



Robert Mugge, Irma Thomas, and Morgan Freeman in 2004 shooting a **BLUES DIVAS** interview at Madidi, Morgan Freeman's and Bill Lockett's former restaurant in Clarksdale, MS.

Photo/Dick Waterman

# Robert Mugge

## Deep Hues

By GUY POWELL

If you've ever seen a blues documentary, there's a good chance you've seen Robert Mugge's work. This guy can fill a week-long film festival with his own works and without ever having to repeat a single one. Although in his case he'd likely be called for encore performances on any number of them – many so well known to our readership that his works documenting the greats will go down in history as being as important in filmmaking as the subjects he covers are to music. And lest you think he's just a blues guy – get that out of your head right now. His knowledge on any number of topics from musical genres to social issues combined with his innate curiosity and overall ability to tell a story left me only caring about one thing after our 3 hour conversation: What'll be next from Bob and when will we see it?

A couple of weeks after we spoke, when it came time to write this piece, I started playing back our conversation and I realized why we spoke so long: at points Bob basically turned the interview around – he had me doing quite a bit of talking about myself (okay maybe not the hardest thing to do) – and I felt he

was actually listening to what I was saying – not too common a trait in this day and age unfortunately. This guy is just a natural storyteller and his instincts are to listen and learn. But fortunately, between my own stories I am able to soak up quite a few of Mr. Mugge's own informative tales. I surmise that he is able to tell a story so well via film because he is an earnest listener and quite an eloquent orator – maybe combining the two makes him a great conversationalist and that then comes through in his movies. He kinda gives new meaning to 'talking the talk.'

"Pronounced like the weather – muggy. And call me Bob – Robert is my 'official' name for the films." I immediately ask Bob about Rosie Ledet, who he has been a fan of since her first record – and had actually fashioned a fictional screenplay after but never got the funding for. Her guitar player is a Bronx guy, Andre Nizzari, who I have known for years and was recently working on a project with. This is representative of how our conversation goes – we spend much time talking about common experiences and acquaintances, but I am truly in awe that he doesn't just delve into a topic for conversation's sake – he had already

conquered the subject in film! Highly regarded films! I've interviewed a ton of musicians but never a filmmaker – a real filmmaker. I'm out of my element but Bob Mugge is making me look like a star. It's what he does for a living.

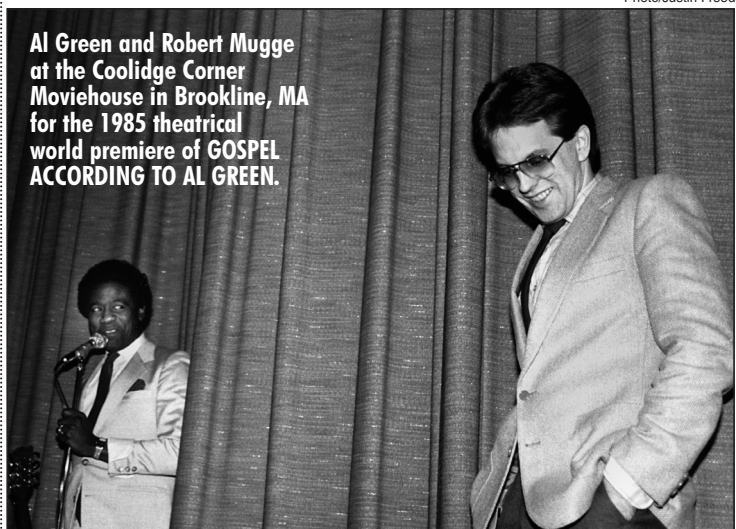
Each movie that Bob feels is good to explore in this interview, given this magazine's focus, brings us into a deep back story: the impetus for the film, its funding, the actual filming – surrounded by a variety of anecdotes from before, during and after the making of the film. Back door politicking, acquiring rights to music (and sometimes not getting rights to music), getting artist releases (and sometimes not getting artist releases) – a dizzying array of heroes and villains, nice guys and total assholes - there's really so

much more to making a movie than lights, camera, action. In fact at times it sounds more like fights, anathema, inaction!

I didn't look into it, but Mugge sounds German to me. "My great grandfather was this big Horatio Alger kind of character, eventually, in Tampa, Florida - owned a whole string of saloons and ran a wholesale liquor organization – he created the first electric lights and paved sidewalks in Tampa. Owned pool halls and a hotel and a shipping line – until all the money was lost during Prohibition and the Depression after he died in 1915. He had come here in 1870 from Germany. In Germany the name has an umlaut over the 'u' – which when translated to English should have added an 'e' after the 'u' – which would have spelled it as 'Muegge' and then been pronounced 'myouggah' instead of muggy. Even in Germany and the Netherlands the name exists and they think it's a little odd. My grandfather thinks it may have had Scottish lineage – and in France there's a perfume spelled the same way, it's some kind of little insect over there."

Born in Chicago in 1950, your Wikipedia says you were involved in rock bands. "Yeah, I was singing only minimally, playing only minimally, I bought instruments but never had a lot of talent that way. I wrote a lot of music – between 11th and 12th grade I wrote a musical comedy – I had asked the music teacher what play should I make into a musical – and he told me 'The Rainmaker' – so I did and then it turns out there was already a musical done from that play - '110 in the Shade' - which he should have already known, and so we could not put on my musical because nobody was gonna give us the rights. Anyway, it was clear my great love for music was not matched by an enormous talent in music – but I had other interests like writing and film so I went to film school at the

Photo/Justin Freed



Al Green and Robert Mugge at the Coolidge Corner Moviehouse in Brookline, MA for the 1985 theatrical world premiere of **GOSPEL** ACCORDING TO AL GREEN.

University of Maryland, Baltimore County and did a year of grad school in Documentary Filmmaking at Temple University. Once out of Temple I wanted to do feature films and then do fun little music documentaries on the side – but I kept writing screenplays that I could never get funded – yet I was able to get the funding for music docs and it just got bigger and bigger so I figured if this is what the world wants me to do... If I'm gonna spend a year on a project at least it will be something I'll enjoy. So I've never made a single film that I didn't enjoy on a subject I didn't care about." And you've never done fiction. "No, but I've written screenplays, I've actually written a novel loosely based on the making of my film 'Deep Blues' and 'Gospel According to Al Green' as if they were one project but I've never released it. I spent two years creating it because I had a lot to get out of my system about the Deep Blues project which was quite traumatic. In many respects it was one of the greatest experiences of my life, but the producer and I fought a great deal so it was very challenging in that way. When you go on an adventure to make a documentary film with something like Deep Blues where, this is the fall of 1990, there are still giants roaming the earth like Junior Kimbrough, RL Burnside, Big Jack Johnson, Jack Owens and Bud Spires, and you're going into these juke joints on notorious Nelson St in Greenville or in Clarksdale – and many of them I was visiting for the first time – I mean I know them like the back of my hand now but then it



Robert Mugge in 1990 preparing to film the late Jack Owens in Bentonia, MS for DEEP BLUES.

Photo/Axel Küstne

was new. And you know you're filming it a certain way to tell a certain story and to represent some performances by some terrific artists and all that – but the adventure is happening all around that, so the reason I sat down and wrote that novel is to tell that other story." The peripheral experience. "Exactly. It was very moving, very exciting."

Your dad does his dissertation on the Great Migration and you've got

quite a few blues and blues-adjacent films under your belt – but your first works were not blues. "I've called myself a music filmmaker for the last few decades and I've worked in just about every American musical genre there is but once I started working with the blues – you know I always loved that music but didn't really get into it as subject matter for my films until Dave Stewart and Bob Palmer came to me about making Deep

Photo/Christopher Li.

Blues – and after that I just kept getting pulled back into it again and again. There were just so many blues-related stories to tell and it was so clear that this was the music that laid the foundation for every other musical genre that was to follow – that it just seemed like a worthwhile use of my time. Now I've made more films about blues than anything else – even if the movie itself is not blues-specific you'll probably find blues in about half of the 36 films that I've made."

Bob is able to immediately recall performers and performances in his films. We speak on race issues and how that subject runs through so many of his films, we talk of Zydeco, Reggae, Bluegrass, Country, Blues – and hearing him spit out musical sub-genres and their main players is reminiscent to me of Bubba calling out shrimp recipes – quite impressed am I at every turn with the breadth of his knowledge.

Mugge lets me in on one of his proud stylistic choices – that of allowing full song performances to be kept intact within his movies – after having done a couple prior where he only did partial songs. That he needs to figure out how to keep the audience's attention during a full song, how the lyrics interact with the music, how the artist interacts with the audience and other band members. He also has different approaches depending on what is the subject of the film – a festival, a musical genre, or an artist. "In a portrait film, which I did especially early on but just occasionally after that, where I start focusing on the individ-



Robert Mugge preparing to interview Boozoo Chavis and family before a 1993 performance in Lake Charles, LA for THE KINGDOM OF ZYDECO.

ual and I use that individual's personal story and personal music-making as a way to work my way out wider into a whole musical genre or musical community, music scene, whatever. Or alternatively I start wide with a genre, festival or a cruise and then within that broad story I end up with a series of little portraits of individual artists, of individual music scenes, or very often of people who support those music scenes – be they DJ's, club owners, festival promoters, blues cruise owners – people who allow independent music scenes and artists to continue to thrive. None of these artists exist in a vacuum – without people to come see them, without people to pay them to appear they would cease to exist. Also, so often music films have been made far from the places those roots musics came to be – so whenever possible I've gone to the source of those musics – gone into the communities and filmed performances that were being done for the people in that community. So you get the milieu, you get the backdrop, you get that interplay between the artist and the members of that community, members of that scene in the geography that that music came out of. These are the sorts of things that underlie my work and that I like to talk about with people who have seen my work." It sounds like you do go into each project with a certain idea – but you allow what is occurring in front of you to shape the end product. "Very perceptive. There is always, for me as a documentary filmmaker as well as a music filmmaker, always that dialectic. There is the preparing in advance so that before I ask questions I can pretty well anticipate the answers. And before I end up on the location, I have done enough research so that there's maybe ten different ways I can structure this film. But it's just like when Sonny Rollins does soloing – he has prepared himself in any number of ways – he has structures in mind, he has ideas in mind from which to draw from. Then he gets out there and just blows. And when I get there to a location and I have all my preconceptions I'm also just as ready to let them go and follow instead, or also, what the artist gives me, what the community gives me, what the world in that moment gives me – so it becomes a dialectic between the structure I'm already planning and what I'm given in the moment. So going into a movie on Sonny Rollins I could not predict that shooting him at the sculptured rock quarry in upstate NY, that in the middle of his performance, having recently had his saxophone lacquered so it ended up affecting the tone of his instrument – so, as he later told his wife, it was like he'd go to play a vowel and out would come a conso-



Robert Mugge, Deborah Coleman, and Morgan Freeman presenting **BLUES DIVAS** portraits at the 2004 Starz Denver International Film Festival.

Photo/Larry Laszlo

nant - that he would practically have a nervous breakdown on stage – leap off of that rock stage 6 feet down, end up breaking his heel, fall over backwards, and then end up starting to play again on his back after people are wondering if he's been knocked out. I have to be ready for life to give me something like that and then be ready to realize all the different possible ways in which this experience I've just been given ties into the themes of my film – the themes of who Sonny is, his perspective as an artist and his experience giving performances. It's that constant back and forth between planning, imagining a structure and then being ready to go with what you're given."

Can you get into the actual process – crew, equipment, etc.? "Well in the early days there wasn't much of a budget so I didn't have money for a 24 track music recording truck until Black Wax – and then when we were working in Hawaii we're shooting on different islands so we'd have to fly in small planes from one island to another and then rent trucks on each island. For Deep Blues we had a recording truck, a grip truck with lights and we'd go as a caravan from one Mississippi town to another. Other times when we couldn't raise as much money we'd take smaller equipment and throw it in the back of a rental truck. If we had the money for four cameras, we'll use four cameras, if we only have the money for three, we'll use three – or two." Are you ever operating a camera yourself? "Rarely – I've always considered cinematography and lighting an art form unto itself with technical demands that are very specific and so I'm more likely to assist running sound – and I always edit my own films. I usually produce,

write, direct, edit. But I have specific, really talented cinematographers who tend to go out with me again and again and because we've worked with each other so many times we know each other's talents, we know each other's technical gifts and we have a kind of a shorthand that makes my job so much easier. If I tell them I want a film noir look I know they can get that look. This way I don't have to focus so much on those details and I'm free to focus on the artist and those themes we were talking about earlier." Are you directing in real time? "Always – we always have a communications system, we always have headsets on and I'm giving them instructions as I'm seeing what they're getting on these 4 video monitors in front of

me. In 1982 we were the first film to have Steadicam from the first frame to the last frame of the film. When I've got a Steadicam out there I have to work other things differently."

Wow. Coming from a hack videographer for whom a two camera shoot may as well be quantum physics, I greatly appreciate that there are people like Robert Mugge on this planet. Just listening to his rapid-fire thought process not just on the actual movie-making exercise but all of the forethought on subject matter and the interplay of personalities both on and off screen would be enough to scare away most mortals. Not Bob. Mugge is cool.

I generally do not list an artist's discography in the story, instead sending you to their website. But in this case I think putting the names of a few of the movies from the Mugge filmography is important since so many would be of particular interest to our readership of blues lovers – although just about any of his music documentaries will appeal to true music lovers of any genre.

Gospel According to Al Green, Deep Blues, Pride and Joy: The Story of Alligator Records, The Kingdom of Zydeco, Hellhounds on My Trail: The Afterlife of Robert Johnson, Rhythm 'n' Bayous: A Road Map to Louisiana Music, Last of the Mississippi Jukes, Blues Divas, New Orleans Music in Exile, Deep Sea Blues, All Jams On Deck, Rosie's in the House Tonight, Zydeco Crossroads: A Tale of Two Cities.

That's not even all the blues-related titles.

Let's face it – there are some music documentaries out there that are absolutely cringe-worthy. Time has proven that Bob Mugge's filmography is absolutely binge-worthy!

RobertMugge.com

Photo courtesy Robert Mugge



Robert Mugge and Diana Zelman presenting **DEEP SEA BLUES** at the 2007 Starz Denver International Film Festival.