

Take a ride with Hambone Willie to find ‘Deep Roots’

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It began as a newspaper assignment in 1992: Drive down the Natchez Trace into Mississippi and record the highlights of the journey for readers of The Tennessean.

For Hambone Willie Nevil, aka Bill Steber, the experience was transformative.

“Things in my life tend to unfold in long circular arcs,” Bill said in an email. Arcs that bend toward music. Specifically, the blues.

Which is how I recently came to be at the Belcourt Theater for a showing of “Deep Roots: The Art and Music of Bill Steber and Friends,” by the documentary filmmaker Robert Mugge. It’s an engaging tribute to a wonderfully talented guy who has made the playing of and celebration of the blues – and of Mississippi juke joint culture, in particular – a major theme.



Born in Dickson, raised in Hickman County, Bill’s a sixth-generation (at least) Tennessean. But I sometimes feel like he’s more of a Mississippian than I am. His knowledge of and enthusiasm for the blues scene – informed and buoyed by 200-plus visits to Mississippi since 1992 – at the least qualify him for some sort of honorary status.

For the record, I was the writer on that 1992 Natchez trip; Bill was the photographer. It was his idea that on the return home we swing through the Delta via Highway 61, because he was familiar with a 1991 Mugge documentary, “Deep Blues,” also focused on the state.

“I was blown away by the music of then-contemporary Mississippi blues musicians I hadn’t known anything about,” Bill said.

He met Mugge the year after our trip, and they have stayed in touch over the decades since. Meanwhile, Bill started assembling his own collection of blues bands.

“The principal group is the Jake Leg Stompers, now going into our 22nd year,” he told me. “We tell people our genre is chicken-fried, pre-war, Hokum-billy jugband blues. But in reality, we play anything before the end of World War II, especially focusing on blues from Mississippi and Memphis, and any other music of the ’20s and ’30s, including early jazz, folk, hillbilly and gospel.”

Other Bill-and-friends iterations, with a certain amount of overlap among members, include the Hoodoo Men, the Jericho Road Show, the Stoop Down Rounders and the Lisa Law Trio, featuring one of his fellow Stompers, Lisa Law Fatzinger. Who is fabulous.

His persona in each is Hambone Willie, which he calls his “nom de jug.”



“I borrowed the name from an old Delta bluesman named ‘Hambone Willie Newbern,’” he said, “who was the first to record the archetypal Mississippi blues standard ‘Roll and Tumble Blues,’ which is sometimes referred to as the Delta national anthem. Since my birth name is William Nevil Steber, I just grafted the two names together.”

And yes, he does play the jug. Along with guitar, slide guitar, ukulele, mandolin, harmonica, kazoo, tenor banjo, dujo (a hybrid dulcimer/banjo) and the saw. As in, a saw.

“I have on occasion played the washboard, spoons and tambourine,” he said, “but I consider myself a terrible percussionist so I don’t claim any proficiency on those instruments.”

“Deep Roots” came about partly through serendipity, Bill says. Mugge had planned to do a short film on a mentor of his who was a filmmaker and painter, exploring the cross-currents of creativity in someone who worked across artistic disciplines.

“For some reason the film didn’t happen,” Bill said, “but he liked the idea for the film. He reached out to me to see if I would be interested in participating in such a film with one or more other artists. That sounded good to me.”

Mugge then decided to instead focus just on Bill, “so I got to be the center of the film from which he branched out to the other creative friends in my circle.”

It’s a darn good circle.

“Deep Roots” is an entertaining dive including musical performances by several of Bill’s groups and a look at his related ventures with photography and mixed-media artwork, some of which was recently on display at his alma mater, Middle Tennessee State University. The video is available to buy on Amazon, to stream free on Tubi or to rent on YouTube. Maybe elsewhere, too.

You won’t get the benefit of a live Bill answering questions and such, as I did at the Belcourt tribute. But if you keep your ears to the ground, you might also find some version of Bill playing live in or around Nashville or his home in Murfreesboro. It’s more than worth your time. You won’t find a more talented, creative guy.

The Jake Leg Stompers, by the way, is a reference to the dangers of homemade Prohibition-era hooch. If you do catch up with Bill, ask him about it. It’s just one of his many interesting tales.

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