

More Than a Mug Shot

Independent filmmaker Robert Mugge is flying high.

It's easy to see why filmmaker Robert Mugge is flying high these days. Five of his films, including *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, *Rhythm 'n' Bayous: A Road Map to Louisiana Music*, and most recently, 2015's *Zydeco Crossroads: A Tale of Two Cities*, were released in March on Blu-ray and DVD. Two films, *Iguanas in the House*, a 27-minute documentary about New Orleans' roots-rocking the Iguanas, and *Rosie's in the House Tonight*, a 55-minute documentary about zydeco starlet Rosie Ledet, are packaged as bonus features with *Kingdom* and *Zydeco Crossroads*, respectively.

Additionally, on April 22, MVD released Mugge's 1992 flick *Pride and Joy: The Story of Alligator Records*, which could be considered a root of the aforementioned music docs.

In a sense, the release of these films validates a portion of his life's work, since only limited audiences saw *The Kingdom of Zydeco* (1994) and *Rhythm 'n' Bayous* (2000) at special screenings and prestigious film festivals. After their short run, Mugge was forced to shelve the films due to music rights issues.

After *Pride and Joy*, Mugge proposed documenting Rounder Records (*True Believers: The Musical Family of Rounder Records*) to BMG Video's David Steffen; it was a natural leaping off place to cover a broad range of traditional American music. Steffen added a second film (*Gather at the River: A Bluegrass Celebration*) covering the World of Bluegrass festival in Owensboro, Kentucky.

But when Mugge started calling around Southwest Louisiana to make arrangements for the Rounder film, he uncovered "all these behind-the-



Robert Mugge with his longtime producer, Diana Zelman

scenes Shakespearean dramas" and convinced Steffen to add a third film on their sweep through the South.

"This white woman [Lou Gabbs] who ran the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame decided that she was going to crown Boozoo to be the new king of zydeco based on a declaration from the City of Lafayette," says Mugge. "The zydeco association was saying this is horrible. A white woman is going to declare a new head of an African-American music. I started talking to DJs and record store owners and suddenly realized we had a real drama that we could capture."

That drama resulted in *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, a staged

battle of the bands at Lake Charles' Habibi Temple between upstart Beau Jocque and the venerable Boozoo Chavis who was in disbelief that anyone with only a few years of professional zydeco experience could challenge him. Twenty-two years later, the bantering scenes are outright hilarious. Beau Jocque jokes "the best man might win if I do" while Boozoo rants how he has forgotten more about zydeco than Jocque will ever know and how he's the daddy. "Who's Beau Jocque?" he asks. "He's a, how do you call that, an individual. He's just an individual."

Rhythm 'n' Bayous came about in 1999 as part of a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame tour across

South Louisiana. Afterwards, Mugge ventured off to Northern Louisiana to capture its rockabilly, country and gospel, including the fervent Easter Rock celebrants of the Mississippi Delta. Though it wasn't Easter weekend when the film rolled in Winnsboro, the all-white-clad African-American group performed its ritual of circling a table decorated with lanterns and cakes, clapping and singing to the Lord. "It's stuff that goes right back to the Civil War and Africa beyond that. It's just extraordinary."

Similarly, *Zydeco Crossroads*, with interviews conducted by the World Café's David Dye, came out of a tour organized by Philadelphia's WXPB. The public radio station staged zydeco concerts, dance lessons and food-related events in Philly, then took a group of WXPB supporters to Louisiana in October 2014 to experience zydeco in its natural environs. Footage includes live performances and interviews in Philadelphia and in Lafayette as well as a zydeco trail ride and a jam session at El Sido's.

As with every film, Mugge insists on musicians being paid, even when things spiral out of control as they did at the filming of the zydeco jam. Originally the plan was to have Buckwheat Zydeco's band back marquee performers like Chubby Carrier, Corey Arceneaux, and Anthony and Rockin' Dopsie, Jr. in the true spirit of a jam. But that all changed after Nathan and the Zydeco Cha Chas were added to the bill. Lil' Nate, Chris Ardoin and Corey Ledet showed up with their full bands, which they needed to play their original compositions. Releases were signed at the last minute and Mugge scrambled, with the help of WXPB's Roger

ROBERT MUGGE

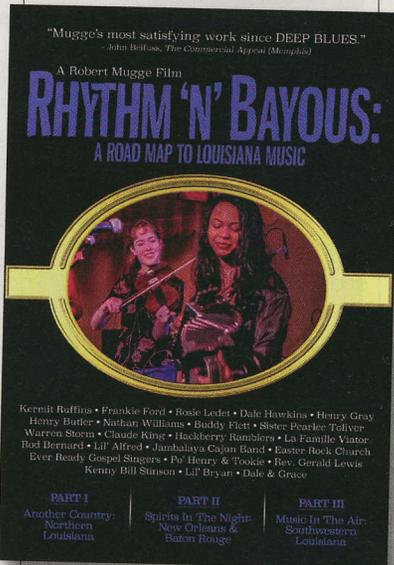
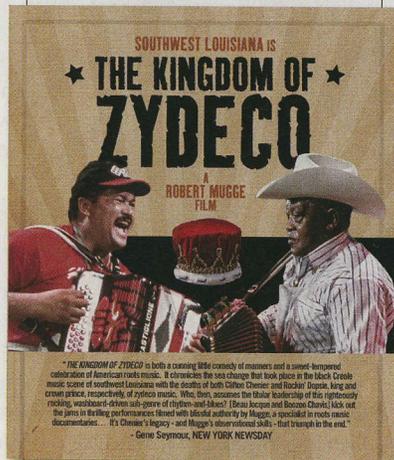
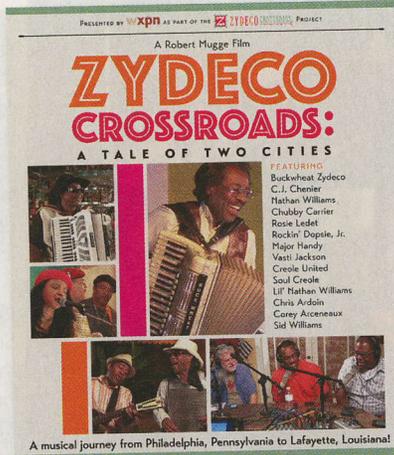
LaMay, to find money to pay them. "In the middle of all that I had not yet met Major [Handy] and Major came up to me while I was trying to direct. Lovely man and he said 'Okay, they told me I'm supposed to see you about playing?' And I said 'I'm so sorry. Our budget is just gone.'"

Major replied that he didn't need to be paid and Mugge promised to work him in towards the end. But things took longer than expected, and by the time Mugge was ready for him, Handy had already left.

A few nights later Mugge filmed Handy playing in a duo with his scrubboard-scrapping wife Frances at Hook'd Up Bar & Grill. "One of the thrills of *Zydeco Crossroads* was getting to work with people like Major and someone who, no pun intended, is such a major artist and has been around for so many years and can play so many instruments and types of music."

A key theme running throughout these films is the idea of family and community. "I tried wherever possible to film these traditional regional artists in their own communities, in the places where they have created this music, in the environment that led to this music in front of the people who are their regular audiences, rather than taking them to a festival somewhere disconnected from those origins."

Another thing Mugge captures in his music documentaries is the variety of infrastructure groups, listeners, dancers, music journalists and historians, independent record stores and public radio stations



who support the music. "Without that support, the music would cease to exist," Mugge says.

Since he shows up infrequently, usually years apart, Mugge jokes that he is really just a drive-by shooter rather than someone immersed in the everyday culture. Still, he observes what's going on. "I think it's wonderful that the young people are still gravitating to zydeco. They have their own artists, their own dancers and dances."

Mugge sees mostly aging baby boomers at blues concerts around the country, with a slight exception in Mississippi. "To be fair, there are young bands happening in Mississippi and some younger audiences are attracted to it but it's nothing like Southwest Louisiana. It's just so amazing that with all the transportation and communication available, the way the people move around, the way they can watch TV and listen to music from everywhere, there is still a distinctive scene like that."

Mugge says that on a certain level none of this side stuff, like king battles (as depicted in *Kingdom*), matters. "What's so much fun is talking to these musicians who are really looking for validation and people to appreciate what they do, so whether you call them the king, the prince or an ambassador, whatever it is, let's just appreciate them. Let's understand and care for these delicate cultural flowers that happen to bloom in our midst." ☆

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