

American Epic: A three-part documentary about early “roots music”

The Carter Family, Mississippi John Hurt, Lydia Mendoza, Joseph Kekuku and more ...

By Matthew Brennan
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American Epic is a three-part documentary about an important period in the development of popular music in the United States. It was written and directed by Bernard MacMahon, who spent a decade on the project, and produced by musicians T-Bone Burnett and Jack White and actor Robert Redford, who also narrates the series. It aired on PBS in late May, and is currently available for viewing through Amazon Prime and select PBS regional websites.

All three episodes—*The Big Bang*, *Blood and Soil* and *Out Of The Many The One*—contain fascinating recollections and at times powerful archival footage of what is often referred to as “roots music” in the United States. Some remarkable musicians—the Carter Family, Mississippi John Hurt, Lydia Mendoza and Joseph Kekuku, to name a few—are featured in the series.

The filmmakers, unfortunately, have in certain ways bitten off more than they can chew, and, as a result, tend at times to impose a somewhat mechanical and historically limited narrative onto the music and its subsequent development. Nonetheless, it is a worthwhile primer for anyone seeking to learn more about this period in popular music.

The series focuses on musical developments in the United States between the mid-1920s and the late 1930s. Several factors in the early 1920s—the emergence of radio, the declining record sales of studio-based big band music and advances in recording technology, particularly the mobile Western Electric Recording system—drove the major record companies to seek new markets and musical sources.

The first episode (“The Big Bang”) begins with the push by record companies like Victor, Okeh and Columbia to find those new sources of music. Scouts and engineers from New York City were sent into rural, isolated and poor urban areas of the country, to audition and then record working class and rural musicians on wax discs for phonographs. These early recordings were initially termed “race records,” “hillbilly records” and the like by record companies, and aimed at supposedly “niche” audiences.

These records were broadly well-received and, taken as a whole, along with the “field recordings” of contemporary archivists like Alan Lomax (1915-2002), they gave impulse to innumerable genres of popular music in the 20th century.

The episode focuses on the impact of two specific musical

developments: the famous Bristol [Tennessee] Sessions in August 1927 and the early jug band music in Memphis. Both involve the efforts of the Okeh recording scout Ralph Peer, who was something of a musical chameleon during this period. He was the first to record dozens of significant artists in the US and Mexico between the 1920s and 1940s.

The Bristol recordings brought to light the music of two important artists, the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. The episode mostly focuses on the impact of the former. Featuring the captivating singing of Sara and A.P. Carter, along with the innovative “flat-picking” guitar-style of Maybelle (only 18 years old in 1927), the Carter Family of “Poor Valley,” Virginia recorded and popularized traditional songs of the Appalachian region.

Their recordings between 1927 to 1940 ended up having a significant impact on the development of modern music, particularly country and folk.

In addition, footage of Carter Family performances of “Sweet Fern,” “The Cannonball” and “Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow,” as well as stories told by family and friends, add convincing humanity to the episode. “They didn’t charge widows and orphans at their concerts” recalls an emotional grandson, “which tells me it was about the music and not the money.”

The portion of the first episode that focuses on the early recordings of the Beale Street Memphis jug bands is also interesting. It focuses primarily on jug band leader Will Shade, who in 1927 recorded songs like “On the Road Again” and “Foldin’ Bed,” and helped to launch the careers of blues singers such as Memphis Minnie.

The music, largely created with the only instruments available to the poor—jugs, washboards, tin cans, guitars, harmonicas and tub basses—also captured something of the rough-and-tumble life of urban African-Americans in cities like Memphis.

The blues musician Charlie Musselwhite, a pupil and friend of Will Shade, movingly makes the case that Memphis music was rich with vibrancy and life, appealing to both black and white audiences at the time. His brief rendition of Shade’s “I’ll Get a Break Someday” is the warmest and most moving of the “guest covers” in the series.

The second (“Blood and Soil) and third (“Out Of The Many The One”) episodes tend to focus a bit more eclectically on regional developments in the country, without much effort to tie them to the first episode. The filmmakers appear to draw heavily on the recordings on Harry Smith’s legendary 1959 “Anthology of American Folk Music.” Nonetheless, there are more or less striking segments in each episode.

The first half of the second episode is perhaps the weakest, dealing with the first recordings of gospel music in 1927. It focuses on the recordings of Elder J.E. Burch, a preacher from Cheraw, South Carolina. Unlike most of the other segments, very little is discussed here about the significance of this music or its impact on broader developments in subsequent years. It has the quality of being somewhat forced into the series.

The second half of the second episode, however, touches upon interesting recordings from Logan, West Virginia coal miners. Dick Justice, Frank Hutchinson and the Williamson Brothers all had songs between 1927 and 1929 that later appeared on Harry Smith’s anthology, such as “Henry Lee,” “Gonna Die with A Hammer in My Hand,” and “Stackalee.” The film also makes a passing reference to the bitter experiences of miners in the region, including the ferocious Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921.

The episode ends by reviewing the early origins of the Mississippi Delta bluesmen. Focusing on a large plantation in Dockery, Mississippi, which became a musical hub, the segment draws on the early 1926 recordings of the gravel-voiced musician Charley Patton, and songs such as “High Water Everywhere” and “Down the Dirt Road Blues.”

Guest commentators, including blues guitarist Taj Mahal and the last of the living Dockery Farms bluesmen, Honeyboy Edwards (who died in 2011), contribute vividly and movingly about the impact of the early bluesmen. Patton was likely responsible for training a significant generation of Dockery sharecroppers in the blues tradition, including figures such as Howlin’ Wolf, Pops Staples, Robert Johnson, Son House and others. They in turn had a huge impact on blues and rock and roll in the 1960s and beyond.

The third episode takes up several regional musical developments, including the struggles of Native American Hopi tribal chanters, the origins and impact of the Hawaiian steel guitar developed by Joseph Kekuku, the migrant worker ballads of the south Texan singer-guitarist Lydia Mendoza, the early recordings of southeastern Louisiana Cajun music and the late-life resurgence and influence of the great bluesman Mississippi John Hurt.

Each of the segments points to the musical fecundity and variety of the period. Songs of love and sorrow still resonate, like the Breaux Freres’ “Jolie Blonde” or Lydia Mendoza’s “Mal Hombre,” as does Hurt’s gentle interpretation of the murder ballad “Louis Collins” (sung from the mother’s perspective). The story of Kekuku’s creation of the steel guitar and its subsequent impact on world music is worthy of a multi-part series in itself.

The final episode is quite intriguing and yet also underscores some of the problems in limiting such a vast project to only three parts. Taken together these musical developments point to significant changes, not just in music but in social and economic life, both in the US and internationally. Much of the music in the series retains its power because it speaks artistically, even

poetically, to harsh economic and social conditions, as well as to vast technological and industrial development and its social consequences. The experiences, moods and sentiments of millions from very different backgrounds were crossing paths, resonating, and interacting in powerful ways.

The filmmakers are reluctant to get at the radical musical and social implications of the great intermingling of sounds that came about in the period under review.

To take one example, there is wonderful footage in episode three of the Hawaiian steel guitar’s influence in several genres of music—delta blues, bluegrass, rock and roll and even African music. Yet the filmmakers leave that historical development, which began before the 1920s, largely unexplained.

They also mechanically set national parameters on the music’s development, which is a glaring weakness. Much is made of the American “uniqueness” of the music in the series. Yet so much of it—such as the Canadian and French influence on Cajun music, the European and African and Hawaiian origins of much of the blues and country music, the overtly “borderless” origins of Mendoza’s music—is anathema to national particularity.

The series concludes movingly with commentary by Timothy Ferris, the producer of the music included aboard NASA’s 1977 Voyager Spacecraft. The project, spearheaded by Carl Sagan, was intended to convey, among other things, the sounds of Earth (not just the US). He points out that “folk” music comes from the “great mass of people,” and has long had impact even on the most advanced forms of Western music, including figures like Bach and Beethoven.

Underscoring his decision to include Blind Willie Johnson’s moving rendition of the traditional Scots hymn “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground,” Ferris notes:

“There is no such thing as the ‘best’ music. Music is often about the hardship and tragedy of life, the feeling of being alone and desperate and homeless. Night has yet to fall on anywhere on the planet without touching men and women in exactly that situation. So one of my first priorities was to put this song on the record intended to last billions of years.”

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