

## **The Wit and Wisdom of American Music**

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**Interview with Robert Mugge: The Wit and Wisdom of American Music**

**Special Thanks: Robert Mugge and Mark Pucci Media / Photos courtesy of the Robert Mugge Archive**

### **A conversation about film, music, and the human spirit**

Over the past five decades, Robert Mugge—who describes himself as a "music filmmaker"—has produced more than thirty documentaries, most of them related to music. In 2023, he published his memoirs, titled "Notes from the Road: A Filmmaker's Journey through American Music."

Now, in 2026, Mugge releases his second book on music: a thematically organized compilation of excerpts drawn from 150 interviews he has conducted with American musicians, as well as with others who support their work.

This new volume, "Quotes from the Road: The Wit and Wisdom of American Musicians," allows these artists to do once again what they already do in his films: speak for themselves regarding their ambitions, achievements, and collaborations—and, above all, regarding what makes the musical traditions and regional music scenes they represent so unique.

### **How did the idea for your new book come about?**

Well, as you probably already know from reading the beginning of the book, I've been making films—primarily music films and documentaries—for over 50 years. When I interview someone, I might spend two hours talking with that person, or—as I did with Sun Ra—I might speak with them on multiple occasions. However, I can usually only include a small portion of the interview in the final film, because I also have to incorporate musical performances, music historians, and other elements.

Space is limited, so I've always thought to myself: "Gosh, I have so many great stories I'd love to share!" Otherwise, they just end up on the cutting-room floor. This was especially true with Sun Ra; he has become increasingly famous in the 46 years since I finished that film, and I felt that those who truly appreciate him would want to know the additional things he told me during the two years we worked together.

I've been mulling this over for a while, and I recently published two other books. The first was a memoir about my work as a filmmaker, titled "Notes from the Road: A Filmmaker's Journey Through American Music." The second, published in late 2024, is about my great-grandfather—a German immigrant and a successful yet controversial pioneer in Tampa, Florida. His primary business ventures were related to alcohol, which is why the book is titled "Saloon Man: A German Immigrant Battles the Limits of Liberty, 1870–1915."

Even before those were published, I had already begun gathering material for this third book: "Quotes from the Road: The Wit and Wisdom of American Musicians." It is finally available

for purchase and is receiving a wonderful reception. In fact, tomorrow I'm traveling to Memphis for my first book-and-film presentation event, where I'll be screening excerpts from the interviews featured in the book—including segments with blues musicians Bobby Rush and Elvin Bishop. I will also be premiering a new 50-minute documentary about the long-standing friendship between New Orleans singer Irma Thomas and Austin artist Marcia Ball. Originally, I considered transcribing the full interviews and including them in the book one after another, but I decided it would be much more interesting to organize them thematically. The book now covers topics such as their beginnings, their sense of place, regional music scenes, songwriting, instrumentation, technique, and the balance between tradition and innovation. I am very pleased with the result.

**You spoke with many musicians from different genres—jazz, blues, folk. Do you find differences among them—for instance, between a blues musician and a jazz musician?**

People from different places may differ in certain respects, but there is a common thread. One of the book's central themes is that, despite working in different genres or coming from different backgrounds, these musicians have a great deal in common. By intercutting interviews—to borrow a cinematic term—and alternating between artists from different genres and regions, you realize just how similar their experiences are.

For example, in the Mississippi Delta, many traditional music venues disappeared due to competition from the casinos lining the river. These casinos offered people a place to gamble and eat cheaply, while also paying musicians better wages than the local clubs in the area. I encountered exactly the same situation in Southwest Louisiana with Cajun, Zydeco, and Swamp Pop musicians; their clubs were struggling for the very same reasons.

There are also deep cultural connections. Much of bluegrass music is tied to the land and to traditional agriculture, and that same spiritual connection to the land can be observed in Hawaii. Even the instruments themselves tell a story of migration. As Peter Rowan notes, bluegrass instruments hail from all over: the guitar from Spain, the bass from Germany, and the mandolin from Italy.

The United States is often referred to as a melting pot of cultures—particularly due to the fusion of European, African, and Caribbean influences. This is evident at Congo Square in New Orleans, where even Native American cultures influenced the music of enslaved people. Another example is the ukulele; most people associate it with Hawaii, but it actually originated in Portugal. Conversely, the steel guitar—used in blues and country music—was invented in Hawaii. Thus, while unique regional scenes and individual talents certainly exist, there is an incredible fusion taking place across different parts of the country and across diverse musical genres.

**What have you learned about yourself from the wit and wisdom of American musicians?**

I grew up loving many art forms, but two in particular: cinema and music. When I first started out in the film world, I had to decide what my subjects would be. Gradually, I realized that if I made films about music, I could combine my two great passions.

My first music film was about George Crumb, the contemporary classical composer. I worked with him in 1976, and later moved on to “Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise,” about the great jazz artist. Next came a project on Gil Scott-Heron—the incredible poet, singer-songwriter,

and bandleader—and shortly thereafter, I worked with Rubén Blades on salsa music, and returned to jazz with Sonny Rollins.

Over time, I began making films about entire genres, music festivals, or broader aspects of music, rather than focusing on a single artist. Each time I explored a new genre, it was a profound learning experience.

For instance, I made the Sonny Rollins film because I wanted to explore jazz improvisation with the greatest living improviser. Even when I worked outside the United States—such as in 1983 for Reggae Sunsplash in Jamaica—my motivation was to understand reggae, ska, and rocksteady.

The same applied to my first blues film, “Deep Blues,” commissioned by Dave Stewart of Eurythmics. I had long wanted to learn more about Mississippi blues: its key artists, and how it differs from the blues of Chicago, Kansas City, or St. Louis.

Every new film is a learning experience for me. One rule I have always followed is that if I am going to dedicate six months or a year to a project, it must involve music and artists with whom I feel comfortable on a day-to-day basis. I have been incredibly fortunate never to have had to make a film about music I didn't like, or musicians I didn't respect.

In my first book, I noted that music is a spiritual language—something that Sun Ra also addresses in this new book. I find it incredibly stimulating to work with these musicians in their places of origin. In my film memoirs, I explained that I have always tried to avoid filming music at festivals completely removed from where it was created. Instead, I go to the places where the music was born to film performances, conduct interviews, and document their lives within their regional scenes.

I feel that the films are much richer as a result, and the experience undoubtedly broadens my own understanding—not only of what makes these artists and regions unique, but also of what they all have in common.

### **What ties bind cinema and music—the soundtrack and the story?**

That is a fascinating question. While I cannot give you a definitive answer, I can tell you what I think about it. First and foremost, both music and cinema exist in time; both, in their own way, tell stories. While musical stories can be more abstract—lyrics aside, music is perhaps the most abstract of the arts—they also possess the most direct emotional connection with us. It may affect us intellectually, but its primary impact is emotional.

Cinema functions in a similar way. A film may not state anything explicitly, yet still elicit a powerful emotional response to the characters' experiences. Great filmmakers use themes and messages to show us aspects of our own lives, commenting on them through the fusion of sound and image.

In fact, I dedicate a chapter of my book—titled “Visualizing Music”—to exploring this very subject. I discuss the psychological phenomenon of synesthesia, wherein people see sounds and hear colors. Given that sight and hearing are our primary means of interacting with the world, it comes as no surprise that stimulating one sense often affects the other.

In that chapter, I discuss the composer George Crumb, whose musical scores are works of art in and of themselves—sometimes written in shapes such as the peace symbol. For his piece *\*Vox Balaenae\** (Voice of the Whale), he conceived it to be performed under blue light, thereby evoking the ocean and the sky. When I make a film about music, I ask myself: How can I best document this performance while simultaneously enhancing it? How can I play with the rhythms of the music within my filmmaking—using color, light, and editing to heighten the sound?

I also explore how different cultures visualize music. For instance, Hawaiian “kumu hula” (hula masters) utilize specific colors and foliage for their “leis” and costumes, thereby honoring their traditions. I mention Marcia Ball and how her husband—a painter—transformed her club, La Zona Rosa, visually in ways that complemented the music. My friend Bill Steber, a musician and photographer, also attempts to capture the “implicit movement” of music through his visual arts and sculptures.

In short, music can be interpreted through film, photography, animation, and dance—each adding a new visual layer. We must also mention Sun Ra. Much like the Wagnerian concept of *\*Gesamtkunstwerk\** (the “total work of art”), Sun Ra integrated everything: music, poetic lyrics, ancient Egyptian mythology, and cosmic themes. His performances were a spectacle of colorful costumes—part ancient tunics, part sci-fi space suits—combined with theatrical lighting and set design. There are endless ways to play with the connections between music and the visual arts, and that is precisely what I attempt to capture in my work.

### **What is the impact of your generation's art on the sociocultural landscape?**

I belong to the Baby Boom generation. At this moment, I feel that we are part of a country going through a very difficult period, and many of us are working hard to repair the damage of recent years. I often feel the need to apologize for the madness currently being inflicted upon the world.

At its best, my generation fused art and politics during the 1960s. The Vietnam War drove many of us toward activism, and art emerged naturally from that. It is a cliché, but the sixties really were an incredible era of experimentation—whether in film, theater, music, painting, or happenings. Those movements had a profound impact on me, and on anyone who ventured into the arts back then.

We are older now, but many of us remain on the front lines, protesting alongside younger generations against injustice. Of course, every generation has its pros and cons.

Some members of my generation became self-centered or greedy, causing harm of their own making. But in my case, the themes of my films—dating back to the mid-70s—were subjects I had already encountered during my adolescence in the sixties. Had I been born earlier, I would have loved to work with Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, Billie Holiday, or Hank Williams. But I came along later, so I sought out the artists who moved me most deeply. Sometimes I initiated the projects myself; other times, someone like Dave Stewart would bring me an idea—such as “Deep Blues”—and help bring it to life.

When Robert Palmer, Dave Stewart, and I made that film, our goal was to demonstrate that Mississippi blues was not a dead art form. We wanted to prove that it remained a vital, contemporary art form, flourishing in the Delta and the hill country of northern Mississippi, just as it had in the 1920s and 30s.

Artistic movements rise and fall, and sometimes they resurface. My mission has always been to capture what is interesting while it is happening. While historical films are valuable, it frustrates me to see major media companies spend a fortune on documentaries about artists who are no longer with us. I want to tell them: “Look around you! There are incredible artists working today. Focus your cameras on them! Support them now!”

Of course, in a way, I benefit from this—because those very same companies eventually come to me to purchase footage of Sun Ra or Gil Scott-Heron; footage I captured when they were still alive and in full swing, simply because no one else was there to document them at the time.

### **If you had a time machine, where would you go with your camera and microphones?**

This is something I’ve thought about a lot. Although I was thrilled to travel to Tokyo to film the world premiere of Sonny Rollins’s “Concerto for Tenor Saxophone and Orchestra,” I wasn’t making films yet—nor was I old enough—to capture moments like the premiere of John Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme” or Duke Ellington’s “Sacred Concerts.” I would have loved to be there.

However, I’ve found great satisfaction in following my intuition and traveling to places where I felt a great film might emerge—only to have the unexpected take over. For instance, I went to Upstate New York, to a sculpted rock quarry called Opus 40, to film Sonny Rollins. During his performance atop this gigantic outdoor sculpture, he suddenly leaped from one rock tier to another—a drop of nearly two meters. He broke his heel, yet as he lay flat on his back, he continued playing his solo.

You go to these places with a plan, but then the universe gifts you something unexpected. Although I deeply regretted that he was injured, it was an incredible, legendary moment to capture on film. Weeks later, when I interviewed jazz critics Gary Giddins, Francis Davis, and Ira Gitler, the concert had already become a legend—not only because of the incredible music, such as the premiere of “G-Man,” but because of Sonny’s incredible resilience.

I had a similar experience with Al Green. He kept putting off our interview for a long time. Finally, after I filmed him in his personal recording studio, he suddenly asked me, “Do you want to do that interview now?”

We talked for quite a while, and I waited until we had established a good rapport before asking him about the infamous incident in which a girlfriend threw hot grits at him and then committed suicide. Since he was already feeling comfortable, he spoke about the subject with a depth he had never before displayed in public. Once again, you start with a plan, but if you’re lucky, you receive those exceptional gifts that make a film truly special.

### **What was the best piece of personal advice you ever received—advice you still live by as a guiding motto?**

That is a question that requires some time for reflection. More than specific pieces of advice, I have been influenced by the collective wisdom and humor of the artists I have interviewed—which is precisely why I titled my book “The Wit and Wisdom of American Musicians.” Then, too, there is the thrill of witnessing their extraordinary performances up close. People often ask me which of my films or artists is my favorite. It is the old cliché: it is like asking

which of my children I love the most. Each one brings something unique to the table, and one attempts to achieve something different with every project.

However, I have always said that, if I had to choose a single film that best represents everything I set out to do, it would be "Gospel According to Al Green." I managed to capture an artist at the very peak of his powers and document his church service—something that had never been permitted before, nor has it been permitted since.

Thematically, that film allowed me to delve deeply into the profound connection between soul music and gospel. It also enabled me to explore different dimensions of love: not merely the romantic love he sang about in his early hits, but the spiritual love that led him to become a preacher and found his own church in Memphis. There is a beautiful line in his song "Belle" where he sings to a woman: "You are the one I want, but He is the one I need." It perfectly encapsulates that tension between the secular and the divine.

The entire experience was incredibly enriching—from working with the great producer Willie Mitchell to exploring the Hi Records label. I felt that I was able to weave more of the things that truly matter to me into that film than into any other.

Of course, there are elements I love—and with which I remain satisfied—in all of my films. There were many others I wanted to make but for which I could not secure funding; ultimately, however, one must judge a filmmaker—or a writer, or a musician—by what they actually created, not by what they merely hoped to create.

### **What are your hopes and fears for the future of art, documentary film, and music?**

One of my greatest fears across all these fields is Artificial Intelligence. While AI enables the achievement of certain artistic effects that would otherwise be impossible—which could be viewed as a positive—it carries a significant risk. It threatens to diminish the value of genuine human talent, whether that be the ability to paint, to compose rich and unique music, or to craft a cinematic scene.

Furthermore, there is the question of truth. When we look at a photograph or watch a film today, how can we be certain that it is real and not something created by a computer? This also carries dangerous implications for politics, where unscrupulous individuals can generate "deepfake" scandals.

Despite these fears, I have no doubt that human beings will always possess an inherent need to create, to express themselves, and to share what moves them. I also hope and trust that we will find better ways to preserve the art of the past and share it with the future.

As a filmmaker, that has always been my mission. Especially in the beginning, I wanted to document artists who were not receiving sufficient attention from corporate media and the entertainment industry. My objective has always been twofold: to preserve and to promote. I wanted to preserve their work for future generations—for a time when they are no longer with us or are no longer able to perform—and to promote them in the present.

I have intentionally focused on minority artists, avant-garde creators, and those living in remote locations, far removed from major corporate hubs. Beyond my own desire to learn and explore, I have always wanted to assist these artists by documenting their work for the future and promoting it in the present.

## **What is your question, Mr. Mugge?**

Ha! What a curious question. I suppose I would ask: "How much longer can you afford to keep doing what you do?"

This is what truly connects me with the musicians I film. I am an independent filmmaker, just as they are typically independent musicians. We don't have the backing of major Hollywood studios or major record labels; we work on the periphery of our respective art forms. I deeply understand their struggle to get by on less money than they would like.

I could have solved my financial problems long ago by making films that didn't interest me—much in the same way these musicians could have made superficial, commercial music instead of something deeper and more connected to their own worlds. But I believe they made the right choice, and I believe I did, too. There is no reason to pity us when we face financial hardships. We do what we do because we are passionate about it, and we gladly accept the trade-offs.

## **Do you feel more like a blues musician or a jazz musician? Does your work align more with the philosophy of blues or jazz?**

I have made more films about blues than jazz—partly by chance. I love the blues and the opportunity it gave me to explore places like the Mississippi Delta, the North Mississippi Hill Country, and Chicago's South Side. But I am equally passionate about jazz.

It was thrilling to work with legends like Sun Ra, Sonny Rollins, and Gil Scott-Heron—artists who fused jazz or jazz-funk with poetry. I've also featured jazz artists like Kermit Ruffins in my film "New Orleans Music in Exile." However, my work isn't limited to a single genre. You could just as easily ask me if I'm a zydeco filmmaker, a salsa filmmaker, or a bluegrass filmmaker. From the very beginning, I've tried to cover a broad musical landscape to reveal the underlying connections between these various forms. Now, through my books, "Notes from the Road" and "Quotes from the Road," I can use both my own words and those of the artists to show what makes each genre unique—and what they all have in common.