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Smithsonian Folkways to Open MP3 Music Store

By *Jacqueline Trescott*
Washington Post Staff Writer
Friday, April 1, 2005; Page C01

The Smithsonian Institution is entering the highly competitive world of music downloads by offering the Smithsonian Folkways collection of ethnic and traditional music in an online music store.

Smithsonian Global Sound, the new project, will be formally launched during the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in June. The enterprise is in the same vein as Microsoft's MSNmusic, Apple's iTunes Music Store and Sony's Connect.

"This is a museum of sound," says Richard Kurin, director of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Folkways will offer music that ranges from the earliest American folk songs to contemporary groups doing traditional music from Europe, Africa, Asia and South America. The music includes the songs of Woody Guthrie; the music of Mwenda Jean Bosco, the late guitar pioneer from Congo; the sound of the Turkish *saz*, a stringed instrument similar to a lute; playground songs by Suni Paz of Argentina; and the rich North Indian music of Kamalesh Maitra.



Woody Guthrie's American folk songs and Suni Paz's Argentine children's music are both available. (AP)

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Global Sound will charge 99 cents a song, which are available in MP3 format. The Smithsonian will pay royalties to the artists, as its recording label has done with records and CDs.

The potential broad exposure pleases many Folkways artists.

"I'm all for it," says Mike Seeger, a member of the New Lost City Ramblers. The son of musicologist Charles Seeger and half-brother of Pete Seeger, Seeger has spent much of his life promoting southern and folk music. "I have a feeling of mission that I would like to have people get to know this realm of music better. This is a way to afford it," Seeger says.

"When we saw the blossoming of the Internet, we thought, what if we could use this as a device for opening up the archives?," says Kurin, who is in charge of the Folkways archives. "People who don't usually have a voice can have a voice in a democratic, central way."

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With monetary returns to the artists, Kurin hopes the payments establish the ownership of the music. Over the years Folkways has fought to give the original voices their due. "There are world music stars who mine the traditional music, and the question is, what is the ownership, what is the moral commitment and how much is going back? When we give them the money, that establishes the intellectual property rights," Kurin says.

The pay to artists is a percentage of each download, but the formula varies according to contracts, he explains. If the Smithsonian or its archives' partners can't locate an artist, the money is put in escrow.

Since this is new territory for the Smithsonian, the staff needed to create the Global Sound unit. They recruited Jon Kertzer, an ethnomusicologist and Microsoft executive, and Anthony Seeger, an anthropologist, former director of Smithsonian Folkways and nephew of Pete Seeger, to assemble a development team in Seattle.

The start-up money came from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, Allen Foundation for Music and Folkways Alive! at the University of Alberta. Rockefeller provided \$850,000, part of which would be paid back if Global Sound makes money.

The Web site, www.smithsonianglobalsound.org, will allow searches by artist, geographic location, language, cultural group or instrument. All of the Folkways archives, including photographs, can be downloaded onto a screen. Also in development are scrolling translations of some of the music for use on a personal computer. Right now the Haya Heroic Ballads, a form of storytelling found in northwest Tanzania, is being translated into English on the Web site.

To help people navigate the site, Kurin hopes to add contemporary personalities, like Mary Youngblood, the award-winning Native American flute player, and Mickey Hart, former drummer for the Grateful Dead, to guide people to their genre of world music, or their favorites.

The service also includes music from the International Library of African Music in Grahamstown, South Africa, and the Archives and Research Center for Ethnomusicology outside New Delhi, not only to expand the Smithsonian's holdings but also to "give them a marketplace," Kurin says.

As the Smithsonian fine-tunes this new service, the promoters hope new audiences for underappreciated artists of traditional music will develop.

"There's a guy in Punjab who is doing wonderful, meaningful work and it is never going to be heard," says Kurin. "Here is a way."

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