

Living Blues

The Magazine of the African American
Blues Tradition

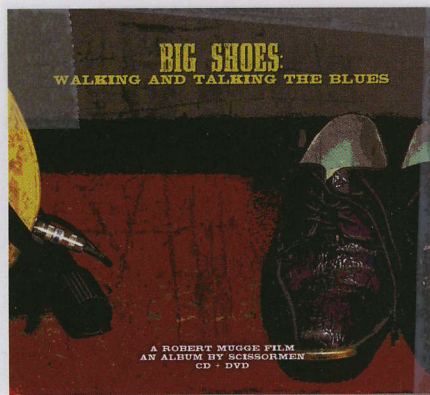
April 2012 • LIVING BLUES •

BIG SHOES: WALKING AND TALKING THE BLUES

A Robert Mugge Film; An
Album by Scissormen

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At the conclusion of his memoir *Me and Big Joe*, Mike Bloomfield writes that mentor Big Joe Williams' "world wasn't my world, but his music was. It was my life; it would be my life. So playing on was all I could do, and I did it the best I was able. And the music I played, I knew where it came from; and there was not any way I'd forget." These words describe the heart of Robert Mugge's documentary *Big Shoes: Walk-*



ing and Talking the Blues so well they could have been written 30 years later by guitarist and music journalist Ted Drozdowski.

The Scissormen, originally formed by Drozdowski with drummer R. L. Hulsman, are the focus of Mugge's latest film. Mugge follows them on a short tour of the Midwest in early 2010, where they play their raw, blistering music for appreciative crowds in intimate venues. Before almost every song, Drozdowski relates the story or the musician that inspired it—Fred McDowell and *Mattie Sweet*, Jessie Mae Hemphill and *Move*

Baby Move—and in Indianapolis, they even host a slide guitar clinic, teaching the open tunings favored by artists such as Son House and Elmore James. They also uncover the local blues history of the towns they perform in; in one scene, they literally do so by shoveling snow off of the Gennett Records Walk of Fame in Richmond, Indiana, in order to find Charley Patton's plaque. They eventually end up at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, where they visit with president and CEO Terry Stewart and peruse the museum's blues collection.

That's as glamorous as the film gets, and as close to a "museum piece" as the Scissormen come. The accompanying CD features their complete performance at the Key Palace Theater in Red Key, Indiana, which we see snippets of throughout Mugge's film. Their music is extraordinary; grittier than their closest counterparts the White Stripes and the Black Keys, the Scissormen also display a fluidity and connection with blues idioms that surpasses that of both these groups. They are also informed by other genres; the punk drums and psych-guitar wails of *Whiskey and Maryjane*, a song from the duo's tenure in the Devil Gods, reveal the band's alternative roots.

Despite their varied influences, the Scissormen define themselves as a "juke joint blues band." They "walk and talk" the blues in their journeymen lifestyle, their constant advocacy for their mentors, and their folk-process method of creating new sounds based on traditional music. And yet, the question, "You got a right to sing those blues?" hovers over all. In the title track, Drozdowski answers his nameless asker, "I say 'It's a free country, man/I'll sing anything I choose.'" Whether one agrees with their self-categorization or not, the compelling, incendiary music the Scissormen create in *Big Shoes* deserves attention from listeners across the board.

—MELANIE YOUNG