

FFanzeen: Rock'n'Roll Attitude With Integrity

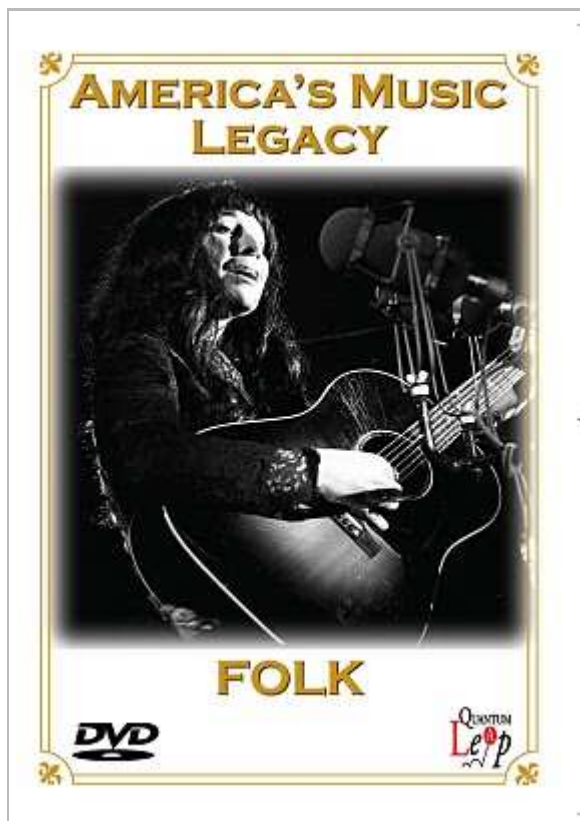
Through the writings and photography of Robert Barry Francos, a view of the arts and culture, including everyday life.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 15, 2011

DVD Reviews: Two of the America's Music Legacy Series, Part 4: Folk, Dixieland Jazz

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Part 4: This is just two of a series of six DVDs that have been released to promote a collection of television specials from the 1980s that highlight specific genres of music, with each disc focusing on a one at a time. Note that links to other performances are not present on these compilations.



America's Music Legacy: Folk

Directed by Kip Walton

Cube International / Century Home Video, 1983 / 2010

120 minutes, USD \$16.95

Cubeinternational.com

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About Me

Robert Barry Francos
 c/o 62 Timber Ridge Rd,
 Commack, NY 11725. From 1977-88, I used to publish a music magazine in New York called FFanzeen, which dealt with the wide-ranging independent music scene. I also photographed many bands from the period (and since). And the beat goes on.

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To be honest, along with the rock and roll one of this series, previously reviewed in this blog, the Folk genre is the one I have been looking forward to the most, and it certainly did not disappoint.

If this were recorded in this present time of the singer-songwriter, it would have been a completely different collection, but for the period it was, the scene was leaning more towards traditional folk. There's no Dylan, Collins, Ochs, Havens, but they present a solid compilation of live performances by some top of their game artists.

Part of the reason for the level of traditional present here is due to the person who is both hosting and performing. Theodore Bikel is co-founder of the Newport Folk Festival, where Dylan would one day infamously go electric, and who I had the honor to see play at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, around 1975. As is common in this series, as the host, he tells the story of folk music, and he gets to sing, but more on that later.

Opening the first of the two edited-together shows is ex-Limeliter singer Glenn Yarborough. He has a distinctive high tenor voice with a Melanie-esque vibrato. Yarborough starts with the light British ballad "Molly," and goes into a rambunctious telling of "Frankie and Johnny" (you know, "Frankie and Johnny were lovers..."; a lot of British folk songs are about the death of a loved one, be it through murder [e.g., "Down By the River"], war ["Bonny Light Horseman"], or heartbreak ["Barbara Allen"], it seems). His version of this well-worn traditional piece has a high jazz percentage mixed in. Being an oral tradition, folk is open for many interpretations. Unfortunately, he pushes it arguable a bit too far when he returns later in the program doing a totally disco-ized "You Are My Reason." I had no problem with Dylan going electric, but this is just bad for its own sake. Feh.

Buffy St.-Marie is from Saskatchewan, where I am currently living, and along with Joni Mitchell, she is highly regarded here. It's no wonder, as the woman has many talents. I'd seen her on the *Music Scene* television show from the late '60s, doing an extremely earnest version of her "Universal Soldier." Time moves on, and here she starts off with "Cripple Creek," in traditional First Nations style. She sings while playing a large mouth harp string instrument in a wonderfully dexterous way (there is a small b-roll clip in the trailer, below). This is followed up by the modernized traditional "Starwalker," which is distinctly Buffy St.-Marie, and shows of the range of her amazing voice. She is such a joy to watch on this program.

From profound to the perky as we are presented with the New Main Street Sing... I mean, the New Christy Minstrels. They open with "Charlottetown" (listed on the clamshell as "Liza Jane") with the *cheery* chorus, "Charlottetown is burning down / Goodbye, goodbye." Happy times. While the TNCM have amazing harmonies, they seem a bit soulless and totally whitebread and whitewashed, a folk equivalent

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of bland gospel, televangelist style. They may have done better with "Oh, Let Me Fly." Think I'll stick to "The Good Book Song" parody (youtube.com/watch?v=G_OJsO8xnRQ&feature=related). They come back later and do an upbeat (no surprise there) "Green, Green," and a medley of six standards, including "I Dream of Jeannie," "Camptown Races," and "Oh Susannah."

Luckily, the show is redeemed once again by Odetta (d. 2008), who I saw do a powerful set at the Calgary Music Festival in 1994. The power of the woman's tone alone could slay a dragon. Most of her material has a strong gospel feel without a hit of patronizing. As she strums her guitar, incense stuck into the neck burns away. She also shows what a medley can be, combining "House of the Rising Sun," "Old House," and a touch of "Goodnight Irene," all with a mournful quality.

Unfortunately, Hoyt Axton (d. 1999) will probably be remember more for his role in the film *Gremlins* than for the writing of his music, much of which has become cultural lynchpins, such as "Joy to the World" and "Never Been to Spain" (heck, his mom co-wrote Elvis's "Heartbreak Hotel"). But it was his lesser known (by much of my crowd, anyway) folk and country material that touch me the most. Here he does two of his own songs, starting with the great "Greenback Dollar" (original covered by the Kingston Trio, but a fine version was released by the Washington Squares). The other is a song about cocaine (surprised this one made it passed the censor in the early '80s) called "Della and the Dealer." His rough-hewn voice is perfect for this material.

Introduced by Buffy St.-Marie, host Bikel takes the stage. He has a distinctive European patter to his voice that adds a flavor to his sound. He once did a great turn with Judy Collins dueting "Greenland Fisheries": youtube.com/watch?v=s7ZxnhZ0Fig. Here, he starts of with a stirring and zippy version of Phil Och's "There But For Fortune." Sadly, he follows this up with Jim Croce's lame "Time in a Bottle" (as Kenne Highland once wrote in a song: "Jim Croce's records never sold / But when he died they all turned gold"). My guess is Bikel was trying to show old school and (then) new, binding them together.

Speaking of *really* old school, the Blue Fame String Band presents some Appalachian style traditional sounds with "Aunt Caroline Dyer Blues," using banjo, fiddle, two acoustic guitars, and an electric bass. This is the type of stuff Alan and John Lomax brought into the popular culture mindset, with images of fog on the mountainside, and moonshine, perhaps.

The first part ends with everyone coming back to the stage and singing Woody Guthrie's (does any *really* need the last name?) "This Land is Your Land," which Bikel refers to as "the unofficial national anthem of folk music."

While Glenn Yarborough was once a member of the Limelitters, who hail from San Francisco, he is not included in the trio as the group

starts of the second part. There are two original members, and a new third that picks up the high tenor gap Glenn left behind. Their first is a rousing version of a rousing song, "There's A Meeting Here Tonight," followed by Woody's "Traveling Wayfarin' Stranger" and the Weavers' "Lonesome Traveler." The trio have really close harmonies, with which they play with the melodies and the pacing in very entertaining ways.

Described as "a man, his guitar, and his talent," Josh White Jr. proves he is quite the talent without familial associations (and yet he seems to be forever in his father's shadow). Josh is backed by just his fingersnapping in the first tune, the spiritual a capella "I've Been Down" ("I've been down so long / getting up never crossed by mind"). With his guitar, he performs the playfully upbeat style blues of "Where Were You Baby When My Heart Went Out."

While he may be blind, Doc Watson is a top finger-picker (no, I don't have any idea what one has to do with the other, any more than he is from North Carolina). Also unrelated, in Watson's intro, Bikel manages to give an indirect slam to electric music, i.e., Dylan and rock). But I digress... Getting back to Doc, he is an old-tyme country player, Woody-style, starting off with a lively cover of the moving "Fix Me a Pallet," followed by the classic I-IV-V rhythm of "I Got the Blues."

Bringing us back to the Appalachian Olde-English-based subgenre is music historian (and musician) Jean Ritchie, of Kentucky. With dulcimer in hand, she wails "March Down to Old Tennessee." I particularly liked the very short background or description she gives explaining how it was illegal for women to dress like men, as in the next song, "They Call Me Jackero." Of course, there are lots of songs of women following men into battle, such as "500 Miles" and the aforementioned "Bonny Light Horseman." In this case, the protagonist fights beside her love and saves his life.

Dave von Ronk (d. 2002) is such a dynamic performer, it's no wonder he mentored other great musicians such as Christine Lavin. As a leader of the urban folk movement (Dylan, Ochs, etc.), this Brooklynite belts some jazz blues with "Sunday Street," for which he refers to himself as a "city-billy." His second piece, "Garden State," has a Brel-ish melody, while he shouts out the lyrics, consisting only of the names of towns in New Jersey (in rhyme, yet).

A jug band, led by Mary McCaslin and Jim Ringer, sails through the country bluegrass (I did say *jug* band, y'know) "Sunday Street." Jim does all the singing and she plays, but for some reason, she still has a mic. Just an observation; go figure. They are quite joyous.

With a John Hartford (he would have been good to have here) banjo-pickin' singing-talking style, John McEuen (of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band) plays "Old Man From Missouri," only he mixes it up a bit with traditional stirred with a more modernized tone. Then he starts playing real fast. Punk banjo anyone?

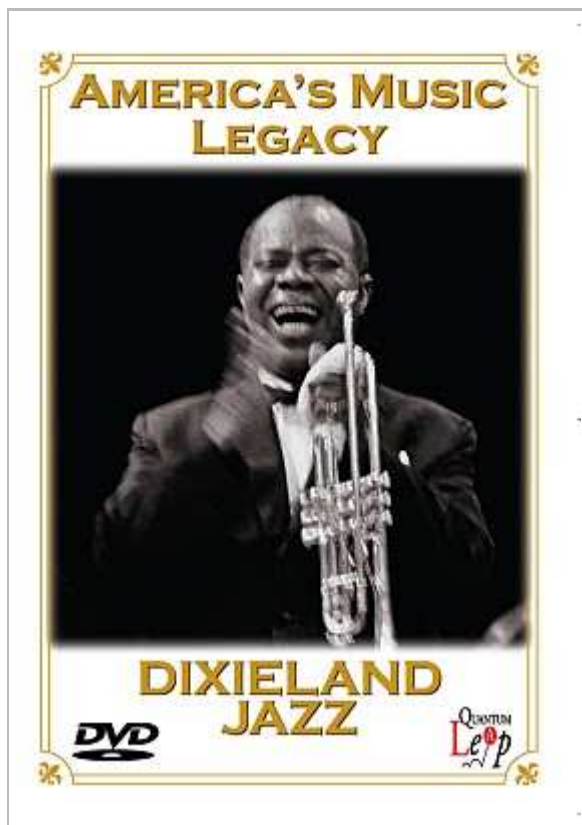
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To finish off as the second set began, the Limelitters come back for "That's Just the Way It Goes," giving it a modern klezmer twist.

There was a lot to enjoy in this collection, and it's easy to recommend to any folker. And yet, there are so many others I would have loved to have seen, like Joe & Eddie (in clips, as Joe died in an accident in '66; youtube.com/watch?v=WBo-SSVNw-g&feature=related), The Allen-Ward Trio (youtube.com/watch?v=c2gAuSGyDmQ), and Dana & Brown, among so many others, but that's just me dreaming and being unrealistic about the time allotted, I guess...

* * *



America's Music Legacy: Dixieland Jazz

Directed by Kip Walton

Cube International / Century Home Video, 1983 / 2010

95 minutes, USD \$16.95

Cubeinternational.com

Qleap.co.uk

MVDvisual.com

What is the difference between jazz and Dixieland jazz? The latter is a mix of Spanish, French, Caribbean and African influences. It also relies heavily on brass and woodwinds, and is generally an upbeat sound. Once a perennial Mardi Gras parade member, host and trumpeter Al Hirt (d. 1999) describes it as “happy music,” though it does share some of the blues.

The sound is not as common now as when I was growing up, as jazz has become more codified, even in its freedom of expression. Just the white hair on so many of the musicians on this two-edited-into-one musical extravaganza shows that it is a sound that may have passed its time, like the related big band swing. I'm not saying it's gone, just that it's not as prevalent as it used to be. But again, as Hirt states proudly, referring to this music, “The south will rise again.”

The musicians used throughout this program is called the New Orleans Jazz All-Star Band, made up of Hirt's and Woody Herman's back-up, including at times such jazz luminaries as Bobby Havens, Eddie Miller, Ray Leatherwood, Gene Estes, Michael “Peanuts” Hucko, Ray Sherman, Fred Crane, Edward Huntington, and Colin Bailey.

Woody Herman and his band open up the show with a stirring “Jazz Me Blues” and “Basin Street Blues,” upbeat numbers with a rousing clarinet. As with most of numbers here, it is common for the lead musician to give way to the others in the band for a chance to shine. Dixieland is very magnanimous that way (and jazz tends to be in general; you really need to know what you’re doing and be able to improvise to play it well).

Much of the music and dialog revolve around trumpeter Louis Armstrong (d. 1971). Also known as Satchmo, or just Pops, he was a New Orleans native who brought the sound to the world in the 1920s. In later years, though, he moved to Queens, NY, and is buried there. Hirt reads off a short but informative bio of Armstrong, and shows some photos and clips.

It only makes sense that one of his musical offspring, instrumentalist Clara Bryant, a killer trumpeter in her own right. She plays “When It’s Sleepytime Down South,” a ballad she dedicates to Louis. Following is an interview clip of her describing the time she met Satchmo, who gave her a trumpet that she still owns.

Whipping up a fast-as-lightening banjo is Scotty Plummer (d. 1992 in a motorbike accident), who plays hardcore punk-speed Dixieland. The two instrumental tunes he strums, the standard “Waiting for the Robert E. Lee” and “The World is Waiting for the Sunrise,” almost sound like bumblebees surrounding the melody as his hand moves up and down so fast they’re a blur. He had quite the incredible technique.

Jazz-angel (sorry) Della Reese proves she’s more than an actress in a (gratefully gone) sappy television program, as she jazzes up and bops Irving Berlin’s “Blue Skies.” As fine as she is here, I enjoyed her second number, “The Man with a Horn,” a bluesy ballad accompanied by Hirt, much more. With “Horn,” she shows off more of her range and musical emotion.

Hirt finally does a lead with the chestnut “Bill Bailey,” joined by his quartet (stand-up bass, drum, piano), each of whom get a solo. After a brief film clip of Hirt describing his life and career, he actually sings on “Bourbon Street Paradise.” His voice is gravelly and raw, and sounds great to this style.

Playing a jellyroll associated with the likes of Scott Joplin and Fats Waller is Johnny Guarnieri (d. 1985), who is sort of the Carol Kaye (bassist of the famed Wrecking Crew) of the big band era, playing on thousands of recordings. Here he plays terrific versions of Joplin’s classic “Maple Leaf Rag” and Waller’s “Ain’t Misbehavin’.”

Where there is Dixieland, can “When the Saints Go Marching In” be far behind? Hirt and Woody Herman fulfill the necessity with a rousing rendition.

Bob Crosby (yes, the youngest brother of Bing; d. 1993) joins his old swing band, the Bobcats, for their big hits, “March of the Bobcats”

and "Big Noise From Winnetka," the latter which started as an improv way back when, before it was put to 78 rpm.

The married couple of Jim and Marsha Hession, aka The Hessions, follow a clip of Eubie Blake (who, like George Burns, died shortly after his 100th birthday). Jim plays a killer piano, and Marsha sings in a high, operatic voice. It's quite lovely and she is able to reach four octaves, but at the same time I found it kind of disconcerting and forced (as operatic voices tend to be). They open with a lively version of Waller's "This Joint is Jumpin'."

Hirt is back with his band doing a jazz rendition of "Someday You'll Be Sorry." It's a bit meandering in the way jazz can be, and it still swings. Again, everyone gets space to do their own thing.

At long last, Scatman Crothers (d. 1986) gets his chance. The man is more than a musician, he is a performer, and I've been a fan for a number of years (as I've stated in a previous review for this series). He plays with the audience for his comedic "The Gal Looks Good." The song is more Harlem blues, and he shows off his amazing talent as he strums his guitar and, of course, scats.

Not to be confused with jazz musician Ted Buckner, jazz musician *Teddy* Buckner continues the Harlem-esque sound with the ballad "Struttin' With some Barbeque," which naturally leads into the swinging "Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone." These songs would sound as comfortable in New Orleans as it would at the Cotton Club.

There is a full song clip, and rightfully so, of Fats Waller (d. 1943) performing his stride piano to his own "Honeysuckle Rose," while a bevy of beauties lounge around him, Busby Berkeley bathing beauties style. Waller tended to lean towards comic, but he was highly talented as both a performer and writer. On the younger side relatively to the rest of this collection, and with some of the biggest hair (it was the '80s, y'know), is pianist Judy Carmichael. She plays a wild stride piano in a post-ragtime style, picking up on an instrumental version of Waller's "Honeysuckle Rose" as the clip of him playing the same song ends. A joy to watch, indeed.

The New Orleans All-Star Jazz Band comes out and does the biggest jazz standard of the Roaring '20s, "Tiger Rag" (you would probably know it if you heard it). The way the song is played here, which is actually quite raucous, is based on the trombone as the central instrument, with Bobby Havens doing physical playing that is reminiscent more of Hendrix than Higginbotham. Quite smile-worthy

The last original artist up is Irma Thomas, who Hirt describes as "The Queen of New Orleans Soul." She starts off singing her first recording from 1960, the humorous blues "(You Can Have My Husband But) Don't Mess with My Man." Her voice is deep, throaty, and honeyed (but not flinty). Hirt joins her in the second song, "Do You Know What it Means," a love song to New Orleans, all the more poignant now, nearly 30 years later after Katrina, since there are film clips shown of

the city shown as they sing that no longer exist.

For the finale, Hirt describes the how and why music at funerals in New Orleans is infamously played with a joyous tone. For the end, or “death” of the program, the whole band comes out again, and they perform “South Rampart Street Parade.”

Of all the collection of the *American's Music Legacy*, this is by far the most spirited and joyous, and also with the largest number of people no longer with us. Am I seeing a correlation? No, but I am enjoying it while I can.

Posted by Robert Barry Francos at [12:01 AM](#) 

Labels: [Al Hirt](#), [America's Music Legacy](#), [Blues](#), [Bob Dylan](#), [Buffy St.-Marie](#), [Dave von Ronk](#), [Dixieland jazz](#), [FFanzeen](#), [Folk music](#), [Hoyt Axton](#), [Louis Armstrong](#), [Odetta](#), [Robert Barry Francos](#), [Scatman Crothers](#)

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