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## FILM REVIEW

### A Ramble Through Louisiana's Roots Music

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

To describe the recent films of the documentarian Robert Mugge as cultural reference books doesn't mean to imply that these explorations of the musical byways of Southern rural America are lacking in pungent musical sap. It's the careful balance between music and scholarship that lends Mr. Mugge's films a foundation of academic seriousness that flirts with dryness without becoming mired in trivia. Documents of a flourishing below-the-radar culture, often involving older musicians who won't be around much longer, they are archival records as well as entertainments.

For every obscure blues or folk musician shown performing in his films, there is usually an expert standing by to explain where this artist or group stands on the family tree of American vernacular music. Instead of concentrating on the trunk and larger branches of that tree, Mr. Mugge likes to examine the smaller branches and even the twigs.

In recent years Mr. Mugge, whose early films were feature-length studies of musicians as varied as Sun Ra, Gil Scott-Heron, Rubén Blades and Sonny Rollins, has turned his attention to the South. His last documentary, "Hellhounds on My Trail: The Afterlife of Robert Johnson," a calm, scrupulously balanced portrait of the pioneering blues guitarist, was as much a study of the environment that spawned him as it was a biography.

In his new film, "Rhythm 'n' Bayous," Mr. Mugge returns to the South (this time to Louisiana) to compile a singing dictionary of the state's roots-music styles and assorted hybrids, from the blues to "swamp pop" to the fusion of Cajun, Creole and rock 'n' roll known as zydeco.

Part musical travelogue, part anthology, part archival document, "Rhythm 'n' Bayous" is a rambling journey loosely divided into four sections. Begun as the official chronicle of a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame bus tour through New Orleans and southwestern Louisiana, it turns into a more informal, out-of-the-way journey to blues and zydeco clubs, gospel churches and radio stations, and musical family gatherings in backwater bayous. From Shreveport, Monroe and Winnsboro (in the section "Another Country"), Mr. Mugge makes his way to Baton Rouge and New Orleans ("Spirits in the Night") and ends in Eunice, Lafayette and Ville Platte ("Music in the Air").

Few if any of the performers who appear in the film could be described as major artists. All, however, illustrate the way authentic, marginally commercial roots music is still embedded in the state's overlapping cultures. Especially in the late 1950's and early 60's, these regional styles yielded some national hits. Dale Hawkins performs his 1957 single "Susie Q," Claude King his 1962 hit "Wolverton Mountain" and the duo, Dale and Grace their 1963 swamp-pop chart topper, "I'm Leaving It Up to You."

Among the more intriguing performances are a slow, brooding rendition of "When the Saints Go Marching In" by the Easter Rock Church and a performance by the Hackberry Ramblers, a trio that bills itself as "the oldest performing band in the world." (It formed in 1933.) The film soars to joyous conclusion with two performances featuring the young, innovative zydeco singer Rose Ledet (a rare woman leading a zydeco band) with her Zydeco Playboys.

"Rhythm 'n' Bayous," which opens today at the Screening Room, won't endear itself to rock 'n' roll fans who like their music slick and star-driven. A number of the performances are as rough-hewn as the tiny clubs in which they are filmed. And while you can appreciate the gumption of aging one-hit wonders performing signature songs recorded four decades ago, time has obviously taken its toll on their voices.

But "Rhythm 'n' Bayous," is finally not about being polished. It's about the organic process by which a culture expresses itself through music and the hybrids that evolve naturally when these cultures begin to mingle. That after all is how rock 'n' roll was born.

#### RHYTHM 'N' BAYOUS

Produced, directed and edited by Robert Mugge; director of photography, David Sperling; released by Cowboy Booking International. At the Screening Room, 54 Varick Street, at Laight Street, TriBeCa. Running time: 107 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Dale Hawkins, Claude King, Dale and Grace, the Easter Rock Church, the Hackberry Ramblers, Frankie Ford, Buddy Flett, Henry Butler, Warren Storm, Rose Ledet and the Zydeco Playboys, Bill Best, the Rev. Gerald Lewis, Kermit Ruffins and Lil' Alfred.