

Lonnie Donegan style of skiffle music that the Beatles style came," he says, though obviously many influences (English Music Hall, the Everly Brothers, etc.) shaped the early Beatles.

That's where the film abandons a straight narrative line, and while it circles back somewhat and offers many recollections/observations from Pete Seeger ("He was light on his feet, like a prize fighter"), it gives short shrift to the influence of the leftist NYC folk song community ("Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly were musical cronies," Lomax says) on Lead Belly's later songs like *We're in the Same Boat*, *Brother, Bourgeois Blues*, and *Nobody in the World Is Better Than Us*. Harry Belafonte tells us: "I don't know that any other artist fueled me as richly as Lead Belly. His Black protest voice really appealed to me." That voice may have been inherent in work songs like *Take This Hammer*, but it was unfettered in his last years.

While Bernice Johnson Reagon and other interviewees offer cogent summations of Lead Belly's impact, the most radical appraisal menus ironically, from one of those 1930s newsreels. Over a visual of the Library of Congress, a narrator's voice intones: "Hailed by the Library of Congress music division as its greatest folk singing find in 25 years, Lead Belly's songs go into the archives of the great national institution, along with the original copy of the Declaration of Independence." For its time, certainly, that's a bold equivalency.

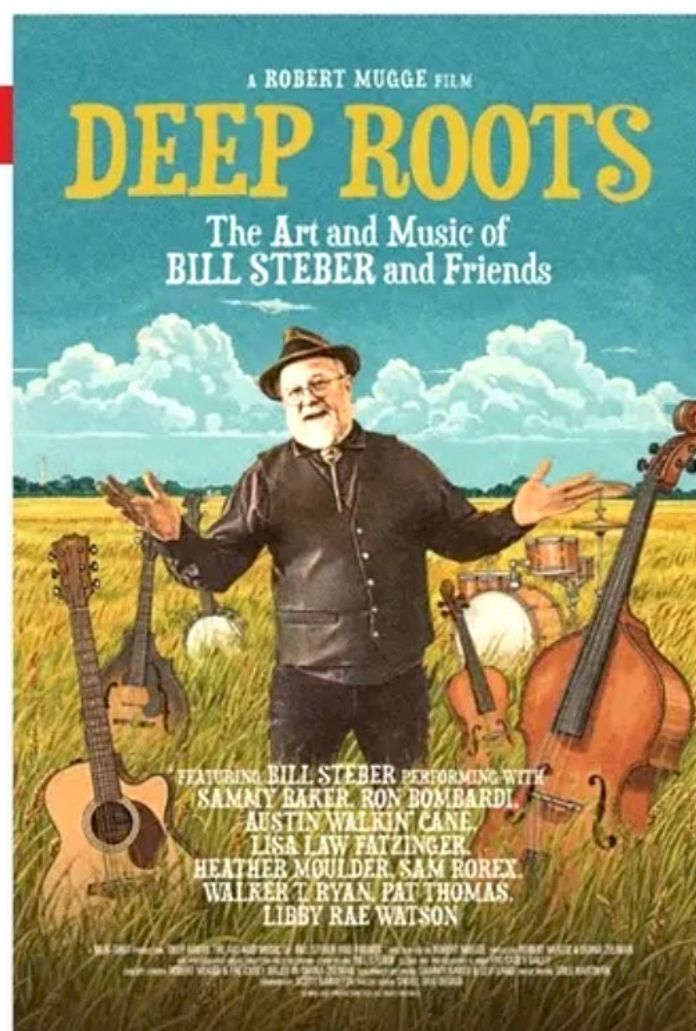
The worst thing about this film is its subtitle. Lead Belly did not invent rock 'n' roll any more than he invented skiffle or commercial folk music. But his work was surely a seminal source for those who did, and this film's a stellar tribute.

—Mark Humphrey

Deep Roots: The Art and Music of Bill Steber and Friends

Directed by Robert Mugge

Documentarian Robert Mugge started making films in the early 1970s. Focusing primarily on music, Mugge's subjects have included everything from reggae (*Cool Runnings: The Reggae Movie*, 1983) and zydeco (*Zydeco Crossroads: A Tale of Two Cities*, 2015) to label histories (*Pride and Joy: The Story of Alligator Records*, 1992) to films about cultural phenomena (*Deep Sea Blues*, 2007). What Mugge has only occasionally done is to devote an entire film to a profile of an individual. He did it in 1984 (*Gospel According to Al Green*), in 1985 (*The*



Return of Rubén Blades), and again in 1999 with *Hellhounds on My Trail: The Afterlife of Robert Johnson*.

Mugge has taken the profile approach once more with his latest motion picture, *Deep Roots*. On one level it's the story of a man, Bill Steber. But, in truth, it's the story of Steber's passions, his creative pursuits, and the manner in which those elements come together to create a body of work and a mission much larger than the individual who embodies them.

Some directors insert themselves into their films, making their presence or perspective an integral component of the work. Mugge isn't that sort of director. Handling all of the camera work himself on *Deep Roots*, the filmmaker doesn't appear—nor is he heard—at all during the slightly more than two-hour runtime of the film. One suspects that Mugge believes that his perceived presence would shift the emphasis and tone of the film. Whatever his reasons, the approach suits *Deep Roots* quite well. Mugge's camera work keeps the emphasis squarely on Steber himself, who is seen and heard in nearly every frame. Mugge captures the onscreen images and sounds in a way that's deeply authentic, presenting the images and sonics without commenting upon them.

Crucially, Bill Steber has the presence and force of personality to carry the film himself. A modern-day Renaissance man (notably, a very humble one), Steber channels his passions through a myriad of creative outlets. He's a historian, storyteller, and folklorist par excellence. He's a multi-instrumentalist (guitar, blues harp, saw, and more) and powerful, expressive vocalist. He's a visual artist, working in the media of photography (small, medium, and large format) and sculpture. Steber creates triptychs that are very pointedly the result of collecting and staging detritus from sources relevant to each work.

It wouldn't be accurate to label Bill Steber a blues historian. While his extensive knowledge on (and appreciation of) the blues is beyond compare, that's merely part of the picture for him. With his band, the Jake Leg Stompers, Steber explores the entirety of American music. He's no snob, freely admitting that one of his entry points into the blues was a record by British band the Yardbirds. In Steber's view, most all roads in the popular music of the 20th century and beyond trace their roots to field hollers and to the race and hillbilly music of the 1920s.

Weaving together his art, photography, storytelling skills, and historical expertise, Steber connects the dots to celebrate the larger story of music. He comes to that mission from a perspective that looks primarily—though not exclusively—to Mississippi. And he brings to the mission the fervor of a religious zealot, the warmheartedness of a treasured friend, the scholarship of a learned academician and—most importantly—the honest appreciation of the women and men who created the musical forms he reveres.

There's no narrator in *Deep Roots*, and one isn't needed. Steber tells his stories; bits of commentary from others fill in the spaces, and the music—as real as it gets—completes the picture.

—Bill Kopp

Don't Get Trouble in Your Mind: The Carolina Chocolate Drops' Story

Directed by John Whitehead

Fretless Films, 2025

It can be called a chance meeting, or it can be called fate. In 2005, three young African American musicians with a passion for old-time mountain music and Piedmont blues—Rhannon Giddens, Dom Flemons, and Justin Robinson—made a connection at the Black Banjo Gathering in Boone, North Carolina, that would have a transformative impact on African American roots music. The meeting set them on a path to reclaim the Black string band tradition, and, ultimately, shine a light on how this almost forgotten musical tradition profoundly shaped American popular music. The three musicians eventually joined forces to form the Carolina Chocolate Drops, and the journey of that group from its inception to its disbanding roughly eight years later is chronicled by the film *Don't Get Trouble in Your Mind* with dynamic live footage and interviews from throughout their tenure.