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FILM REVIEW

One Big, Contented Musical Family

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

A lot of wonderful music is heard in "True Believers," Robert Mugge's straightforward tribute to Rounder Records, an independent company based in Cambridge, Mass., that is celebrating its 25th anniversary.

Since its founding in 1970 by Marian Levy, Bill Nowlin and Ken Irwin, all of whom are interviewed, Rounder hasn't lost sight of its original goal: recording quality blues, folk, bluegrass and other American roots styles. Even when one of the label's artists, George Thoroughgood, broke through in the late 1970's, the company resisted taking a more commercial path and used the profits from his albums to expand on what it was already doing.

"True Believers," which opens today at Cinema Village, is, among other things, a testament to Rounder's clarity of vision and consistency of taste. The movie's main flaw is that it spends too much time interviewing company personnel, so that in places it has the ring of a corporate promotional film.

Rounder has prospered by discovering and exposing roots-music art-

TRUE BELIEVERS

Produced, directed and edited by Robert Mugge; director of photography, Bill Burke; music consultations by Scott Billington, Keith Case and Peter Guralnick; released by Dakin Films. At Cinema Village, 22 East 12th Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 86 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Marian Levy, Bill Nowlin, Ken Irwin, Bill Morrissey, Marcia Ball, Little Jimmy King, Steve Riley, Irma Thomas, Beau Jocque and Alison Krauss.

A valentine to Rounder Records as it turns 25.

ists with followings in regional music centers like Memphis, where there is a flourishing blues scene; Austin, Tex., where country and folk mix with the blues, and New Orleans, the hub of Cajun and zydeco.

Interviewed in Memphis, Little Jimmy King, a hot young guitarist, tells how the blues giant Albert King chose him to be his surrogate grandson. There is a stirring funky performance by Beau Jocque, a zydeco

performer whose singing and harmonicalike accordion-playing have strong Delta-blues inflections.

The rhythm-and-blues singer Irma Thomas, whose voice suggests an earthier Gladys Knight, is shown performing in her New Orleans nightclub. Marcia Ball, a gritty country-blues singer who resembles a piano-playing Bonnie Raitt, is shown performing in her club in Austin.

Rounder's best-selling artist currently is the bluegrass fiddler and singer Alison Krauss, who performs a twangy country-folk version of the Foundations' 1967 hit "Baby Now That I've Found You" that is a small revelation. Although Ms. Krauss is a major talent who could easily move to a large record company, she goes out of her way to express her complete satisfaction with Rounder.

The film's most vivid personality is the New Hampshire-based folk performer Bill Morrissey, whose songs rank alongside those of John Prine and Loudon Wainwright 3d in dispensing homegrown wisdom and aphoristic pith. The movie ends with Mr. Morrissey's performance of his hilarious "Letter From Heaven," in which mistakes that famous entertainers made on earth are corrected in the hereafter. (James Dean, for



Dakin Films

Steve Riley performing in the documentary "True Believers."

instance, is given driving lessons.)

The refrain goes:

*It's a great life here in heaven,
It's better than the Bible said
It's a great life here in heaven
It's a great life when you're dead.*

Mr. Morrissey, who has also chosen not to sign with a major record company, exemplifies the integrity that has made Rounder one of the most important and stable independent record companies in all of pop music.