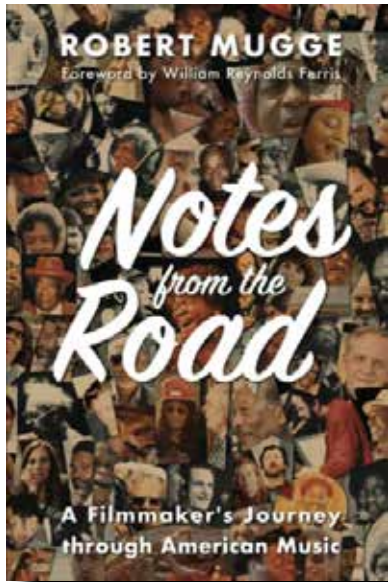


BOOK REVIEW

Notes From The Road: A Filmmaker's Journey Through American Music

By Robert Mugge

The Sager Group LLC



Since his earliest film documenting American music (*Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise* in 1980), Robert Mugge has been the premier filmmaker exploring America's musical back roads. For over five decades, Mugge has captured to film the dusty, musical paths that are mostly ignored by the mainstream, popular culture. In his current memoir, *Notes From The Road: A Filmmaker's Journey Through American Music*, Mugge describes the journey, process, and struggles he has overcome as an independent filmmaker through twenty-five key music films.

My first meeting with Robert was his magical *Deep Blues* in 1991. His intimate and unobtrusive style took viewers into a rich, yet ignored, blues culture that was thriving inside Mississippi. It was meant as a coda to Robert Palmer's best-selling book of the same name.

After that, the celluloid floodgates opened. As a blues writer and fan, I was mostly interested in his blues titles. In order, I became the owner of these films of Robert's: *Pride And Joy: The Story Of Alligator Records* (1992), *Hellhounds On My Trail: The Afterlife Of Robert Johnson* (1999), *Last Of The Mississippi Jukes* (2002), *The Road Home: B. B. King In Indianola* (2004), *Blues Divas* (2005), *Memphis Blues Again: The 25th Anniversary W.C. Handy Blues Awards* (2005), *Deep Sea Blues* (2007), *All Jams On Deck* (2011), *Big Shoes: Walking And Talking The Blues* (2010), and *Elvin Bishop's Raisin' Hell Revue* (2011).

Now Robert has written his filmography memoir detailing the back-story of each music documentary. He takes readers through the steps needed to take the idea from a pipe dream to theatrical completion. We readers go from idea to storyboard to organizing on location details to the editing room to funding to showings to every seemingly minor detail Robert encountered. As each project took on its life, readers can watch ideas grow from seeds to a fully realized film that embodies the unique spirit of the documentary's subjects.

The 11 chapters are organized around pairs of documentaries; the chapter pairs that would most interest the readers of *Blues Music Magazine* are: *Deep Blues* and *Hellhounds On My Trail: The Afterlife Of Robert Johnson*; *Pride and Joy: The Story of Alligator Records* and *True Believers: The Musical Family of Rounder Records*; *Blues Divas* and *Last Of The Mississippi Jukes*; and *Deep Sea Blues* and

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All Jams On Deck.

There are a lot of corporate negotiations and manipulations. Especially interesting are the minute-by-minute production details that are essential to pre-planning the film. In addition, there are the ongoing concerns as the film is being shot, edited, and, in some cases, dealing with on-the-fly substitutions or glitches that were never accounted for in the film's pre-production.

But, for me, the best parts of the memoir are Robert's behind the scenes talks with his staff, co-producers, or musicians. Like when he dissuades Palmer to not join the stage in Junior Kimbrough's juke joint playing a clarinet blending the reedy clarinet with Junior's rough-hewn juke joint style. Or the brown water explanation in Greenville's Regency Inn. (I know, I read that same poem when I stayed there). Or the intricacies detailed in the backstage obstacles of the Johnson and Juke Joint films, as those are two Mugge films that I used in the Blues And Literature class I taught for 15 years. Or walking through Irma Thomas' home after Katrina. Or Ted Drozdowski and R.L. "Rob" Hulsman demonstrating the fundamentals of Mississippi Hill Country blues. Likewise, the onboard bonding of music and fans in his two documentaries about the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise.

The seven-page forward by the nationally esteemed blues scholar William Ferris is a must read. Here is an example that Ferris cites about the details viewers never see. "Throughout their complex shooting schedule in New Orleans, Diana Zelman (Mugge's wife) is constantly on the phone as she buys Mugge a new laptop, arranges to have their laundry done, and books vans, flights, and hotel rooms for the group. When they leave New Orleans and drive toward Mugge's home in Jackson, Mississippi, Diana drives one of their two minivans and finds a Popeye's restaurant that serves both shrimp and oyster po' boys. She constantly delivers comfort and security to her collaborators.

Mugge and Zelman arrive in Jackson, wash and dry their clothes again, and collapse, only to find that the backers of their New Orleans film have asked for 'updated budgets, copies of all collected releases, a list of every person we had interviewed on camera, a list of every person who had performed on camera, and a *separate* list of those who had both performed and been interviewed on camera'."

This is just one of the thousands of incidents Robert illuminates throughout these 340 pages and best summarized by Ferris, "His candor is refreshingly honest and offers an unvarnished view of the struggles every documentary filmmaker faces."

As a teacher of writing, I always stressed to my students to "put the reader there." In these pages, in every encounter, in every music joint or hall, in every negotiation, in every conversation Robert Mugge has succeeded in his writing in the same way he succeeded in every one of his documentary films. I highly recommend this inside look into the making of his music documentaries.

– Art Tipaldi - **BMO**