

The Beautiful Music All Around Us: Field Recordings and the American Experience (Music in American Life)

By Stephen Wade

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The Beautiful Music All Around Us presents the extraordinarily rich backstories of thirteen performances captured on Library of Congress field recordings between 1934 and 1942 in locations reaching from Southern Appalachia to the Mississippi Delta and the Great Plains. Including the children's play song "Shortenin' Bread," the fiddle tune "Bonaparte's Retreat," the blues "Another Man Done Gone," and the spiritual "Ain't No Grave Can Hold My Body Down," these performances were recorded in kitchens and churches, on porches and in prisons, in hotel rooms and school auditoriums. Documented during the golden age of the Library of Congress recordings, they capture not only the words and tunes of traditional songs but also the sounds of life in which the performances were embedded: children laugh, neighbors comment, trucks pass by.

Musician and researcher Stephen Wade sought out the performers on these recordings, their families, fellow musicians, and others who remembered them. He reconstructs the sights and sounds of the recording sessions themselves and how the music worked in all their lives. Some of these performers developed musical reputations beyond these field recordings, but for many, these tracks represent their only appearances on record: prisoners at the Arkansas State Penitentiary jumping on "the Library's recording machine" in a rendering of "Rock Island Line"; Ora Dell Graham being called away from the schoolyard to sing the jump-rope rhyme "Pullin' the Skiff"; Luther Strong shaking off a hungover night in jail and borrowing a fiddle to rip into "Glory in the Meetinghouse."

Alongside loving and expert profiles of these performers and their locales and communities, Wade also untangles the histories of these iconic songs and tunes, tracing them through slave songs and spirituals, British and homegrown ballads, fiddle contests, gospel quartets, and labor laments. By exploring how these singers and instrumentalists exerted their own creativity on inherited forms,

"amplifying tradition's gifts," Wade shows how a single artist can make a difference within a democracy.

Reflecting decades of research and detective work, the profiles and abundant photos in *The Beautiful Music All Around Us* bring to life largely unheralded individuals--domestics, farm laborers, state prisoners, schoolchildren, cowboys, housewives and mothers, loggers and miners--whose music has become part of the wider American musical soundscape. The hardcover edition also includes an accompanying CD that presents these thirteen performances, songs and sounds of America in the 1930s and '40s.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Extraordinary. . . . A masterpiece of humane scholarship."--*The Wall Street Journal*

"These stories and the recordings — capturing the voices of everyday people, not pop stars — simply crackle."-*Los Angeles Times*

"Offers an understanding not only of a musical thread vital to American culture, but of America itself."--*Publishers Weekly*

"Astonishing. . . . These stories are compelling, moving and revelatory."--*Chicago Tribune*

"As compelling as a good detective story, this investigation of field recordings of a bygone era will be embraced by music fans. This book reminds readers that they don't need pop icons to experience passionate music."--*Library Journal*

"A unique, personal, thoroughly documented book, a labor of love. . . . valuable for those with an interest in folklore, popular music, southern cultures, and race relations. . . . Highly recommended."--*Choice*

About the Author

Musician, recording artist, and writer **Stephen Wade** is best known for his long-running stage performances of *Banjo Dancing* and *On the Way Home.* He also produced and annotated the Rounder CD collection that gave rise to this book, *A Treasury of Library of Congress Field Recordings.* Since 1996 his occasional commentaries on folksongs and traditional tunes have appeared on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered.*

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April Harry:

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