

INTERVIEW



SPECIAL EDITION

LAST OF THE  
MISSISSIPPI  
JUKE  
A ROBERT MUGGE FILM

ROBER



By Gustavo Pollo Zungri  
Editor & Director  
CADB Magazine

Translation: Mabel Sosa

DVD

# Deep Blue

A MUSICAL PILGRIMAGE TO THE CROSSROADS



A FILM BY ROBERT MUGGE

PERFORMERS PHOTOGRAPHED BY  
B.L. Burrows, Jesse Blue, Harvey, Jack Johnson, Big Jack Johnson,  
Lennie Hutchins, Roosevelt "Big Boy" Baker, Willie T. Lopez, Jack Owens,  
Blind Willie Johnson and many others at Crossroads.

DVD  
VIDEO

"A UNIQUE AND FASCINATING Glimpse INTO  
THE LIFE AND MEMORY OF ONE OF SOUL MUSIC'S  
MOST PERPLEXING FIGURES,  
GREEN SHEDS IN ITS INTIMACY  
ESSENTIAL VIEWING."  
—MUSIC & MOVIE LITERATURE



# GOSPEL ACCORDING TO AL GREEN

"ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL 'LIVE' PERFORMANCES EVER  
CAPTURED ON FILM. IT'S FRIGHTENING, ELECTRIFYING."  
—ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK

# ROBERT MUGGE

## THE GUARDIAN OF THE HISTORY

*Robert Mugge is, doubtless, one of the most important and prolific film-makers and documentarists of the history of music. He is the author of many documentaries about the Mississippi Delta Blues such as Deep Blues: A Musical Pilgrimage to the Crossroads. Robert Mugge has recorded his documentaries at the barrelhouses and juke joints, where bluesmen used to exhibit their music at the end of the Civil War. On the stages of those places the blues found a very important space to develop.*





*Robert Mudge*

**W**e've learnt a lot through your films and documentaries so it's surely an enriching interview for *Latin America*, and we thank you in advance from "Con Alma de Blues Magazine"

It's my pleasure, Gustavo.

**GZ:** *Your filming passion didn't start with music but in 1976 there was a change through various musical documentaries, and a deep idyll with the blues started from that moment. How did this love to this beautiful genre start?*

Yes, in 1976, I produced *GEORGE CRUMB: VOICE OF THE WHALE*, a portrait of avant-garde composer George Crumb. Not only was it my first "music film," but also the first film I made after leaving grad school. I then spent all of 1977 creating *AMATEUR NIGHT AT CITY HALL*, a portrait of Philadelphia's law-and-order mayor Frank L. Rizzo, releasing it in early 1978. Believe it or not, although the film's subject was political, it included the first blues performance I ever filmed. The way that happened is as followed: One day, my crew and I were walking through Center City Philadelphia and stumbled upon black singer and harp player Charlie Sayles playing on the street for spare change. The song he was singing, "The Man," addressed police brutality against African Americans, which perfectly fit the themes of my film. And making the situation even more

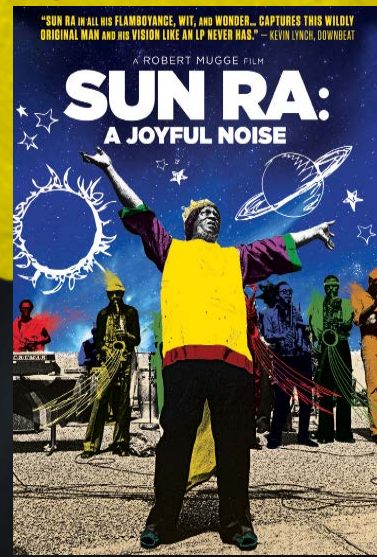
relevant was the fact that, perhaps sixty feet away, police were arresting another black man and placing him in the back of a paddy wagon. So, we filmed both events simultaneously, as if one were providing musical accompaniment for the other.

My next film, *SUN RA: A JOYFUL NOISE*, took nearly two years to produce. I shot most of it in 1978, essentially without funding, then spent another year and a half trying to find money to complete it. For some reason, no one wanted to back a portrait of a visionary jazz musician who claimed to be from Saturn. But in the spring of 1980, I finally secured enough money to finish it. And that film's eventual success is what let to my having a career as a so-called "music filmmaker." For the rest of the 1980s, I made films concerning one musical genre after another: *BLACK WAX* with Gil Scott-Heron in 1982; *COOL RUNNINGS: THE REGGAE MOVIE* (shot at Sunsplash in Jamaica) in 1983; *GOSPEL ACCORDING TO AL GREEN* in 1984; *THE RETURN OF RUBÉN BLADES* in 1985; *SAXOPHONE COLOSSUS* with Sonny Rollins in 1986; *HAWAIIAN RAINBOW* (about Hawaiian music) in 1987; *ENTERTAINING THE TROOPS* (about performers who entertained Allied troops in World War II) in 1988; and *KUMU HULA: KEEPERS OF A CULTURE* (about Hawaiian dance) in 1989. Along the way, I often considered making a film about Mississippi blues, but I wasn't sure how to go about it. Then, in 1990, I was hired to direct

Filed from 1978 to 1980, Robert Mugge's *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise* serves not only as a performance film, but as a record of the famous composer-keyboardist-bandleader's truly and purposefully odd personal and professional life.



*Robert Mugge in 1978. All photos are courtesy of Robert Mugge.*



what became *DEEP BLUES*, and doing so changed my life forever.

As you imply, since making my first blues film, I have returned to that subject again and again. On the one hand, I have made lots of additional blues films, from *PRIDE AND JOY: THE STORY OF ALLIGATOR RECORDS* in 1992, to *HELLHOUNDS ON MY TRAIL: THE AFTERLIFE OF ROBERT JOHNSON* in 1999, to *LAST OF THE MISSISSIPPI JUKES* in 2003, to *DEEP SEA BLUES* in 2007, to *BIG SHOES: WALKING AND TALKING THE BLUES* in 2010, to *ALL JAMS ON DECK* and *ELVIN BISHOP'S RAISIN' HELL REVIEW* in 2011. On the other hand, I have made

many other films that either incorporate blues performances or else focus on genres related to the blues, among them *THE KINGDOM OF ZYDECO*, *GATHER AT THE RIVER: A BLUEGRASS CELEBRATION*, and *TRUE BELIEVERS: THE MUSICAL FAMILY OF ROUNDER RECORDS*, all released in 1994; *IGUANAS IN THE HOUSE* in 1996; *RHYTHM 'N' BAYOUS: A ROAD MAP TO LOUISIANA MUSIC* in 2000; *NEW ORLEANS MUSIC IN EXILE* in 2006; *GIVING UP THE GHOSTS: CLOSING TIME AT DOC'S MUSIC HALL* in 2014; and *ZYDECO CROSSROADS: A TALE OF TWO CITIES* and *ROSIE'S IN THE HOUSE TONIGHT* in 2015.

As everyone knows, blues helped to lay the foundation for all forms of traditional music which took root in North America. So, it seems logical that, increasingly, I would find myself interested not only in the many roots and branches of the blues itself, but also in other forms of music that have been influenced by the blues. The evidence of that interest can be found in the films themselves.



***GZ: You've worked as an independent producer-director-writer-editor for more than four decades. How did you manage to get funding for your TV and film projects?***

Early on, starting when I was still in school, I managed to secure a couple of filmmaking grants from the U.S. government. But I quickly saw that, to survive as an independent filmmaker, I would have to find many different sources of funding, and that they likely would change from project to project. Since those earliest years, I have been funded by American and foreign television channels, home video companies, record companies, theatrical distributors, investors, private foundations, state governments, and more. My first steady funder was Britain's Channel Four Television which gave me full funding for *BLACK WAX*, *GOSPEL ACCORDING TO AL GREEN*, and *THE RETURN OF RUBEN BLADES*, and partial funding for *SAXOPHONE COLOSSUS* with Sonny Rollins and *DEEP BLUES*. A few years later, BMG Video (now defunct) gave me the primary funding needed for *PRIDE AND JOY: THE STORY OF ALLIGATOR RECORDS*, *GATHER AT THE RIVER: A BLUEGRASS CELEBRATION*, *THE KINGDOM OF ZYDECO*, and *TRUE BELIEVERS: THE MUSICAL FAMILY OF ROUNDER RECORDS*. Then, several years after that, STARZ ENTERTAINMENT GROUP provided full

funding for *LAST OF THE MISSISSIPPI JUKES* and *NEW ORLEANS MUSIC IN EXILE*, while also acquiring *BLUES DIVAS* in between. In short, I've been happy to work with any company or organization that has shared my interests and permitted me to retain ownership of, or at least primary control over, my own work.

***GZ: DEEP BLUES is a 91 minutes length exploration on the Mississippi Blues made with Dave Stewart (Eurythmics) and Channel 4 from Great Britain funds with the collaboration of music writer Robert Palmer. How was that experience? Do you have any anecdote or extra remark with any other musician from the documentary?***

In early 1990, Eileen Gregory, a close associate of Dave Stewart of the British rock group Eurythmics, approached me about directing a film on Mississippi blues. She told me that, growing up in the North of England, Dave had, through a cousin in Memphis, been very influenced by the music of Memphis and Mississippi, and now he wanted to "give something back." He had approached music writer Robert "Bob" Palmer, the author of the seminal book *Deep Blues*, and asked him to collaborate on a film that would document assorted blues of that region. Bob told Dave and Eileen that, if they could get me to direct it, he would



work with us. So, I was fortunate to be hired for what turned out to be an extremely demanding, yet also quite rewarding, project.

In the early fall of that year, Eileen, Bob, Bob's girlfriend, and I made a weeklong trip through Memphis and Mississippi, scouting locations, meeting with artists, and making arrangements for the weeks of shooting then being planned. We returned roughly a month later with camera, lighting, audio, and music recording people in what became a caravan of vehicles moving from Memphis, Tennessee and West Memphis, Arkansas to the Hill Country of North Mississippi, and then to various parts of the Mississippi Delta. As you know, the artists we filmed (Junior Kimbrough, R.L. Burnside, Jessie Mae Hemphill, Big Jack Johnson, Roosevelt "Booba" Barnes, Jack Owens and Bud Spires, and others) were then virtually unknown outside of that region. But thanks to our film, our soundtrack album, and subsequent releases by the new record label Fat Possum (some of those first releases produced by Bob Palmer himself), many of them got to be extremely well-known for the rest of their lives.



**Robert Mugge and Boozoo Chavis**



**Robert Mugge with Jack Owens during the filming of Deep**



**Al Green and Robert Mugge at the October 25, 1985 American theatrical premiere of GOSPEL ACCORDING TO AL GREEN at the Coolidge Corner in Brookline, MA. Photo by Justin Freed.**



*Robert Mugge*

Me with singer Irma Thomas and actor Morgan Freeman (at Madidi, Morgan Freeman's and Bill Lueckett's former French restaurant) in Clarksdale, Mississippi in 2004 while we were shooting the interviews for BLUES DIVAS (photographer: Dick Waterman).

Perhaps the most memorable part of the project was traveling to Bentonia, Mississippi to film the so-called "devil blues," first performed by the legendary Skip James, Henry Stuckey, and others, and currently being covered by guitarist Jack Owens with harp player Bud Spires. When we filmed Jack and Bud in the fall of 1990, it was a beautiful sunny day, Jack was in good voice, and everything went beautifully. Or so we thought. After we returned home from the shoot, my film lab phoned to report something had gone terribly wrong with footage from one of the scenes. As I soon learned, everything shot in Bentonia was overlaid with a bright orange light, as if the scenes were immersed in hell fire. Now, this is similar to what happens when film is inadvertently exposed to light prior to the footage being processed, but my camera assistants swore that nothing like that had happened. At any rate, those scenes, and those scenes alone, were ruined, almost as if they had been purposely set aflame.



Fortunately, Eileen had purchased what is called "negative insurance," and that gave us the money we needed to return to Bentonia for a reshoot in early 1991. This time, though, the weather was awful, and Jack's voice was raspy due to a cold. In addition, my sound man's recorder was at the shop being repaired. So, we had to use a recorder from a rental house, which can sometimes be risky.

The reshoot itself went reasonably well, with Jack and Bud giving a decent performance, though not as amazing as the one they'd given before. In addition, when we got this new batch of footage back, we found that one of the two stereo heads on the audio recorder had been bad, causing Jack's already raspy voice to distort on occasion. Cutting around the worst of the audio, I did edit together an effective, two-song sequence for the film. In addition, for the soundtrack CD, we used the earlier, superior take of Jack's song "The Devil." But if there's one thing we learned during these repeated trips to Bentonia: one should never underestimate the power of the Devil in rural Mississippi.

Morgan Freeman delivering his introduction for the film version of BLUES DIVAS in front of Ground Zero Blues Club in Clarksdale, Mississippi in early 2005 (photographer: Robert Mugge).



For the record, Dave Stewart paid for the making of DEEP BLUES out of his own pocket because, as he said, he wanted to “give something back” to the artists who had influenced him while growing up. Ultimately, Britain’s Channel Four Television did agree to provide about a fifth of our budget in return for British TV rights. But Dave picked up the rest of the costs himself, for which my crew and I will be eternally grateful. I should also mention that none of us ever intended to make a film version of Bob Palmer’s book. The film ended up with the same name only because, early on, Eileen proposed a title for the film which I didn’t like; and since I rejected her title, she would never approve any of my own suggestions. As a result, as my editing was nearing completion, I went to Bob and asked if he’d mind our borrowing the title of his book, because I assumed it was the only one on which we all could agree. Bob said yes, and that’s how the film got its title.

***GZ: We’ll publish on this issue the numberless quantity of the titles you’ve filmed. Which one is your most special work and why?***

I really can’t pick a favorite of my own films. With each one, I’ve sought to accomplish different things, and I’ve always been pleased with the results. However, if one film of mine perfectly represents what I try to do with my work, that film would be GOSPEL ACCORDING TO AL GREEN. To my mind, it does three key things: it captures a great artist at the peak of his powers; it explores important themes (in this case, the connections between soul music and gospel); and it tells a dramatic story. [As it happens, I’ve just finished remastering that film, and MVD Visual will rerelease it worldwide on Blu-ray and DVD this coming spring.





*Robert Muggs*



***GZ: Who is your musical hero, speaking about art and as life example?***

I have so many musical heroes, I feel silly mentioning any at all. They range from jazz greats Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Billie Holiday; to composers George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and Stephen Sondheim; to singer-songwriters Bob Dylan, Neil Young, and Leonard Cohen; to blues legends Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and B.B. King. But I'm also incredibly grateful to have been able to work with the likes of Sonny Rollins and Sun Ra, Gil Scott-Heron and Rubén Blades, Al Green and Otis Clay, Odetta and Koko Taylor, Dr. John and Doc Watson, Beau Jocque and Boozoo Chavis, and so many more. In fact, I've worked with hundreds and hundreds of brilliant artists, some of them well-known and others barely known at all. But all have given me joy, and I hope I've given them valuable exposure in return. In addition, some of the artists with whom I've worked most often - New Orleans soul queen Irma Thomas, the late singer-songwriter Bill Morrissey, and Mississippi bluesman Vasti Jackson - have become close friends of mine as well..

***GZ: Thanks to the internet we could enjoy the television series "Blues Divas". How was it to work with Morgan Freeman and leading figures as Odetta, Irma Thomas, etc? What***

***can you tell us about this programme?***

From July of 2003 through August of 2005, I worked as a Filmmaker in Residence, first for Mississippi Public Broadcasting, and then for its Foundation. While there, I generated several blues-related projects. The first involved my shooting a major concert at legendary Club Ebony in Indianola, Mississippi, out of which I produced two films: A NIGHT AT CLUB EBONY and THE ROAD HOME: B.B. KING IN INDIANOLA. The second project involved my creating thirteen 60-second films about Mississippi blues culture which I titled BLUES BREAKS. But my third effort - really two projects shot simultaneously - was the most ambitious of the bunch.

Just before coming to MPB, I had worked with actor Morgan Freeman and attorney Bill Lockett - the owners of Ground Zero Blues Club in Clarksdale, Mississippi - for my film LAST OF THE MISSISSIPPI JUKES. In fact, their club (along with Jimmy King's Subway Lounge in Jackson, Mississippi) was a central focus of the film. But now, I proposed working with Bill and Morgan on an even bigger project - one that would involve staging concerts at Ground Zero Blues Club featuring eight major female blues artists, and having Morgan conduct interviews with each of them at Madidi, Bill and Morgan's nearby French restaurant. I would then edit the resulting foo-

tage into a two-hour film, an eight-hour public television series, and eight long form portraits intended for home video release. The artists selected were Odetta, Irma Thomas, Mavis Staples, Bettye LaVette, Ann Peebles, Denise LaSalle, Deborah Coleman, and Renée Austin, all of them brought to Clarksdale from around the country.

Knowing we would film those eight concerts and interviews on a particular Friday, Saturday, and Sunday in Clarksdale, Mississippi, I also proposed that, on the preceding Thursday, we film the annual W.C. Handy Blues Awards celebration (now called simply the Blues Awards) in nearby Memphis, Tennessee. This would mean our using the same crew to shoot an additional two-hour film as well - one titled MEMPHIS BLUES AGAIN: THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY W.C. HANDY BLUES AWARDS - which, like the various versions of BLUES DIVAS, could be distributed worldwide.

Happily, the shooting and editing of both productions came off without a hitch, and Morgan, Bill, and the assorted divas were all delightful collaborators. In fact, Morgan proved to be a superb interviewer and he loved inter-



In 1991, Robert Mugge made the documentary *Deep Blues*, with the help of journalist Robert Palmer, who wrote the book of the same name, and David Stewart of the Eurythmics.



viewing these talented female singers and musicians, almost as much as they loved simply being in his presence.

Shortly after I finished the two-hour film version of *BLUES DIVAS*, my friends at Starz purchased U.S. television rights. Next, Mississippi Public Broadcasting aired the eight-hour series version and distributed it to other public TV stations around the U.S. Unfortunately, rights issues prevented the wide release of most of the other aforementioned films I made for MPB and its Foundation. However, two years ago, I made a deal with an American home video company called MVD Entertainment Group to release or rerelease as many of my films as possible around the world and, together, we have so far released twenty of them, with two more (*GOSPEL ACCORDING TO AL GREEN* and *SAXOPHONE COLOSSUS*) scheduled to come out this spring. In addition, we are now negotiating with Mississippi Public Broadcasting to be able to release all versions of *BLUES DIVAS* worldwide, and once those negotiations are completed, we hope to arrange the release of the other films I made for MPB as well.

***GZ: Do you feel that you've had a very important contribution to the American musical culture, are you satisfied? Or do you think that there is still a lot to do?***

What I have, or have not, accomplished with

my films is for others to decide. All I can say is that, from the beginning, I have considered it a personal mission to promote the work of musical artists who are ignored by the corporate entertainment industry, and to preserve such work for the future. Naturally, I have neither the time nor the resources to document everything and everyone of interest, but I do what I can. I also do my best to spotlight all the different groups which support traditional forms of music, be it clubs and juke, music festivals, music cruises, independent record labels, public radio stations, or assorted others. Beyond that, I try to tell interesting stories and to explore pertinent themes, because I want my films to provide the richest possible experiences for viewers. Finally, more

PRESENTED BY **wxpn** AS PART OF THE **ZYDECO CROSSROADS** PROJECT

A Robert Mugge Film

# ZYDECO CROSSROADS: A TALE OF TWO CITIES

**FEATURING**  
Buckwheat Zydeco  
C.J. Chenier  
Nathan Williams  
Chubby Carrier  
Rosie Ledet  
Rockin' Dopsie, Jr.  
Major Handy  
Vasti Jackson  
Creole United  
Soul Creole  
Lil' Nathan Williams  
Chris Ardoin  
Corey Arceneaux  
Sid Williams

A collage of four photographs from the film. The top-left photo shows a man playing a keyboard instrument. The top-right photo shows a man playing a zydeco accordion. The bottom-left photo shows a man playing a trumpet. The bottom-right photo shows a group of musicians performing on stage.

A musical journey from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Lafayette, Louisiana!



than perhaps any other filmmaker, I present complete songs in my films, not only out of respect for the artists, but also because each and every song tells a story of its own, and I see it as my obligation to tell such stories fully and accurately.

*GZ: Do you know that you have greatly blessed us in Argentina and South American countries with your work? On behalf of the many blues fans we want to cheer you and thank you endlessly!*

I'm very pleased if my films have reached music fans in Argentina and elsewhere in Central and South America, because I've tried to make their appeal as universal as possible. I also appreciate your excellent magazine allowing me to speak directly to its readers. Should some of them wish to seek out the films I've just mentioned, here is one place they can do so: <https://www.amazon.com.mx> I also hope your readers feel free to explore my website, where they can view excerpts from nearly every film I've made (<http://www.robertmugge.com/index.html>) or my Facebook page where I regularly post clips, news about screenings, and a lot more (<https://www.facebook.com/robert.mugge.3>).

Finally, Gustavo, I want to thank you for honoring me with this interview. As I said before, it has been my pleasure.

Robert Mugge

