

# MLIFE

MAKING THE MOST OF IT



Bill Steber and the late Pat Thomas (the son of Son Thomas) at the Highway 61 Blues Museum in Leland, Mississippi, in a scene from Robert Mugge's documentary, "Deep Roots: The Art and Music of Bill Steber and Friends." PROVIDED BY MUG-SHOT PRODUCTIONS

# 'Deep Roots'

*Famed documentarian chronicles Mississippi blues photographer in new film set to premiere in Memphis on May 7*

John Beifuss Memphis Commercial Appeal | USA TODAY NETWORK - TENNESSEE



The husband-and-wife filmmaking team of Robert Mugge and Diana Zelman. PROVIDED BY PAT CASE DALEY

Robert Mugge has produced and directed documentary feature films about bluegrass and zydeco and reggae; about New Orleans musicians, in exile from Hurricane Katrina; about Hawaiian dance; about the "saxophone colossus," Sunny Rollins and the "cosmic" jazz radical, Sun Ra; about the pre-hip-hop jazz poet, Gil Scott-Heron; and about the Panamanian salsa singer, Rubén Blades, among other subjects. • "In the three dozen films I've made in the last 50 years, I've done just about every musical genre there is," said Mugge, who turns 75 on May 8, which — appropriately if coincidentally — is the day of the 2025 Blues Music Awards, a 46-year Memphis tradition that will be held at the Renasant Convention Center.

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**Bill Steber with one of his artworks, a sculptural construction inspired by Robert Johnson, made with items collected from Johnson's former haunts.**

PROVIDED BY MUG-SHOT PRODUCTIONS

## Deep Roots

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Mugge, who lives in Muncie, Indiana, where he held an endowed professorship in telecommunications at Ball State University, will be in Memphis during awards week for the "world premiere" of his latest movie, "Deep Roots: The Art and Music of Bill Steber and Friends," a documentary that returns the filmmaker to the Tennessee/Mississippi territory that has provided especially fertile soil for his art.

If Mugge has chronicled "just about every musical genre there is," several of his most successful and significant films were tilled in Memphis and Mississippi. "Gospel According to Al Green" (1984) offered an intimate portrait of the nonpareil soul singer turned Pentecostal pastor. "Hellhounds on My Trail: The Afterlife of Robert Johnson" (2000) focused on the influence of the short-lived Delta bluesman who was said to have sold his soul to the devil in exchange for mastery of the guitar. (Johnson also was born on May 8, in 1911.)

The most momentous of Mugge's more-or-less-local films was probably "Deep Blues" (1992), which introduced viewers to such previously neglected but at the time still vital artists as Junior Kimbrough and R.L. Burnside, igniting their commercial careers and helping to launch an international fascination with North Mississippi hill country blues that continues today.

## 'Deep Roots: The Art and Music of Bill Steber and Friends'

Movie screening at 11:30 a.m. May 7, Blues City Cafe, 138 Beale. Admission free.

Director Robert Mugge and artist/musician Bill Steber will attend.

Part of The Blues Foundation's "Blues Music Awards" week. The 46th Blues Music Awards show is May 8 at the Renasant Convention Center. Doors open at 5 p.m.

For more information and tickets, visit [blues.org](http://blues.org).

That same year, the Mississippi-based Fat Possum label began releasing new records by those musicians, which found favor with young and hip listeners; meanwhile, the 1990 CD box set "Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings" continued to be a surprise best-seller. "Those three events put Mississippi music on the map for a much wider audience," Mugge said.

The title of Mugge's new film is an intentional echo of its predecessor. "Even though it's a very different one from 'Deep Blues,' it's covering some of the same artists and same territory," Mugge said. "So I do see it as kind of a companion film."

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# Deep Roots

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## Joy and darkness

The blues acolyte/enthusiast/evangelist name-checked in the title of “Deep Roots: The Art and Music of Bill Steber and Friends” is a Murfreesboro, Tennessee-based photographer, musician and painter who did not see “Deep Blues” in 1992 but did in that year meet Son Thomas, the storied Leland, Mississippi, gravedigger/blues musician/folk artist who sculpted clay skulls with actual human teeth, collected from a local dentist.

“I actually mark my life from before that day and after that day,” Steber says in the film. “Deep Roots” showcases a variety of Steber’s artistic identities. In concert sequences shot mostly at Murfreesboro’s Linebaugh Public Library (a particularly humble and wholesome setting) and in Clarksdale, Mississippi, the film presents Steber — a jovial sort of blues Santa Claus, with a neatly trimmed white beard, and a fedora in lieu of a red cap — singing and playing banjo and kazoo with his various bands, including the Jake Leg Stompers and the Stoop Down Rounders, which perform jug and “ho-kum” music in the style of the 1920s and ’30s.

Steber calls that era “the most magical period in the history of recorded music.”

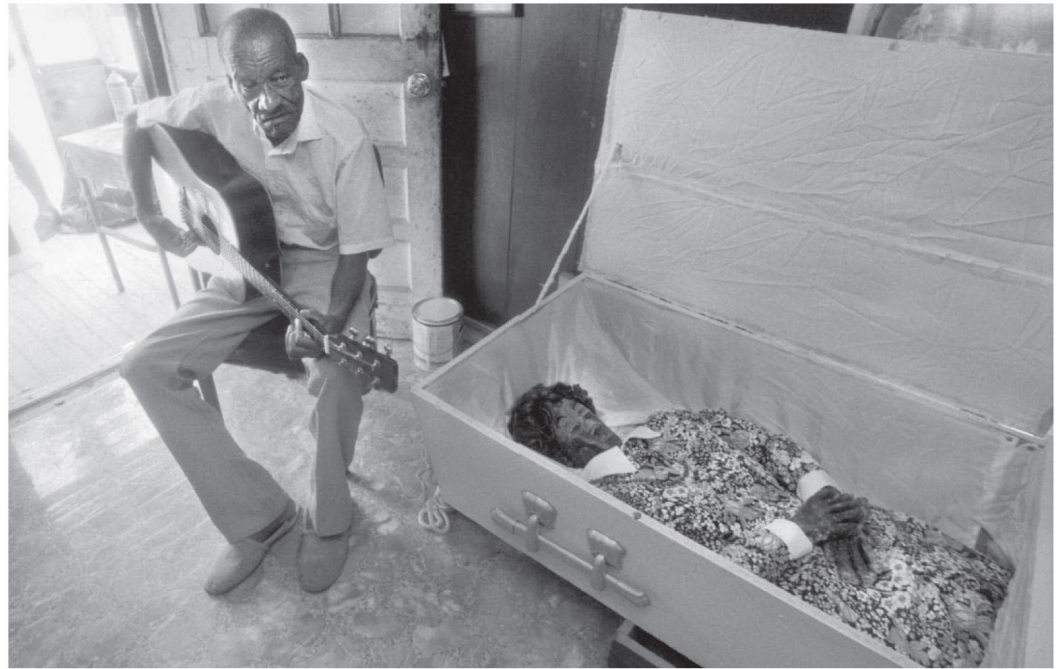
The movie also introduces viewers to Steber’s startling black-and-white photographs of juke joints, cotton fields and hill country jam sessions (Steber is a former Nashville Tennessean photojournalist); and to his multimedia “constructions,” which layer photographs, paint and “detritus” — wood, tin, soil and more, collected from pilgrimages to sites of blues history — to form what might be called sculptural paintings, which pay homage to classic blues performers.

“His art is full of metaphor and full of actual elements that relate directly to the life and music of the artist,” Mugge said.

He said the “swirling imagery” of Steber’s photographs represents an “emotional response” to the music of the juke joints. “They’re just so full of joy, but sometimes he’ll capture sort of a dark underside of the hill country and Delta.”

## The iPhone Blues

Chicago-born and based for much of



Son Thomas, with his guitar, seated next to one of his sculptures of a person in a casket, as photographed by Bill Steber.

PHOTO BY BILL STEBER

his career in Philadelphia, Mugge (pronounced “muggy,” as in “Memphis in August is muggy”) said Steber’s “colorful personality” and “unbelievable energy level” convinced him that “Deep Roots” would work.

He compared Steber’s role in the new film to that of another white blues-culture enthusiast, the late music critic Robert Palmer, who acted as a sort of do-cent-scholar in “Deep Blues.”

Steber, Mugge said, is “a guide into this world that he loves to document, this world that he inhabits” and, through his artistic interpretations, “helps to create.”

“Deep Roots” was sort of “a family affair,” Mugge said: The film mostly was shot in early 2024, with Mugge, his filmmaker wife, Diana Zelman, and Steber’s wife, photographer Pat Casey Daley, handling most of the cinematography. That’s a perhaps highfalutin word for a high-tech but simplified production process: The movie was shot with iPhones, which were attached to rigs and sometimes tripods, and augmented with

microphones.

In other words, this movie about a man whose favorite music is a century old is very much a product of the 21st century and the current era’s very changed moviemaking environment.

The financing process has changed along with the production process. Mugge said “Deep Blues” cost “\$250,000 in 1990 dollars”; he said his last “fully funded film” was “Zydeco Crossroads: A Tale of Two Cities” in 2016. And yet with “Deep Roots,” “I’ve made a film I like a lot that has rich themes and great performances and chronicles, as I love to do, important artists who are outside the corporate entertainment complex, and I’ve been able to do that with just several thousand dollars out of my own pocket.”

“Deep Roots” will be distributed via MVD Entertainment, the company that handles most of Mugge’s films. Free to the public, the Memphis premiere is set for 11:30 a.m. May 7 at Blues City Cafe on Beale Street, where a screen will be erected on a stage usually devoted to live

music. Mugge — who in past years has screened his movies in such venues as the New Daisy and Automatic Slim’s — hopes the early showtime will be convenient for musicians, journalists, tourists and others in town for the next evening’s awards show.

Steber will join Mugge for the premiere. In an interview from Murfreesboro (where he lives among what he called “artists, academics, ne’er-dowells and musicians”), he said it was “humbling” to be the focus of a movie made by a director whose previous films spotlighted such legends as Al Green and Sun Ra.

But Steber said he believes “Deep Roots” is “not really about me” but about “the musicians and their music and their experiences. It’s me saying, ‘Let me tell you about this, because you need to know this stuff.’”

Said Mugge: “I’ve always said this from the very beginning, that the best music films are about more than music, and I still believe that.”