

Ethnomusicology

vol. XXV #3 pp 565-567 Sep. 1981

Film Review

The Land Where the Blues Began. Videotape by Mississippi Educational TV with Alan Lomax, John Bishop, and Worth Long. 3/4 in. video cassette. Color, 58 minutes. 1980.

Mississippi Delta Blues. Videotape by Mississippi Educational TV with Mississippi Action for Community Education 3/4 in. video cassette. Color. 58 minutes. 1980.

Delta Blues: Festival '79. Recording by Worth Long in cooperation with Mississippi Action for Community Education. One 12" 33 1/3 rpm disc. 1980. (Available from: Mississippi Action for Community Education. 815 Main St., Greenville, Miss., 38701).

The Land Where The Blues Began, Mississippi Delta Blues, and the latter's corresponding Phonorecording **Delta Blues: Festival '79** are three media products created in 1980 through the complex networkings of ethnomusicologists, folklorists, educational television, and a local community action agency. Through these works, many people express their shared dedication to the collection and dissemination of Black music and folklore from the state of Mississippi. These products collectively attest to the rich cultural heritage of Mississippi and provide an excellent thrust for understanding the conceptual framework and aesthetic principles which govern Afro-American music as a whole.

Of these three works, **The Land Where the Blues Began** has the greatest scholarly import for ongoing research in Afro-American music. Capitalizing on a variety of contexts from picnics to revivals, barrooms to riverbanks, **The Land** presents the views of Black cultural giants, both men and women, who worked skillfully and tirelessly throughout their lives as farmers, axmen, roustabouts, muleskinners and railroadmen.

Although the film seeks ultimately to document the social milieu that spawned the Delta Blues tradition, through careful planning and construction even more far-reaching results have been produced. First, in the opening scenario featuring Lonnie Pitchford on "diddley bow" (a one-string guitar or fiddle), this instrument is visually and aurally contrasted with the African musical bow to establish an undeniably concrete link between African and African-American musical traditions.

As the film progresses, the acute perceptiveness and sensitivity of producers Lomax and Long is further evident in their skillful juxtaposition of items from both sacred and secular Afro-American cultural traditions, thereby documenting the behavioral and aesthetic unity that characterizes virtually every aspect of Black American culture. The preacher is contrasted with the teller of toasts;¹ the intensity, phrasing, and mood of the blues singer is juxtaposed to that of the singers of the *a cappella* lined hymn and Negro spiritual in a rural, presumably Baptist, Black church,

It is the exceptional work that incorporates such a wealth of diverse materials, and yet succeeds in producing an effectively integrated product. **The Land** includes: demonstrations of instrument construction and tuning- fife and diddley bow; dances- the slop, camel walk, and dog- popular during the 1950s; work songs performed in context;

and even a church service, complete with uniformed ushers, funeral parlor fans, and a mourner's bench. One special feature is the inclusion of a fife and drum band, an extremely unusual Afro-American tradition. **The Land** is by no means "just a film about the blues"; rather, as its producers intended, it ably and accurately documents a way of life.

If there is any fault to be found in **The Land**, it lies solely in the subtle, but omniscient Lomaxian presence, which one senses constantly from start to finish. On camera for the film's introduction, Lomax laments the "disappearance" of the folk culture that produced the blues. Fortunately, the intermittent Lomax narrative voice-overs, which cast a decidedly romantic view of the Black Mississippian (and indirectly, Blacks at large), are overshadowed by the philosophical commentary and descriptive dialogue provided by the artists themselves.

In the process of shooting both ongoing events and controlled interview/performances, the producers of **The Land** succeed in portraying Black performers with "dignity and stature," and in conveying "the sense of excitement that makes folk performers so important to their own communities" (Bishop 1980:19-20). This film is a welcome, major contribution to research in Afro-American music. It will undoubtedly become a model for ethnographic films in our discipline.

Whereas **The Land** presents an in-depth treatment of the blues from a broad sociocultural perspective, **Mississippi Delta Blues** focuses on the Mississippi blues tradition as performed in the context of a large-scale community-sponsored public event. **Mississippi Delta Blues** documents the performances of Tennessee-, Arkansas-, and Mississippi-born blues all-stars at the 1979 Delta Blues Festival staged in Freedomville, Mississippi. The performers are sequentially programmed to illustrate the chronological development from the rural Delta Blues tradition to its urban derivative, the Chicago Blues.

The lineup of rural blues performers (many of whom appear in **The Land**) includes: singer-guitarists Boyd Rivers, Clyde Maxwell, Eugene Powell, and Sam Chatmon; Napoleon Strickland on harmonica; and Hammie Nixon on harmonica, jug, and kazoo. Performers from the Chicago tradition are bassist Sylvia Embry, vocalist Betty Fikes, and singer-guitarists "Big" Joe Williams, Johnnie Shines, Robert Lockwood, and Lefty Diz.

Though the producers of **Mississippi Delta Blues** are extremely conscious of allowing the performers to speak for themselves, the sparse commentary provided by master of ceremonies, bluesman Willie Dixon, and a few other performers leaves far too many questions unanswered. For example, through back-to-back performances of gospel singer Boyd Rivers and his mentor Clyde Maxwell, this film seeks to demonstrate that "Black sacred and secular musics can often be distinguished only by intent, not by an inherent structural design, technical display, or overt behaviorisms" (Burnim 1980:173). However, because there are neither notes nor program guide accompanying this film, this and other important statements will likely go unnoticed by all save the well-informed blues enthusiast or scholar.

Information citing the political significance of Freedom Village as a setting, the intent of the festival planners, and biographical sketches of the participants can be gathered from various sources.ⁱⁱ Equipped with this body of information, **Mississippi Delta Blues**

becomes a tool with political, artistic, and scholarly significance for all students of Afro-American music and culture.

The album **Delta Blues** is edited from the soundtrack of **Mississippi Delta Blues**. The phonorecording includes performances by each of the artists in the Delta Blues film, plus "Everything's Gonna Be Alright" by Sam Meyers. One outstanding performance on the recording, identified mistakenly as part of a harmonica medley, is Hammie Nixon's solo with jug and kazoo entitled, "Mule to Ride."

Like the Delta Blues film, the amount of factual data accompanying this album is minimal. Performers' names are cited without reference to instrumentation, or identification of accompanying performers. Nonetheless, the jacket notes successfully capture the spirit and pathos of the blues by incorporating poignant blues lyrics and direct quotes from blues performers in the text.

The major significance of both of these Delta Blues products is their successful documentation and preservation of a dynamic and vibrant tradition. They are both valuable additions to Afro-American music scholarship.

Mellonee Burnim
Indiana University

REFERENCES CITED

Bishop, John M.
1980 "The Land Where The Blues Began," **Filmmakers Monthly** 13(9):19-23.

Burnim, Mellonee
1981 "The Black Gospel Music Tradition: Symbol of Ethnicity." PhD diss., Indiana University, 1981.

ⁱ Long narrative poems peculiar to Black Americans. For further examples and discussion, see Daryl Cumber Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978)

ⁱⁱ For supplementary information, see "Mississippi Delta Blues Festival, 1980 Program Guide," and Introduction: The Mississippi Action for Community Education Project-Background." These materials should be available upon request from the address given in the Delta Blues record citation.