

Programming

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'American Routes' Gets To The Roots

Program Is PRI's Fastest-Growing Syndicated Music Show

BY BRADLEY BAMBARGER

NEW ORLEANS—Radio listeners are often divided among those who prefer music and those who prefer news. Yet as Nick Spitzer knows, music has long been the vehicle for news. Whether Indian chants or urban raps, music has been the medium by which a society delivers messages about itself to itself.

"All the important ideas of a culture are voiced in its art," says Spitzer, host and producer of "American Routes," a weekly program based here, in which the nation's content is examined in the context of sounds from blues to bluegrass, Tin Pan Alley to zydeco.

In one of his two-hour shows, Spitzer might examine the way in which cultural mores are reflected via the singer/songwriter tradition from Bob Dylan to Beck. Or he might explore the manner in which the field hollers of black slaves and the late-'60s funk of James Brown each relayed information vital to the African-American condition. Similarly, he can turn the manifold musical signifiers embodied in an age-old holiday like Mardi Gras or a many-hued metropolis like New York into a sonic scenic tour.

On the air for two years, "American Routes" is the fastest-growing music show syndicated by Public Radio International (PRI), with 111 stations and some 300,000 listeners per week. Many of the subscribing outlets are news/talk-oriented, and those who do air music are as likely to focus on classical as on jazz or folk styles. Spitzer, though, doesn't aim for any one sort of listener, whether news hound or jazz junkie.

"We don't want to preach to the choir," he says. "We want to spread the gospel."

NONLINEAR DOCUMENTARY

But for all the revelations of "American Routes," the program is neither Sunday sermon nor grad-school seminar. It's a nonlinear documentary in music.

"Although the show can be accessed on a deeper level, it rides on sonic flow," Spitzer says. "It operates at that dual level because we know that the best stuff is always both entertaining and educational. We design the show so that you can tune in for the interviews or just roll with the music, whichever you're into most."

The key to the character of "American Routes" lies not only in Spitzer's long experience as a folklorist with the Smithsonian Institution and the state of Louisiana but in his formative years as a die-hard fan

of classic rock'n'roll radio. Spitzer grew up in rural Connecticut, where he turned to radio as refuge from "parental authority." Along with affection for New York Yankee broadcasts, he developed an abiding love for such vintage rock DJs as Murray the K and Matt Daddy. Spitzer says their spinning of platters by the likes of Fats Domino and Jerry Lee Lewis "helped me connect to a wider musical culture, helped me visualize a world beyond Connecticut."

Illustrating a wider world and a listener's connection to it has always been a prime mission of public radio, one to which Spitzer feels especially close. "There seems to be an increasing



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emphasis on fragmentation in our society, on reinforcing narrow interests," he says. "Particularly, a lot of American musical forms have historic relationships yet have been artificially separated for the purpose of marketing to various core classes and ethnicities. That may be considered economically efficient, but it inhibits cultural sharing. I hope we help show people not only what distinguishes them from each other but what brings them together."

SETTING A MOOD

Local roots-music shows are common, of course, although most of those are genre-focused, concentrating on the regional affinity whether it be country or blues, for instance. When Junior Brown was featured on "American Routes," his basis in both country and blues was underlined with aplomb. Likewise, a past show demonstrated George Gershwin's use of not only jazz but klezmer. And a recent taping had Dolly Parton discussing the roots of her Nashville art in Appalachian ballads.

But one of the peerless aspects of "American Routes" is its way of both setting a mood and discerning deeper meanings via apposite segues. One episode saw Spitzer highlighting the mythic and musical connections among an old Tejano *ranchera*, the vintage rockabilly number "Wooly Booly," and a contemporary Los Lobos track. And a Labor Day show emphasized the common cause in a trio of songs separated by considerable time and temper.

"We had Paul Robeson, a committed socialist, singing this labor movement anthem, 'Joe Hill,' in an art-

song style," Spitzer recalls, "and we had Randy Newman doing his 'Mr. President, Please Have Pity On The Working Man,' which is this sort of retro Louisiana populism voiced in a West Coast version of Tin Pan Alley."

"Then there was Ray Charles singing his R&B and crossover pop hit 'Busted,' which is this romanticized vision of the working man," he says. "There are thematic and sonic threads that join each of those songs. And, of course, they all speak to nearly every listener, since most people know what it feels like to have been broke at one time or another."

NOT A NATIVE BUT A LOCAL

A New England intellectual and adopted Southerner, Spitzer says he may not be a native, but he is "a local," speaking Louisiana French and knowing the area's Byzantine ins and outs from years of rooting around. He could have realistically based "American Routes" in Austin, Texas, or Sante Fe, N.M., but it is for reasons both aesthetic and pragmatic that he has made the show the only nationally syndicated public radio program produced on the Gulf Coast.

"There is obviously a rich musical heritage in New Orleans—jazz, R&B, gospel, Cajun, zydeco, rock'n'roll," Spitzer says. "Plus, we have national artists who are rooted locally, like Allen Toussaint and the Neville Brothers. There is still this ongoing mix of cultures as in the 19th century, with African and Latin and French influences. And I'm a big believer in the Creole ideal, of building new cultures out of the old."

"Also, the city is relatively isolated socially, which has its advantages and disadvantages, but it means that great music still happens at a party or parade here for the sheer love of it—not with the idea that someone might get a record contract," he says.

Located next door to the historic Gallier House on Royal Street in the heart of the French Quarter, the "American Routes" headquarters was home to a water-bottling plant 150 years ago. The gulf in creative atmosphere between this environment and, say, a midtown Manhattan office building is infinite. Beyond Spitzer, the staff includes production director Matt Sakakeeny, contributing producer Katy Reckdahl, assistant producer Joel Rose, and production assistant Kaori Maeyama. Executive producer Mary Beth Kirchner is based in Los Angeles.

30 NEW PROGRAMS IN 2000

After a slightly higher pace for

the first two years, the "American Routes" team is set to produce 30 new programs this year. Upcoming broadcasts include a summer "back to the beach" show featuring surf-guitar god Dick Dale; there will also be a rebroadcast of a segment Spitzer produced at the Smithsonian that had late Grateful Dead guitarist Jerry Garcia discussing his influences in country and bluegrass. Artist and song selections for every program are listed at americanroutes.org.

"American Routes" received seed money from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, with subsequent support coming from sources both public (the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities) and pri-

vate (Community Coffee of Baton Rouge). The show rents its offices from the University of New Orleans, which provides certain infrastructure gratis. (Spitzer is an adjunct professor of cultural conservation at the school.)

Selling any new show on public radio is an uphill climb, and "American Routes" trails such hit PRI offerings as "The Savvy Traveler" (with 200 stations) and "This American Life" (400 and counting). But Spitzer points out that it took seven years to get the iconic "Prairie Home Companion" out of Minnesota and onto the airwaves nationwide. And Dale Spear, PRI's director of programming, sees "American Routes" (Continued on page 106)

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as having something in common with almost every successful show.

"We think great radio comes from great hosts," Spear says, "and Nick is a great on-air presence—it's easy to be pulled into whenever he talks about music, any kind of music. In fact, the feedback from stations and listeners is that people want to hear Nick talk more—and that's rare for a music-oriented show."

KEY OUTLETS

In the highly competitive week-end-specialty-show market, the position of "American Routes" is now comparable to that of successful triple-A program "The World Café" or new age show "Echoes." Among subscribers to "American Routes" are stations in six larger markets, Washington, D.C. (WAMU, American University); Seattle (KUOW, University of Washington); Phoenix (KJZZ, Rio Salado College); Ann Arbor/Detroit (WUOM, University of Michigan); Charlotte, N.C. (community outlet WFAE); and Northridge/Los Angeles (KCSN, California State University-Northridge) and two recent adds, San Diego (KPBF, San Diego State University) and Portland, Ore. (KOPB, hub for Oregon Public Broadcasting).

Other key outlets for the program include KUNC Greeley, Colo., and WFPK Louisville, Ky. (Strangely, the show is no longer carried in the Crescent City, after eclectic community station WWOZ dropped it in favor of more volunteer programming.)

THE SHOW HAS 'CLEARLY WORKED'

Many stations air "American Routes" on Sunday afternoons, as does KJZZ (from 2 to 4). The Arizona outlet—which focuses on news/talk during the day and jazz and blues at night—has carried the show almost since its inception. Although there were questions as to whether such a genre-blurring program could be effective, KJZZ PD Scott Williams says "American Routes" has "clearly worked for us, which we see not only in the Arbitron ratings but in good listener feedback. The show seems to work so well for us because it reinforces our other music programming in the way that Nick often underlines the relation of jazz and blues with rock and pop music, which I think our audience finds really interesting."

"American Routes" obviously goes against the grain in that most of the musical dial is taken up by the hot and the new—the hits. "We are always open to making connections to current artists like, say, Lauryn Hill or Yo La Tengo," Spitzer says, "but we have the advantage of mostly dealing with enduring music—the long-term American hit parade. Yet what is new for most of our listeners are the different genres, the kinds of

music that they might never have heard even though they might inform some of the music that they listen to every day."

After first praising Spitzer as a "good guy who knows his stuff," 76-year-old Texas bluesman Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown echoes many of the host's concerns in what makes for a ringing endorsement of "American Routes." He says, "Although people seem to be brainwashed today into thinking something else, our roots make us what we are. It's what makes us different, and it's what a lot of us have in common,

whether we admit it or not.

"It's important to have things that help remind people of where today's music came from," Brown adds. "Eric Clapton knows he got his music from the black man, and some of the white people who buy his records probably know it by now, too. But I can tell from my mostly white audience that not many black people, especially young ones, know about the blues... I don't know how many black people listen to ['American Routes']. But it might do them some good if they did. It might do everybody some good."

TO OUR READERS

AirWaves will return in next week's issue.