRAMMY Award winning Carolina Chocolate Drops, Dom Flemons. More than a collection of songs from the "Wild West," the record sheds light on the prominent but often overlooked role African American pioneers played in westward expansion.

In 2018, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings celebrates its 70th anniversary, honoring Folkways founder Moses Asch's mission to "document the people's music." As a musical torchbearer and innovator, Dom Flemons is committed to extending and reinterpreting Asch's legacy in the modern age. Joining him on this year's extensive release schedule are avant-garde folk duo Anna & Elizabeth, Iraqi-American oud virtuoso Rahim AlHaj, Tejano giants Los Texmaniacs, and special projects that include the 'Smithsonian Anthology of Hip-Hop and Rap,' a topical box set on 'The Social Power of Music,' and extensive retrospectives on Folkways greats Pete Seeger and Barbara Dane.

Listen to this [3-song sampling](#) of the record.

The first album of its kind, 'Black Cowboys' takes the listener on an illuminating journey "from the trails to the rails" of the Old West. The 18-song set traverses a varied soundscape featuring string blues, old-time square dance music, and cowboy poetry. Flemons is joined by a celebrated group of backing musicians throughout the record, such as GRAMMY-winning bluesman Alvin "Youngblood" Hart, Jimbo Mathus (Squirrel Nut Zippers), and decorated folklorist and Folkways' director emeritus Dan Sheehy, who co-produced the album.

From the first, plaintive line sung on the album opener, a field holler called "Black Woman," it's clear that Flemons' relationship with this material runs deep. Indeed, in 2016, Flemons himself followed the westward path taken by Lewis and Clark and their slave, York, "crossing every original cattle trail and Indian trading post along the way."

In addition to the album's re-worked traditional songs, Flemons includes original songs written specifically for the occasion. "One Dollar Bill" reflects on the portrayal of black cowboys in Hollywood Westerns, "He's a Lone Ranger" tells the story of Bass Reeves (an escaped slave who became the first African American Deputy US Marshal west of the Mississippi), and "Steel Pony Blues" pays tribute to Nat Love, the former slave turned Pullman porter who spent time as a rancher in Flemons' native state of Arizona.

Flemons is also a historian, music scholar, and collector. He has long carried a torch of awareness that many traditional American songs and tunes in fact originated from, or were influenced by, the musical and storytelling traditions of African Americans and Native Americans. Flemons illustrates the complex cultural exchange that happened on the frontier in the 40-page liner notes booklet, reminding us that the American West was a much more diverse environment than old Western films and dime novels would have us believe. On his rendition of "Home on the Range," arguably one of the most celebrated Western songs of all time, Flemons explains that the popularized version came from a variant recorded in 1908, sung by a black bartender in San Antonio.

Flemons' love of cowboy songs and history traces back to his manifold familial connections to the region in which he was born and raised. His grandfather worked as a preacher and sawmill laborer in the same Arizona town Nat Love called home, and after emigrating from Mexico, his maternal ancestors became civil rights leaders in Arizona. A decade ago, after serendipitously coming across the book 'The Negro Cowboys' on a road trip from North Carolina to Phoenix, Flemons began immersing himself in research and interviews on the subject. After his first experience at the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in February 2016, he was inspired to bring his passion for this material into the studio, and began recording 'Black Cowboys' two months later.

Along with its substantive liner notes, the album packaging includes historic portraits of many of the songs' subjects, Flemons' personal family photos, tintype wet plate photographs taken on a 19th-century camera, and cover art featuring a portrait of Flemons by the celebrated Western artist William Matthews.

Part of the Smithsonian Folkways' African American Legacy Series, the album was produced in conjunction with the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Flemons joins the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings family as the label celebrates its 70th anniversary, in part with an initiative to partner with more contemporary, living artists who carry on traditional forms of music in the modern age.

Though extensively researched and likely educational for many listeners, 'Black Cowboys' is much more than a history lesson. It's a collection both plaintive and upbeat, which evokes the familiar nostalgia for the Old West without sacrificing the truth of the matter. With this recording, Flemons further solidifies his place at the contemporary forefront of the American song tradition, and presents an innovative blend of traditional forms with a modern sensibility for the 21st century.

'Black Cowboy Track List:

1. Black Woman
2. Texas Easy Street
3. One Dollar Bill
4. Going Down the Road Feelin' Bad
5. Tyin' Knots in the Devil's Tail
6. Home on the Range
7. Ol' Proc
8. John Henry y los vaqueros
9. Po' Howard/Gwine Dig a Hole to Put the Devil In
10. Knox County Stomp
11. He's a Lone Ranger
12. Steel Pony Blues
13. Little Joe the Wrangler
14. Charmin' Betsy
15. Goodbye Old Paint
16. Lonesome Old River Blues
17. The March of Red River Valley
18. Old Chisholm Trail

Dom Flemons Upcoming Tour Dates:

Jan 25 - Blue Ridge Community Center - Flat Rock, NC

Jan 27 - City Vineyard at Pier 26 - New York, NY

Feb 1-3 - National Cowboy Poetry Gathering - Elko, NV

Feb 5-7 - American Music Research Center - Boulder, CO

Feb 22 - Tyler-Tallman Hall - Davidson, NC

Mar 1 - The Harmony Lodge - Chepachet, RI

Mar 2 - me and thee coffeehouse - Marblehead, MA

Mar 3 - Hopewell Theater - Hopewell, NJ

About Smithsonian Folkways Recordings:

Going into its 70th year, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, the "National Museum of Sound," makes available close to 60,000 tracks in physical and digital format as the nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian, with a reach of 80 million people per year. A division of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, the non-profit label is dedicated to supporting cultural diversity and increased understanding among people through the documentation, preservation, production, and dissemination of sound. Its mission is the legacy of Moses Asch, who founded Folkways Records in 1948 to document "people's music" from around the world. For more information about Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, visit folkways.si.edu.

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