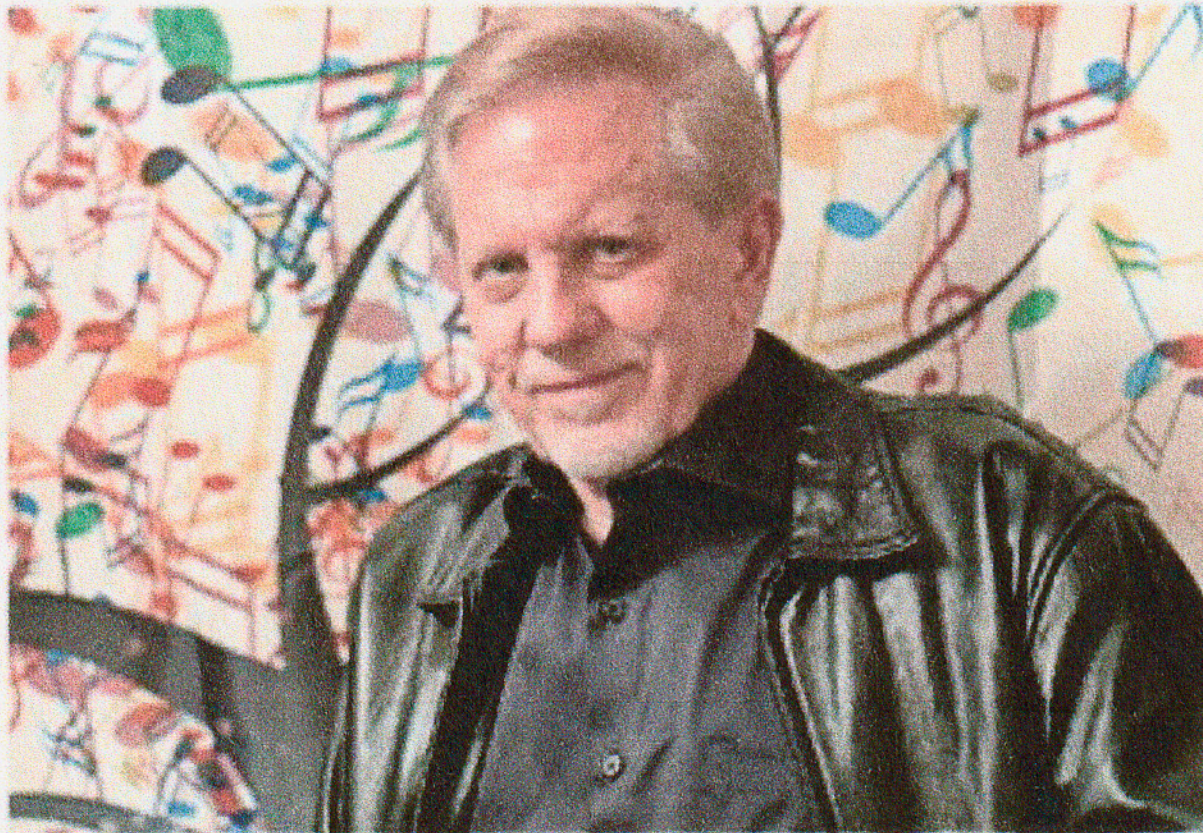


MISSISSIPPI BOOKS

AUTHOR Q&A | ROBERT MUGGE



Robert Mugge SUBMITTED PICTURE

Documentarian filmmaker writes the book on key American music films

Jana Hoops
Special to Mississippi Clarion Ledger
USA TODAY NETWORK

In his new memoir, "Notes from the Road: A Filmmaker's Journey through American Music," documentarian Robert Mugge (pronounced "muggy") focuses on his 25 films about music and musicians from his unique perspective, as he chronicles a longtime career of more than four decades as a filmmaker and director.

A Chicago native who grew up in Silver Spring, Maryland, Mugge first began to realize an interest in music as a young child, as he found himself listening to a diverse mixture of American musical genres that included country, gospel and rock 'n' roll. During his career, he would broaden that list as he also came to love bluegrass, soul, reggae, zydeco, jazz improvisation, Cajun and others.

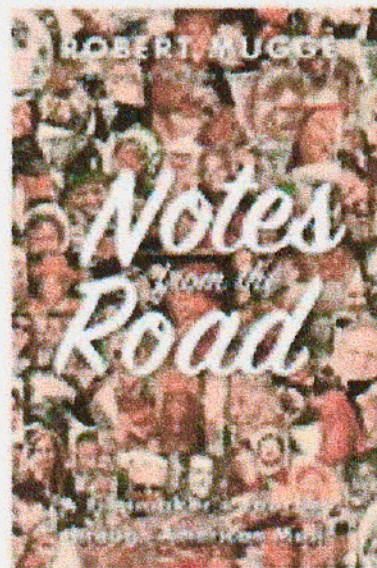
Mugge's book highlights 25 of his key

music films, depicting not only the musicians and their performances, but also the behind-the-camera experiences that he and his crews would encounter. All were shot from 1976 through 2015. Among the music film titles included in the book are Deep Blues, Gospel According to Al Green, Last of the Mississippi Jukes, Blues Divas and New Orleans Music in Exile.

Among his enormous collection of awards are the Keeping the Blues Alive in Film Award from the Blues Foundation in Memphis (1992); a Gambit Weekly Big Easy Music Award for being a "Special Friend of New Orleans Music" (2007); and the Lifetime Achievement Awards from the Santa Fe Film Festival (2005); and the Cinema on the Bayou Film Festival (2008).

He has also served as the Department

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MISSISSIPPI TOP READS

Sunday, May 28, 2023

1. "Salvage This World," Michael Farris Smith, Little Brown
2. "The Trackers," Charles Frazier, Harper Collins
3. "We Are A Haunting," Tyriek White, Astra House
4. "The Wager," David Grann, Random House
5. "Happy Place," Emily Henry, Penguin
6. "Knowing What We Know," Simon Winchester, HarperCollins
7. "The Covenant of Water," Abraham Verghese, Ingram Publishing
8. "Missy," Randy Pierce, Dogwood Press
9. "Finding Me," Viola Davis, HarperrOne
10. "The Boys from Biloxi," John Grisham, Doubleday Books

Children and Young Adults

1. "Dog Man: Twenty Thousand Fleas Under the Seas," Dav Pilkey, Graphix
2. "Oh, The Places You Will Go!," Dr. Seuss, Random House
3. "The Eyes and the Impossible," Dave Eggers, McSweeney's
4. "Little Blue Truck Leads the Way," Alice Schertle, Clarion Books
5. "Wishtree," Katherine Applegate, HarperCollins

Events (Sunday, May 28 – Saturday, June 3, 2023)

Wright Thompson discusses and signs "Pappyland: A Story of Family, Fine Bourbon, and the Things That Last" 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, Off Square Books, 129 Courthouse Square, Oxford, 662-236-2262; and in partnership with the Jackson Friends of the Library (JFOL), 6 p.m. (VIPs), 7 p.m. (General Admission) Saturday, The Cedars, 4145 Old Canton Rd, Jackson, ticket sales by JFOL at formississippi.org/jfol, book sales by Lemuria Books, 601-366-7619
Carolyn Brown discusses her book "To Dance, to Live: A Biography of Thalia Mara" Noon Wednesday, History Is Lunch, Two Mississippi Museums, 222 North Street, Jackson, and livestreaming on Facebook and YouTube, 601-576-6998.

— Reviews compiled by Mississippi Library Commission; sales ranks and events compiled by University Press of Mississippi.

Sales Reported by Book Mart & Café (Starkville); Lemuria Books (Jackson); Lorelei Books (Vicksburg); Square Books (Oxford); Story Books (Cleveland).

Mugge

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of Telecommunication's endowed chair at Ball State University in Indiana; and from 2003 to 2005, he served as Filmmaker in Residence for Mississippi Public Broadcasting and its Foundation for Public Broadcasting in Jackson.

Mugge and his wife and production partner Diana Zelman now live in Indiana.

As the producer-director-writer-editor of some three dozen films — most of which focus on music and musicians — tell us about your challenges as a filmmaker.

Anyone who wants to pursue a life in the arts is likely to face a great many challenges, and that's especially true if you hope to make a living while also expressing a personal vision. For any self-employed artist in particular, the most basic challenge is earning enough money to pay your bills while practicing your chosen craft. And that's especially true of filmmaking, because your costs are so much higher than they are with, say, writing, painting, or music-making. Part of the challenge is that, even when you find backers for your work, they may have agendas of their own (or simply egos) that lead them to interfere with your creative efforts.

As filmmakers, we've long joked about studio heads or television executives who say, "I may not know how to make a film, but I certainly know how to edit one!" In other words, they don't know how to tell a story in their chosen medium, but they do know how to mess one up. And that's why I've always kept my productions as inexpensive as possible: not only to make funding more likely, but also to keep my investors from feeling they've "bought" themselves a filmmaker.

That said, over time, I've managed to retain total — or nearly total — creative control of all my projects. So, imagine my shock when I began writing and found that editors and publishers are far worse than film funders, believing that anything and everything you've written is fair game for them to revise or reimagine. I spent two years waiting for a university press to publish "Notes from the Road," only to have them miss their own self-declared deadline and then try to dictate a brutal edit of my work. So, I switched to a small commercial press that moved much faster, but which also tried to impose what I considered to be an ill-advised edit.

Eventually, I convinced them to publish exactly what I wrote, and since all reviews thus far have complimented my writing, I feel a sense of vindication. Whether it's in the film business, the book business, or anything else, the biggest challenge is to stand up for your own vision and be ready to walk away from overly controlling funders or distributors. Of course, that's easier said than done.

Would you characterize your films as documentaries?

Yes. In my book, I refer to the making of music docs as a "small subset" of documentary filmmaking. All nonfiction filmmakers share — or at least should share — similar goals, techniques, ethics, etc. But with music docs, you also need to know how to capture musical performance, which is a craft unto itself, and how to interweave that performance with interviews and other sorts of documentation. In my opi-

nion, if your goal as a filmmaker is to capture elements of the world in a fair and truthful way — developing themes, making connections, and highlighting values in the process — you are a documentarian, regardless of your subject matter.

What have you learned in your many years as a film producer, as well as your five years as an endowed chair professor at Ball State University?

I suppose the films themselves provide my answer to that question, as does "Notes from the Road," which I wrote specifically to address aspects of filmmaking that can't be communicated through the films themselves. That includes explaining my own goals and techniques when making a film, the effort involved in raising money, and the dramas which sometimes take place *behind* the camera.

As to teaching, what interested me most was that, in order to tell students what they needed to know — not only about making films, but also about surviving and flourishing as a filmmaker — I had to analyze my own motivations and practices through the years, as well as the potential pitfalls I had faced. And of course, all this self-analysis also led to my writing a filmmaking memoir, which, itself, is intended to explain how films focusing on assorted musical genres can be diverse expressions of a unified perspective.

Please explain what you mean by "musical spirit," and how that influences your filmmaking.

I mention "spirit" three times in the book. First, I tell how, since my earliest projects, I've viewed music as "a metaphor for the human spirit." Second, I write that, when going on location, I try not to preconceive what I'll find there, believing that, ultimately, unknown "spirit guides" will lead me to what is compelling, entertaining, and enlightening in any situation. And finally, I raise the age-old issue of whether cameras can see beyond the basic exteriors of human beings, because my own goal, whenever possible, is to capture a subject's personality, character, and especially "spirit." The latter is difficult to quantify, but I view it as the animating force within each of us. I also feel that traditional American musicians are more likely than their corporate counterparts to have a spiritual dimension to everything they do, and that this explains my attraction to them and their music.

After your longtime career as a "music filmmaker," and after now writing a well-received book, what goals remain for you?

For the past several years, I've been in a period of consolidation. That has involved remastering many of my older films in 2K or 4K and getting them newly released. It also has led to my writing or assembling multiple manuscripts that relate to my life and career. The first to be published is "Notes from the Road," but I've also completed a sequel for that which is comprised of thematically organized excerpts from artist interviews I've conducted through the years.

Yet the completed manuscript I care most about is titled "Saloon Man: A German Immigrant Battles the Limits of Liberty (1870 to 1915)." It's a biography of my paternal great-grandfather, a hugely successful businessman who helped to pioneer the city of Tampa, Florida — but who was controversial since his core businesses were alcohol-related at a time of oncoming temperance, and because he supported, hired, and partnered with African Americans in the midst of Jim Crow. I've had a couple of presses interested, but I'm holding out for one that shares my vision for the book. I also plan to make more films.