

Notes from the Road

By Robert Mugge

The Sager Group • 364 pages

Looking over the more than three dozen films he has directed, filmmaker Robert Mugge has created a body of work as prolific as that of writers Samuel Charters and Peter Guralnick or recording engineer Alan Lomax.

And his work has covered similar territory to the above figures, helping document in both performance and discussion musicians working in traditional and other non-mainstream styles. Mugge's films have focused on the blues to bluegrass, zydeco to Panamanian, jazz to R&B, gospel to Hawaiian and reggae, as well as a couple non-musical subjects.

If those subjects tend to stay below the pop culture radar, leaving Mugge unknown to not only most music fans but most cinema fans as well, certain of his films—*Deep Blues* (1991), *The Kingdom of Zydeco* (1994)—have become highly regarded classics among fans of those styles of music, while *New Orleans Music in Exile* (2006) is the story of how Hurricane Katrina upended the music community of the Crescent City.

His new memoir, ***Notes from the Road: A Filmmaker's Journey Through American Music***, is a surprisingly easy read coming from someone whose chosen medium is not the written word. Always informative, frequently insightful, Mugge offers a fun behind-the-scenes look at how one of the most prolific documentarians of non-mainstream music has gone about his business the last five decades.

The book is not chronological in its organization; instead, each chapter looks at two or three films that have a connection that is not always apparent until Mugge explains it. For instance, chapter one covers his 1976 film on composer George Crumb and *Gather at the River: A Bluegrass Celebration* from 1994; Mugge grouped them together, he explains, because:

In fact, what most connects these two films is their shared focus on nature, time, and spirit, as rooted in the rural mountain culture of both George Crumb's West Virginia and Bill Monroe's Kentucky. And even George's evocation of whale songs in "Vox Balaenae" resembled the high-pitched, "high lonesome" vocals of bluegrass singers echoing plaintively out of an Appalachian holler. Both suggest a kind of cosmic loneliness and a recurring sense of loss.

For each of the 26 films he writes about, Mugge offers details about cinematic challenges the different settings presented (camera locations, lighting, sound), his artistic aims for the film, and then a bit of a narrative about the making of the film.

It is his thoughtful discussions about his purpose in making each film that may be most interesting. For instance, in preparing to film *Black Wax*, his 1983 film about poet and musician Gil Scott-Heron, Mugge recalls:

Beyond capturing Scott-Heron in performance, I wanted to do what I had done for Sun Ra, which was create opportunities for him to express more of his personal philosophy and political beliefs without resorting to stereotypical interview situations.

It is also enlightening when Mugge discusses his failings, such as an attempt in his Al Green film to include (at the suggestion of his financial backers) more academic discussions about the intersections of faith and art. But when audiences at early screenings voiced their disapproval of the juxtaposition of academic atop performance, Mugge realized he'd attempted the impossible and re-edited the film.

One of the longest sections is his discussion of *Deep Blues*, his 1991 film on Mississippi juke joints made with funding from British

rock guitarist Dave Stewart (Eurythmics) and the participation of music journalist Robert Palmer. This film, more so than most of the others, had its schedule repeatedly upset by events of the day; this is reflected in Mugge's retelling that, even 30 years later, still has the frustrations seeping through. From film lost to accidental post-shooting exposure to a bad recording head on an audio deck to personality clashes with one of the producers, it was a production that clearly wore on Mugge.

The next chapter is of particular interest to blues fans of a certain age, pairing as it does *Pride and Joy: The Story of Alligator Records* (1992) and *True Believers: The Musical Family of Rounder Records* (1994). In the 1980s and '90s Alligator and Rounder together put out a good portion of the total blues releases each year, and certainly had most of the top blues acts on their respective rosters. The labels' own stories are fascinating; Mugge's recollection of telling those stories no less so.

The Alligator film focuses as much on Alligator founder and still-owner Bruce Iglauer as it did the artists on the 20th anniversary tour that year. Once funding for the film was secured (a topic that Mugge visits on nearly every film, because documentaries on non-mainstream musical styles don't tend to do Spielberg-like box office), the Alligator project went pretty smoothly, to judge by Mugge's narrative.

The Rounder project, however, was tacked on to the *Gather at the River: A Bluegrass Celebration* in order to save on travel expenses; before those two films were far along, Mugge managed to add *The Kingdom of Zydeco* into the combined budget—and shooting schedule! And where the Alligator film was shot on two locations—at a concert in Philly, and in Chicago where Alligator (and Iglauer) are based—the Rounder film took in locales from Austin to New Orleans and back to their offices near Boston. Mugge's narrative of the making of the Rounder film seems a bit harried, but then the process being described was also harried.

The most personal section of the book, as well as the longest and most in-depth, is his telling of the making of *New Orleans Music in Exile*. Grouped in a chapter with *Iguanas in the House* (1996) and *Rhythm 'N' Bayous: A Road Map to Louisiana Music* (2000), the section on Katrina starts with Mugge discovering that due to the economic destruction from Katrina, a planned teaching job at a state university has fallen through.

With no job to report to—nor income to count on—Mugge does what he knows best, and works on lining up financing to document how Katrina has disrupted the lives of New Orleans' famed musical community. The subject of financing this film is almost a chapter in itself, as the backers wanted to see results from each step of the production before cutting the next check.

The devastation Mugge and his team find—both physical and spiritual—was a shock to their systems, in Mugge's telling. Yet, they soldier on to capture what had happened and what those still in New Orleans were doing to help bring back those whose homes had been destroyed, and who were living in Austin, in Houston, in Memphis, and elsewhere. The film and the making of the film blend together in the face of the losses they encounter.

But that overlap of art and the creation of the art is true of each of the films Mugge discusses here: while none hold the innate drama of the Katrina film, every film becomes personal for him as he interviews his subjects and captures their performances.

An engaging preface covers Mugge's own journey to a life making films about other people, and blues historian William Ferris sets the table in an informative foreword.

What makes this book so rewarding for both music (particularly blues) and film fans is how freely Mugge pulls back the curtains and allows the rest of us to see through his eyes both the joys and struggles that have gone into making each of his films. The filmography at the end of the book offers a guide for further exploration of his work.

—Jim Trageser *LB*