



Folkways



royal court music of thailand

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1. Sounds of the Surf Overture (*Pleng Homrong Kleun Kratob Fang*) 11:41
(Music by His Majesty King Prajadhipok, Rama VII)
Piphat mai khaeng ensemble
2. The Floating Moon (*Pleng Bulan Loy Luen*) 8:54
(Music and lyrics by His Majesty King Phra Buddha Lertla Napalai, Rama II)
Sau sam sai (three-string fiddle) and *piphat mai nuam* ensemble
3. A Starlit Night (*Pleng Ratri Pradab Dao Thao*) 19:40
(Music and lyrics by His Majesty King Prajadhipok, Rama VII)
Krueng sai ensemble
4. Heart of the Sea (*Pleng Ok Thalay Thao*) 15:59
(Lyrics by Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, music by Choi Suntharavathin)
Mahori ensemble

Recorded in 1994, in Bangkok, Thailand, these studio recordings feature ensembles performing vocal and instrumental music of the Thai classical repertory. These royal court pieces were composed by Thai monarchs primarily in the late 19th and early 20th century. The final piece was written by H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, daughter of the present King.

Produced in collaboration with the External Relations Division of the Thailand Office of the National Culture Commission, and in conjunction with the 1994 Festival of American Folklife program "Thailand: Household, Temple Fair and Court."



**Smithsonian
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Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings
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Recorded and annotated by M. R. Chakrarot Chitrabongs

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1. Sounds of the Surf Overture (*Pleng Homrong Kleun Kratob Fang*) 11:41 Instrumental music composed by His Majesty King Prajadhipok, Rama VII (reigned 1925-1935). Performed by the *piphat mai khaeng* ensemble.
2. The Floating Moon (*Pleng Bulan Loy Luen*) 8:54 A song accompanied by the *saw sam sai* (three-string fiddle) and the *piphat mai nuam* ensemble. Music and lyrics composed by His Majesty King Phra Buddha Lertla Napalai, Rama II (reigned 1809-1824).
3. A Starlit Night (*Pleng Ratri Pradab Dao Thao*) 19:40 A song in three variations accompanied by the *krueng sai* ensemble. Music and lyrics composed by His Majesty King Prajadhipok, Rama VII (reigned 1925-1935).
4. Heart of the Sea (*Pleng Ok Thalay Thao*) 15:59 A "farewell song" accompanied by the *mahori* ensemble. Lyrics written by Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, daughter of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej (reigned 1946-present). Music composed by Choi Suntharavathin.

Performing Arts in the Thai Royal Court by M. R. Chakrarot Chitrabongs

In his deep sleep one peaceful night, King Rama II of the royal house of Chakri, who reigned from 1809 to 1824, dreamt that he was sitting in a beautiful moonlit garden. The brightly shining full moon slowly floated toward him. He also heard the strains of a most wondrous music. He sat there in awe of the sight and sounds until the moon floated away and the music faded. The King woke up, but the magical music was still vivid in his memory. He immediately summoned the court musicians and played the song for them on his *saw sam sai* (the three-string fiddle). The song was given the name "*Bulan Loy Luen*" ("The Floating Moon") and may be heard on track 2 of this recording. One of the most famous songs in the whole of the Thai classical music repertoire, it gives us a glimpse into the role of music in the royal court of the early Bangkok period.

King Rama II ascended to the throne twenty-seven years after the inauguration of Bangkok as the new capital city in 1782. Bangkok had been built by King Rama I, who reigned from 1782 to 1809, to replace the old

capital, Ayutthaya, which had been totally devastated by warfare in 1767. Within a decade, by 1792, the glittering architecture of Bangkok's Grand Palace and Royal Chapel became the new symbols of national integrity and identity. The royal court, with all its component parts, was reinstated as the seat of power. Among these components were the court performers, who were retainers of the King and were charged with ceremonial and entertainment duties.

In the early Bangkok period, court or "classical" arts were extremely refined. The female court performers enjoyed the sanctity of the exclusively female "inner court." Their upbringing, designed to give them a refined deportment considered essential for members of the nobility, included music and dance training from the early age of five or six. The female court performers specialized in the *lakhon nai*, which may be literally translated as "the dance-drama of the inner court." This genre is not represented on this recording because its emphasis on dance movements and highly crafted costumes is better served by film and videotape.

Male performers were also retained by the King. They provided instrumental music for

2

state ceremonies. The *lakhon nok*, or "dance-drama outside the royal court," was performed by male dancers and female impersonators in lively presentations which were much more suited to the general audience and were of lesser artistic quality than the *lakhon nai*. Only males could participate in another genre of classical performing art, the *khon* (masked dance). The sole story performed in the *khon* is the *Ramakian*, the Thai version of the Indian epic, the *Ramayana*. Celebrating Lord Rama in accordance with the Hindu belief that Rama was an earthly manifestation of Vishnu, the Protector of Humanity, the *Ramayana* appears in all aspects of Thai arts and culture and is thought to have been introduced into Thailand well before the development of Thai culture itself.

During the Second Reign of the Bangkok period (the reign of King Rama II), the court arts flourished, partly due to relative political stability and freedom from armed conflicts, and partly because King Rama II himself was an accomplished artist. Many works of art are attributed to him, including a masterpiece of poetry written for the *lakhon* entitled "*Inao*."

Royal patronage ensured the livelihood of

the royal court artists during the reigns of King Rama I, King Rama II, and King Rama III—the so-called "early Bangkok period." However, profound changes were to take place during the "middle Bangkok period," in the reigns of King Rama IV and King Rama V. Western powers had made their presence felt strongly in the Southeast Asian region during the mid-nineteenth century, and the need to attend to them resulted in an influx of Western cultural elements. Western military band music was imported to serve the Western-style military; to welcome state visitors, new Thai performing art genres were invented that corresponded to the music concert and the opera. These many new roles inflated the number of performing artists to such an extent that the royal court could not support them all.

Other members of the royal family and the nobility began to retain performing artists in their households. The new patrons encouraged their charges to be dynamic and creative, to compete amicably with each other. Highly gifted artists were sought, and grand music masters came to the fore, composing more and more wonderful music and writing variations on old themes. At this time, the demands on the musicians' intelligence, dex-

3

terity, and stamina were intense. Instrumentalists trained for hours each and every day in the search for fame and recognition. Successful performing artists were given titular honors, and their achievements were recorded for posterity.

The princely patrons considered it their duty to serve the state by supporting the performing arts. Two notable examples may be cited. When King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V, who reigned from 1868 to 1910) expressed his wish for a Thai classical equivalent to the Western concert, Prince Naris, son of King Rama IV and an artist, architect, and designer, created a completely new artistic genre, the Thai musical concert. In response to another request, the Prince and his associates created the Thai version of the Western opera. Known as *lakhon duekdamban*, it was a derivation of the classical *lakhon nai* in which the presentation was livelier while the artistic quality was maintained. The dancers also spoke and sang their own lines, just as in opera.

The golden age of Thai classical performing arts waned between the two world wars and especially during the Great Depression in the 1930s, which also deeply affected the

Thai economy. Palace households could no longer support numerous retainers and they disbanded their groups of musicians and dancers. The royal court performers were transferred out of the royal household into a newly created government department called the Fine Arts Department. Other artists found employment in government institutions such as the Public Relations Department and the music departments of the armed forces, or maintained themselves in "households," living and working as professional groups as well as training their own children and other youth.

Today, the Fine Arts Department is officially responsible for the continuation of the national heritage, preserving the royal court performing arts and training new generations of classical artists. It now supervises eleven Colleges of Dramatic Arts situated in various parts of the country. The method of training is wholly and deliberately traditional, so that the art forms remain intact not only at the performance level, but in spirit as well. Students still undergo the various stages of *wai khru* initiation rites and pay ritual homage to the grand masters of the past and present. Their instructors are still regarded as teach-

ers, mentors, and parents, as they have been through the ages.

Although most of the princely palaces ceased to patronize performing artists for a period of time, a few have revived their interests. At least three are now running music and dance schools to which modern parents can send their children at a very young age. The most outstanding example of royal patronage in our time is that shown by Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, daughter of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX, the present monarch. At the onset of the Information Age, Thai children, youth, and adults are enjoying a spirited revitalization of the classical performing arts under her leadership. Her Royal Highness is also undertaking Thai classical music and dance training. She has become an accomplished musician, often performing with groups ranging from secondary school children to military cadets, university students, senior citizens, and grand musical masters. She is also the author of the verses in the performance on track 4.

An Introduction to Thai Musical Instruments and Ensembles

Instruments

Thai musical instruments are formally grouped into the plucked string instruments (*kreung deed*), bowed string instruments (*kreung si*), percussion instruments (*kreung ti*), and wind instruments (*kreung pao*). Within this standard method of classification, a very large variety of regional and local characteristics exists. The *saw* (fiddles) of the Southern Region are of similar construction to those of the Central Region, but are known by different names. The *saw* of the Northern Region, however, are of entirely different construction. Only Central Thai musical instruments, those classified as the "Classical Music Instruments" used in the refined performing arts of the royal court will be discussed here (but see "Additional sources," below).

All Thai musical instruments have highly individual tonal qualities that make them easily identifiable.

The string instruments are either plucked with a plectrum or played with a bow, but never both. Special tonal qualities are widespread. For example, the lowest string of

the *chake* (a plucked string instrument) is made to vibrate with a distinct metallic timbre. The tenor fiddle known as *saw u* has a vellum membrane which gives it a mellow tone. In contrast, the treble fiddle (*saw duang*) has a high-pitched tone produced by its snakeskin membrane and cylindrical sound box.

The percussion group includes both finely tuned melodic instruments, partly tuned tonal drums, and untuned rhythmic instruments such as gongs and clappers. The gong (*khong*) appears both as an individual and untuned rhythmic instrument, and as the *khong wong*, a set of sixteen or more finely tuned gongs suspended in a horizontal frame. The xylophone (*franad*) group encompasses several different instruments which use finely tuned keys made of wood, bamboo, or metal suspended over resonant boxes of various shapes. The keys are struck with either hard or soft mallets which produce a wide range of sound qualities. Drums are also constructed and tuned so that the sound of each kind is easily identifiable. Both single face and double face drums are used, singly or in pairs. The variety includes the highly sophisticated and sacred *tapone*, whose two faces are struck

with a variety of hand movements to yield seven different sounds, and the *perngmang kok*, which is a set of finely tuned drums suspended in a frame and played as a melodic instrument. Even the most simple of rhythmic instruments such as the small cymbals (*ching*), large cymbals (*chab*), and clappers (*krab*) have distinctive sounds.

Thai wind instruments are subdivided into two main groups: the *pi* (reed instruments) and the *klui* (reedless instruments). Both groups retain their ancient, primitive forms, being tubular instruments with open finger holes. The *pi* is often referred to as an oboe because it uses a double reed, and the *klui* is called a flute because it is reedless. On analysis, both terms are misleading. The *pi* group indeed resembles the oboe, but is played with a technique which can generate continuous tones. The *klui* group is actually closer to the Western recorder. Thai wind instruments are intended to represent the human singing voice. The player uses a wind bypassing technique which does not require breath stops.

Ensembles

The instruments are grouped into three main types of musical ensembles (*wong*): the per-

cussion ensemble (*piphat*, heard on tracks 1 and 2); the string ensemble (*kreung sai*, heard on track 3); and the mixed string and percussion ensemble (*mahori*, heard on track 4).

There is a convention that string instruments are suited to women players only and percussion instruments are more suited to men. This rule is not strictly adhered to, however, for many men are excellent string players and there are highly gifted women percussionists. The convention is based on the type of music presented by each ensemble. The string ensemble usually plays music for listening, or the Thai equivalent of Western chamber music. Much skill and dexterity is needed, but within a relatively small dynamic range. The percussion ensemble, however, is used to play ceremonial music and to accompany the performing arts such as the *khon* (masked dance) and the *lakhon* (dance-drama). These genres are considered to be masculine by nature and require strength and stamina in execution. For grand concert purposes, the mixed *wong mahori* was created and is performed by men and women.

The smallest ensemble is that used in solo instrumental music. The soloist is always,

and without exception, accompanied by a drummer and a *ching* (cymbals) player. The interplay between the soloist and his accompanists is an important technical aspect of the performance.

The most common *piphat* (percussion ensemble) is known as *wong piphat kreung khu*, the "paired instruments ensemble." It comprises the *ranad ek* (treble wooden xylophone), *ranad toom* (tenor xylophone), *khong wong yai* and *khong wong lek* (large and small tuned gong sets), one wind instrument (either the *pi* or *klui*), the *ching* and *chab* (small and large cymbals), and one or more drums to suit the music.

The *kreung sai* (string ensemble) is an ancient combination of instruments. It is depicted in ancient stone carvings and mural paintings, some of them more than one thousand years old. The commonest form of contemporary *wong kreung sai* includes three fiddles (the *saw duang*, *saw u*, and *saw sam sai*), one *chake*, one *klui*, cymbals and drums.

The *piphat* and *kreung sai* ensembles are combined to become *wong mahori*. The percussion instruments used in *mahori* ensembles are scaled-down versions of those used in *piphat*. This is both to lower their dynamic

range and to adapt their tuning to the string instruments.

Scales

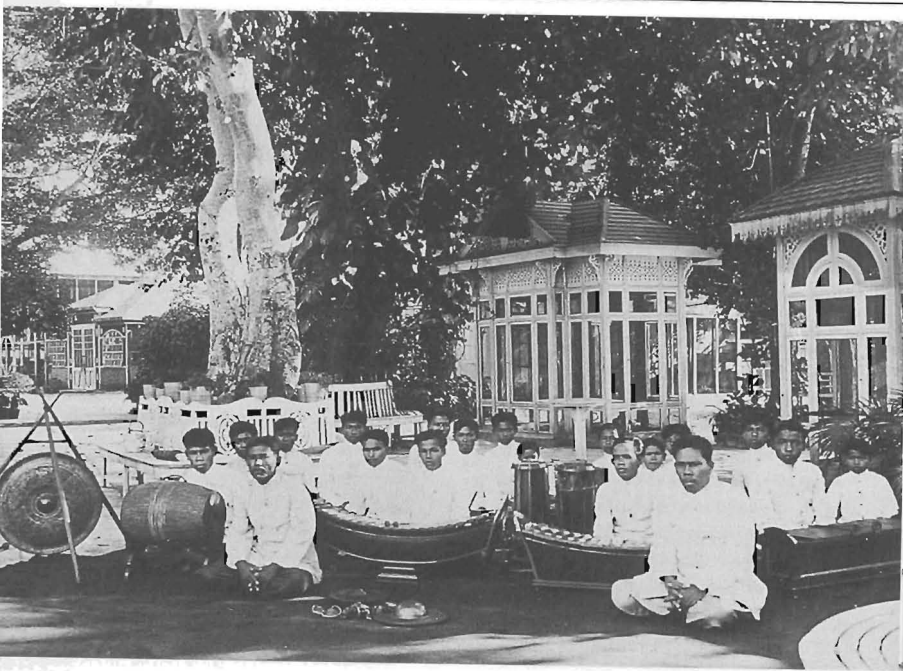
The Thai musical scale has seven full tones equally divided in pitch within an octave. There are no semitones. This makes it possible for the music to be freely transposed up or down the scale. Thai music makes good use of the facility. In sacred music, for example, whole sections are often transposed.

It is difficult to combine Western chromatic instruments with Thai instruments because only the fourths and fifths are similar in pitch. The other intervals are "off pitch" to the extent that it is impossible to combine the Thai and Western musical instruments without retuning one or the other.

For musical transcription, the Western notation system is preferred, but is used in a simplified form without incidentals (flats and sharps). Each note represents a sound in the Thai scale. In order to play Thai music with Western instruments, incidentals must be added to simulate as closely as possible the Thai musical sound.

Use of Tempo Variations

The words "tempo variation" are used here to convey a concept in musical composition in which the composer enlarges upon or abbreviates a musical theme using different tempos. The first variation (*chan diaw*) is the briefest presentation of a musical theme. The second variation (*song chan*) doubles the measure of the first variation. The third variation (*sam chan*) doubles the measure of the second variation. Placing one variation after another creates a nested tempo order. This type of music is known as *pleng thao*. The slowest tempo is usually played first, followed by the second variation and the first variation, finishing with an extremely lively end piece.



The musicians of Bang Khun Phrom Palace, photographed during the reign of His Majesty King Prajadhipok, composer of the songs performed on tracks 1 and 3.

Notes on the recordings

1. *Sounds of the Surf Overture (Pleng Hom-rong Kleun Kratob Fang)* Instrumental music composed by His Majesty King Prajadhipok, Rama VII (reigned 1925–1935). Performed by the *piphat mai khaeng* ensemble.

King Rama VII composed this instrumental piece in 1921, after a sea journey to Sat-tahip, a resort of exceptional natural beauty. Sounds of the surging waves inspired him to write a piece of descriptive music. The piece opens with an introductory phrase played by the *pi* (oboe). Soon after the opening, the melodic instruments divide into two groups and begin to represent the rolling waves with a musical technique known as *luk loh luk khad*. In this technique the *pi* and *ranad ek* (treble xylophone) assume the lead, while the *ranad toom* and *khong wong* (melodic gongs) take on a supporting role. Successive waves are represented in ever shortening phrases which follow each other until they merge, as if on a beach. The final phrases are played with a furious tempo, ending in the exciting climax of the surf.

2. *The Floating Moon (Pleng Bulan Loy Luen)* Music and lyrics composed by His Majesty King Phra Buddha Lertla Napalai, Rama II (reigned 1809–1824). A song accompanied by the *saw sam sai* (three-string fiddle) and the *piphat mai nuam* ensemble.

One night, King Rama II dreamt that he saw the full moon floating towards him while hearing the most wondrous music. Upon awakening he summoned the court musicians and taught the music to them. He also set one verse from his romantic poem “*Inao*” to the music. This song became one of the most beloved songs in the whole Thai music repertoire.

Modern performances of this song always include the *saw sam sai* as a solo instrument which either accompanies or complements the singing voice. This musical ensemble has become a tradition in Thailand. King Rama II was an excellent *saw sam sai* player in his own right, and had a collection of beautiful fiddles. The most famous was known as “*saw sai fa fad*,” the “thunderbolt fiddle,” which refers to its sound quality.

3. A Starlit Night (*Pleng Ratri Pradab Dao Thao*) Music and lyrics composed by His Majesty King Prajadhipok, Rama VII (reigned 1925–1935). A song in three variations accompanied by the *krueng sai* ensemble.

In composing both the words and music for this song, King Rama VII demonstrated his mastery in classical music. In this love song, a man compares his lover with beautiful and fragrant flowers. Instrumental music is played after each line of the singing verse, first in the slow *sam chan* tempo. The tempo is then halved to the *song chan*, then halved again into the fast *chan diaw* tempo.

Composition of musical variations like this is usually attempted only by professional musicians. This is the process of taking a piece of music or song written in one tempo and lengthening or shortening it so that both the singing and the musical accompaniment are performed at three tempi, ending with a very short end piece (*luk mod*) which is played at a very fast pace. King Rama VII wrote the whole composition, a rare achievement.

4. Heart of the Sea (*Pleng Ok Thalay Thao*) Lyrics written by Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, daughter of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej (reigned 1946–present).

Music composed by Choi Suntharavathin. A “farewell song” accompanied by the mahori ensemble.

The last piece in every Thai music concert is always a song from the group known as “farewell songs” (*pleng la*). The lyrics of farewell songs express the need to part and the wish to meet again in the future.

“*Pleng Ok Thalay Thao*” was written by Khru Choi Suntharavathin, a recognized master. At the time of composition, other verses were used. Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn wrote a new verse for this song in 1977. The accompaniment is lively with good use of a “dialogue” technique in which groups of instruments interact with each other.

Appearing on this recording

Musicians of the Bangkok College of Dramatic Arts Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Education

Kreung sai - string ensemble
klui (flute): Rattanaprakorn Yanavaree
saw duang (treble fiddle): Benjarong Tanakosed
saw u (tenor fiddle): Chalerm Muangpraesri
chake (string instrument): Jaru Balee
tone ramana (drums): Sahawat Pluempreecha
ching (cymbals): Lumyong Sovat
chab (large cymbals): Dussadee Meepom
mong (gong): Songyot Kaewdee

Mahori - string and percussion ensemble
saw sam sai (three string fiddle): Chalerm Muangpraesri
klui (flute): Rattanaprakorn Yanavaree
ranad ek (treble xylophone): Tanong Jamwimon
ranad toom (tenor xylophone): Dussadee Meepom
khong wong yai (treble gongs): Lumyong Sovat
khong wong lek (soprano gongs): Weerachat Sangkhaman
tone ramana (drums): Sahawat Pluempreecha
ching (cymbals): Surapong Bualuang
chab (large cymbals): Songyot Kaewdee
mong (gong): Tirapol Noinith

saw duang (treble fiddle): Benjarong Tanakosed
saw u (tenor fiddle): Niramon Trakarnpon
chake (string instrument): Jaru Balee

Piphat mai khaeng - percussion ensemble
pi (oboe): Jakrayut Laisakul
ranad ek (treble xylophone): Tanong Jamwimon
ranad toom (tenor xylophone): Dussadee Meepom
khong wong yai (treble gongs): Songyot Kaewdee
khong wong lek (soprano gongs): Lumyong Sovat
klong (drums): Sahawat Pluempreecha, Tirapol Noinith
ching (cymbals): Surapong Bualuang
chab (large cymbals): Weerachat Sangkhaman
krab (clappers): Rattanaprakorn Yanavaree

Piphat mai nuam - percussion ensemble
klui (flute): Jakrayut Laisakul
ranad ek (treble xylophone): Natapong Sovat
ranad toom (tenor xylophone): Dussadee Meepom
khong wong yai (treble gongs): Songyot Kaewdee
khong wong lek (soprano gongs): Lumyong Sovat
klong (drums): Sahawat Pluempreecha, Tirapol Noinith
ching (cymbals): Surapong Bualuang
chab (large cymbals): Weerachat Sangkhaman
saw u (tenor fiddle): Niramon Trakarnpon

Singers: Thadsanee Khoontong, Amporn Sowat, Chamnan Duannuan

Musical Directors: Natapong Sovat, Thongdee Sujaritkul, Benjarong Tanakosed
College of Dramatic Arts in Bangkok—Pranee Samranwong, Director; Arts Education Division—Sirichaicharn Fakchamroon, Director; Fine Arts Department—Somkid Chotigavanti, Director General; Presenter—M. R. Chakrarot Chitrabongs

About the compiler and author

M. R. Chakrarot Chitrabongs is currently Director of the External Relations Division of the Thailand Office of the National Culture Commission. He was previously Deputy Director of the Thailand Cultural Centre, responsible for Performing Arts. He was educated at Cambridge University and is a member of a family of royal descent which continues to maintain support for the performing arts.

Additional sources

For general information on Thai music, read the entry on Thailand by David Morton in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*, edited by Stanley Sadie, vol. 18, pp. 712–733 (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1981). This is

available in many public and university libraries.

For additional recorded classical music of Thailand, look for *Classical Music of Thailand*. World Music Library CICC-5125.

Credits:

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Production supervised by Anthony Seeger, Matt Walters, and Richard Kennedy
Editorial assistance Edmund O'Reilly

(front and back cover photo) Musicians of the College of Dramatic Arts in Bangkok performing at a *wai khru* ceremony, a ritual homage to the Lord Buddha, the patron gods, and the grand masters of the performing arts. Shown is the *piphat mai khaeng* ritual music ensemble heard on track 1.

About Smithsonian/Folkways

Folkways Records was founded by Moses Asch and Marian Distler in 1947 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In the ensuing decades, New York City-based Folkways became one of the largest independent record labels in the world, reaching a total of nearly 2,200 albums that were always kept in print.

The Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987 to ensure that the sounds and genius of the artists would be preserved for future generations. All Folkways recordings are now available on high-quality audio cassettes, each packed in a special box along with the original LP liner notes.

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