

'Gather at the River': bluegrass in all its glory

BY JEFF SHANNON

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Years from now, when 44-year-old filmmaker Robert Mugge leaves behind his remarkable legacy of priceless documentation (a prolific 16 films to date), musicologists, cultural historians and just plain folks are going to hail Mugge as a national treasure. Retrospectives of his work will stretch into the future, providing a timeless record of artistic expression and pure entertainment.

Just as Alan Lomax made and preserved valuable recordings of Mississippi Delta blues, Mugge has been traversing the continent for more than 20 years, capturing the music of America — the music that really matters — on 16mm color film, as performed by the masters of their chosen form.

"Gather at the River" points Mugge's cameras (and his sharply recorded sound) at the ongoing evolution of bluegrass, the "high lonesome" music that is celebrated each year at the World of Bluegrass Festival in Owensboro, Ky. The 1993 event constitutes the entirety of Mugge's film, a generous feast of performance by the finest bluegrass musicians, punctuated by authoritative commentary about the past, present and future of bluegrass music.

Traditionally arranged for bass, fiddle, mandolin, guitar and banjo, bluegrass (we're told) emerged as a combination of African and Celtic music, spiced with jazz and blues. After the Civil War, the evolving music moved out of the towns and cities and into the hill country, where it took on its own distinct identity.

As veteran and emerging performers demonstrate, bluegrass today is torn between traditional purity (as played by such greats as Ralph Stanley, Doc Watson, and Mac Wiseman) and the younger, progressive sounds of Tim O'Brien, Peter Rowan, the Nashville Bluegrass Band and others. But the distinctions are symbiotic, not contradictory, as demonstrated when Hazel Dickens — the queen of old-time bluegrass — shares perfect harmony with the more contemporary Johnson Mountain Boys.

Shooting on a shoestring budget, Mugge knows that music is his top priority. But interviews and commentary provide valuable perspective, and "Gather at the River" hits high points during informal backstage encounters. A performance by "The Bluegrass Youth All-Stars" is astonishing — none of the ace players looks older than 12. When the blind Doc Watson sits in for a casual jam with young fiddler Michael Cleveland (himself blind), their banter and musicianship provide a moment of pure magic.

Other highlights include visits with the Japanese group Nakashima Family and the Russian group Kukuruz, both illustrating the international influence of bluegrass.

Throughout the film, we hear of Bill Monroe, the pioneer whose Bluegrass Boys gave the music its name. Now 80 and still writing music, Monroe remains influential, but his physical absence from the film is puzzling. It is arguably enough, however, to honor Monroe's greatness through the continuation of bluegrass — a legacy of music that shows no sign of its once-predicted decline.

Movie review

★★½ "GATHER AT THE RIVER: A BLUEGRASS CELEBRATION," directed, produced and edited by Robert Mugge. Grand Illusion. Not rated; suitable for all ages.



Bluegrass legend Doc Watson performs in "Gather at the River."