


R DIGGING Routes

By Samuel Hughes **NICK SPITZER'S
SONIC GUMBO IS UNLIKE
ANYTHING ELSE
ON RADIO.**



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIKA GOLDRING



A Saturday afternoon, maybe a Sunday. You might be driving; you might be in the kitchen chopping onions. The radio is on, and when you notice the hour, you flip it to a certain NPR station, just in time to hear the rolling opening bars of “Tipitina,” Allen Toussaint’s interpretation of the Professor Longhair classic.

“You’re traveling on *American Routes*, from Basin Street Station in New Orleans,” comes the voice-over: “songs and stories from the bayous to the beltways, from crossroads to crosstown, from coast to coast.” The voice, which belongs to Nick Spitzer C’72, is at once laid back and revved up, friendly but erudite, somewhere on the wry edge of folksy. As Jelly Roll Morton breaks into “Doctor Jazz,” or Nat King Cole slides into “Route 66,” or Louis Jordan digs into “Five Guys Named Moe,” Spitzer offers a teaser of the week’s installment. It might be the Medicine Show, with rollicking songs of lovesickness and snake-oil healing; it might be Classical Routes, with the likes of Gershwin, Gottschalk, and “Concerto for Cootie”; it might be The Spirit World of New Orleans, with odes to voodoo queens and interviews with Fats Domino and a Louisiana Creole healer. Or it might be a live performance of Arlo Guthrie’s “The City of New Orleans,” as he and Spitzer ride the train of that name, riffing down to the sea.

Whatever—for the next two hours, if it’s at all possible, you’re not budging. You’re cruising.

All right, so I’m using the second person a bit loosely here. Maybe you haven’t even heard of *Routes*, and if you have maybe you’re not a fanatical listener. But if you have even a passing interest in the broad, roiling, many-tributaries river of American music, Spitzer’s show is as essential as a pair of ears. This is not just the opinion of one hyperventilating fan. “In the history of American radio,” wrote jazz critic and chronicler Nat Hentoff nine years ago, “no series has come close to Nick Spitzer’s *American Routes* in exploring the many streams of this nation’s music.”

Over the past decade Spitzer’s toothsome musical gumbo, infused with meaty interviews and piquant observations, has lured a weekly audience of nearly a million Americans on more than 300 stations, and the numbers are still arcing up.

Spitzer himself describes the show as a “Creole document,” explaining that “it contains Creole music, like Zydeco and the roots of jazz; it contains creolized forms, like the way that Klezmer or country music and rock ‘n’ roll represent minglings of culture to create new music out of old traditions; and it’s an assemblage of many different styles that makes the totality of what is a kind of aesthetically creolized, purposely creolized, mixed and mingled document.”

Since he’s a recognized authority on Creoles and creolization, he doesn’t toss those terms around lightly. But he also doesn’t let his erudition bog down his extremely user-friendly show.

“When you talk about scholarship and history in a radio show, it seems like a weight,” says veteran radio news broadcaster Bill Vitka C’71, who’s known Spitzer since their early days at Philadelphia’s WMMR. “But his show is always light as a feather. A lot of that is Nick’s delivery—he’s just so comfortable behind the frigging mic, and you feel comfortable because he is.”

“*American Routes* has an excellent grasp on how the public understands American culture,” notes John Szwed, professor of music and jazz studies at Columbia, emeritus professor at Yale, and a former professor at Penn. “Spitzer builds on that understanding, advances it, and drops it into the listener’s lap—almost as a letter from home, even if from a home you might not have known you came from.”

What sets *Routes* apart isn’t just the range of styles and musical genres Spitzer explores but the way he connects them, and the knowledge and taste he brings to the table. “It’s wonderful how Nick can tie up the disparate threads to show how connected this crazy quilt of music is—that it’s not just rags,” says Michael Esterson (aka Michael Tearson) C’70, a free-lance radio performer who has known Spitzer since their WMMR days. “It’s a truly unique show.”

In addition to his considerable experience in radio—he cut his FM teeth on then-student-run WXPB, put in a couple of years at then-progressive WMMR, and had a highly regarded program on KOKE in Austin before turning to NPR—Spitzer has a Ph.D. in folklore from the University of Texas. He also served as Louisiana’s first state folklorist from

1978 to 1985, as the senior folklife specialist at the Smithsonian Institution for five years after that, and as artistic director of the *Folk Masters* series at Carnegie Hall and Wolf Trap for another seven. These days he is a professor of communication and American studies at Tulane University and an adjunct professor for research in anthropology and urban studies at the University of New Orleans.

“The relationship between his academic credentials and his public role with *American Routes* is a critical relationship, because he brings an edge intellectually to his programming and his interviews that is really unique,” says William Ferris Gr’69, former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities and now associate director of the Center for the Study of the American South at the University of North Carolina. “When he talks with Willie Nelson or [record producer] Jerry Wexler, he really knows the history and context in which their lives are set.

“Nick has made enormous strides in advancing the public’s knowledge of and appreciation for vernacular culture,” he adds, “which tends not to have advocates within the academy.”

“I’m leading a sort of double life, in many people’s terms,” Spitzer admits cheerfully. “I mean, I’m both a media person and a culture person. I’m an ethnographer and a documentary-arts person; I’m a behind-the-scenes field person, but I’m also on the stage. So life for me has pulsed between those points.”

Right now, my cell phone is pulsating in my pocket. I’m supposed to meet an old friend for dinner during my brief trip to New Orleans, but I’m two hours into my interview with Spitzer, and not only is he showing no signs of flagging, he’s not even pausing for breath. So I let the phone vibrate. When Spitzer’s on a roll—not an uncommon occurrence—you just sit back and listen.

We’re sitting in his small studio in the *Routes* complex, which occupies the third floor of the weirdly renovated Basin Street Station, across from the venerable St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, home to Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen, among other shades. (Basin Street is the third home for *Routes*, and it

will soon give way to a fourth: Tulane, now a co-producer, is building him a new studio on campus, which will simplify his life no small amount.) Behind the mic stands a Hank Williams bobblehead doll, a bust of Louis Armstrong carved from Mississippi River driftwood, and a little windup jukebox with a kneeling bobby-soxer.

He came by his verbal virtuosity and his thirst for American vernacular culture honestly—a “loquacious kid from a family of loquacious people,” he says. His mother was a “very expansive” lady from a once-prominent Southern family who shared her fascination with all things American with her children—driving Nick and his brother Paul from their house on eastern Long Island to Harlem to glimpse the Savoy Ballroom, or down to the East Village to check out the Beats. The Spitzers moved to rural Old Lyme, Connecticut when Nick was seven, whereupon the drives would take in Charles Ives’ points of inspiration on the Housatonic or maybe a nearby Indian reservation. His German-Jewish father’s contributions to the mix included a scholarly intelligence (he was a chemist for Pfizer) and a love of classical music (he was a serious cellist).

From a young age Nick was fascinated by radio, which brought in the pulsing rhythms of Fats Domino and Chuck Berry as well as the crack of a baseball hitting a bat on the West Coast. When he was 10 he used a Remco radio kit to do pirate “broadcasts” from the house, jamming Paul’s favorite AM top-40 station with announcements.

At Penn, where he soon realized that his heart was not in the career path offered by Wharton, his real education came in two forms. One was anthropology and folklore, but since the anthropology department—with its index-card archives of Human Relations Area Files (the Yale-based cultural-anthropology organization)—was more interested in Oceania and South America, Spitzer’s scholarly explorations were supplemented by forays into the strange new world of Philadelphia.

“I went into Philly, and I started looking around and thinking, ‘Wow, all these people of the Italian Market, they’re selling vegetables and speaking Italian, and down on South Street there’s Harry’s Occult Shop, a little voodoo shop, and some doo-wop singers—white ones on one corner, black on

another corner. Philly’s soul music. Jazz clubs—you know, the Aqua Lounge, and cats in fancy suits and dashikis, playing mind-boggling jazz.’ Seeing these guys playing this unbelievably great modern jazz—some of Coltrane’s old people—and the new sort of free jazz, I’m thinking, ‘Where are *these* guys in the Moynihan Report? Why doesn’t the anthropology department study these people?’”

In the spring of 1969, he signed up for a course on jazz and blues with John Szwed.

“He’d be bringing in the Grubbs Brothers and his jazz people from Philly, and he’d be talking about Professor Longhair,” Spitzer recalls. “Szwed really opened me up to the power of jazz as a community music, the power of the vernacular oral tradition. And it was a very liberating thing to be able to talk about avant-garde but small-community music as folkloric, and oral tradition.”

Around that time he met the late Professor Kenneth Goldstein, who, as a folklorist, had produced some 500 records for a variety of labels.

“I was so impressed that a *professor* had produced records, and he produced them for a bunch of labels, and he did a lot of blues and sort of bluesy jazz. But he also did Irish-American folk songs, and old English ballads. So it was like the classic folklore content.”

Between Szwed and Goldstein, “I kind of had the bases covered,” says Spitzer. “And then I could get on the air at XPN, where I was starting to do shows, and start mixing music.”

In those freewheeling days WXPX was a mother lode of opportunity, both in the air-time it offered fledgling DJs and in its music library. Spitzer started off on the AM station as a freshman and quickly worked his way to the FM side, becoming program director by his senior year.

“XPN was the incubator for our interest, and a tremendous resource,” says Andy Baum C’72, now a lawyer, who served as station manager when Spitzer was the program director. “The station was really blazing a trail in terms of the variety of music being played. Both Nick and I were avidly involved in programs that mixed different musical genres together and explored a wide variety of types of music.”

“I realized one day at WXPX, I’ve got the Human Relations Area Files [in the anthro-

pology department], and the sound recordings on this wall,” says Spitzer. “I’ve got 500 Folkways records, of ethnic groups of the world. I’ve got all these Lyricord records, Nonesuch Explorer Series, Arhoolie. These are the sounds of these people at ritual, at festival, at entertainment, at weddings and funerals and births, in their own voices, in their own soundscapes, making their own music. It could be old-time American country music in English, and it could be South African workers’ songs. And I just began to feel that the radio station’s record library was more important to me personally than the Human Relations Area Files, and that they needed to be taken as seriously.”

“He brought the anthropological approach to the music,” says Baum. “He was serious about the roots of the music from the start.”

There was at times a “gonzo aspect” to the programming, which was then being called *Phase II* and “allowed for world music, jazz, rock, folk, classical, pop, you name it,” recalls Spitzer. “And we were all learning to make the music mix, and the art of the segue was a very big deal to us.”

He learned something about the art of the interview, too, sitting down with Jerry Lee Lewis after a raucous concert at the Civic Center. The Killer even yodeled for him. Sadly, that tape no longer exists.

Though on the surface, the long-haired Spitzer might seem to have epitomized the era in which the station evolved, as program director he sometimes had to clamp down on youthful ... excesses.

“One guy was tripping, and I just had to tell him it wasn’t possible to be on-air, tripping,” he recalls. “And he says, ‘But man, I’m doing it.’” Well, not for long. “My view of it was, ‘I’m protecting the station and the University by doing this,’” he says. “I didn’t sign up to be a cop, but I did have to occasionally do that.” He also helped raise money to keep the station on the air over the summer, expanding its appeal from the University community to the greater Philadelphia area.

WXPX has gone through a lot of changes since then, and while it is now in many ways a highly successful station, Spitzer has occasionally criticized its musical format and its lowered profile for students. But it clearly provided a seminal experience for him.

“XPN was an enormously uplifting experience for me,” he says, “because I was able to merge the world of folklore and anthropology—my life and growing interest in American cultures—with the music that expressed that diversity and expressed the unity of America, the *pluribus* and the *unum*, in programming and in the shows I could do.”

IT was Zydeco that made Nick Spitzer leave his happy home.

By then he was Nick Spencer, afternoon-shift DJ for WMMR in Philadelphia, a pretty sweet gig for a guy just out of college. Program director Jerry Stevens, the man responsible for the station’s innovative flow of music, viewed Penn and WXPN as a kind of farm club, and he liked the tape Spitzer had sent to the station. But *Spitzer* got Anglicized to *Spencer*.

“I told him when he hired me I’d rather use my own name, but he said, ‘I like *Nick Spencer*,’” Spitzer recalls. “The only advantage was that I didn’t need an unlisted phone number. But I never used a pseudonym again.”

In the beginning, the station’s DJs had “quite a bit of freedom,” he says. “We would play Randy Newman and segue to Ray Charles, or play Merle Haggard and segue to the Grateful Dead, and old blues to the Rolling Stones. Sometimes you’d get a little off the wall—some classical music to the Moody Blues, or some Ornette Coleman avant-gardism to sort of early funk. But it was fun.”

Those halcyon days were not fated to last.

“The world of MMR was evolving into this kind of stereotypical sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll,” says Spitzer. “And there was a side of me that was, for better or for worse, more serious than that world.”

Worse than that was the fact that, “little by little, we were being told to play certain music—less Bessie Smith, less country, less jug band, more rock, rock, rock,” says Spitzer, whose show’s ratings were still quite high. “I can’t tell you how many times I went to record-promo parties that seemed like the scene in *Spinal Tap*. And I was just getting sick of it.”

The final moves of the endgame at MMR are a bit hazy in Spitzer’s mind, but according to Bill Vitka he had been warned not to play Clifton Chenier, the flamboyant,



accordion-playing “King of Zydeco.” He did anyway. And to make sure his point wasn’t missed, he stuck a copy of the station’s marketing logo—an ear with a pair of wings on it, suggesting sonic freedom—onto Stevens’ door.

After declining to accept his inevitable reassignment to the night shift, he won a year’s severance pay—enough to finance his graduate education. Encouraged by his old mentors in anthropology, he applied to and was accepted by the University of Texas, which was flush with oil money and Penn émigrés. His friends at the station gave him a Sony stereo cassette recorder as a going-away present. It was all he needed. The open road and its many-tongued song beckoned.

Spitzer describes his long cross-country Odyssey as “Woody Guthrie meets Jack Kerouac,” with a little Charles Kuralt thrown in for good measure.

He started off recording a ballad singer in western Maryland, then visited the Carter Family in the Clinch Mountain region of southwest Virginia, before making his way to New Orleans and rural French Louisiana. Which pretty much blew his boots off.

There he met the Cajun fiddler Dewey Balfa, whose day jobs included farming, selling insurance, and driving a school bus. Balfa liked what he saw in Spitzer, and let him stay a month in a little camp behind his house. To earn his room and board, he worked—feeding the sheep, delivering insurance checks, cutting the grass.

Somewhere along the way he saw a poster in French advertising the Ardoin Brothers. Having already met Alphonse “Bois Sec” Ardoin, a black Creole musician, at a folk festival in Canada, he decided to check out the performance.

Afterwards the Ardoins invited him to a *fais do-do*, a sort of Cajun country dance party.

“I told Dewey, and he said, ‘Oh, you got to go to that.’ He said, ‘You know, all the people from France and Belgium and Quebec, they’re focusing on the Cajuns and their traditions, and I’m happy for that, but the black people, they get very little attention. The black American culture people don’t really look at them as black American, and a lot of the French people don’t think of them as fitting into the French world. But they got something special going on out there.’”

Morris Ardoin’s Cowboy Club, at the edge of St. Landry Parish, turned out to be Elysian Fields for a young folklorist.

“I went to this Sunday afternoon dance in this little shack, with a pool table that’d been moved to one side, and a little stage, and even though it was now like early spring, it was really hot because there were so many people in the place, and there’s little babies asleep on the pool table, on coats, bouncing up and down to the two-steps, and there were sheep over by where the cars were parked.” Old-time Creoles and younger kids alike were dancing and having fun and drinking beer, he recalls. “It was like paradise to me.”

Spitzer ended up doing most of his fieldwork there, living in a nearby house and picking cotton and doing pretty much everything else, and for many years he would come back for Mardi Gras and for deaths in the family.

One night at a Zydeco joint, a young man confronted him on the dance floor.

“You dance pretty well, and you talk better Creole than many of us kids,” the guy told him. “But don’t fool yourself. We like you, and you’re not bad; but you’re not us. You never will be.”

“But,” the young man went on, “you have a lot of things that you can do that we don’t know how to. You can read and write. You can make a recording. What you should do to help us is take pictures and make a recording.”

“It was an off-handed comment, but I took it very, very seriously,” says Spitzer now. “The best you can be is be yourself and acknowledge where you come from. Being myself was to be the documentarian, the broadcaster, the photographer, the scholar, the public servant.”

One afternoon in the KOKE-FM studio in Austin, the phone rang. Spitzer—who was about to start his second semester of grad school at the University of Texas and had landed a weekend gig on “Goat Roper Radio” (as the station was affectionately called)—answered.

“You’ve got the greatest show,” said the man on the other end of the line. He wasn’t your average enthusiast. He was Archie Green Gr’69, a “working-class intellectual,” in Spitzer’s words, who had a Ph.D. in folklore from Penn and was then teaching folksong and public folklore at UT-Austin. And he was extremely impressed with the taste, depth, and range of this young man’s programming.

“You should come to my class,” he told Spitzer, who replied: “I’m already registered.”

Green became Spitzer’s mentor in the realm of American folksong and public folklore, and continues to be one of his biggest fans. (Now in his 90s, he has gone so far as to lobby members of Congress to pick Spitzer to head the National Endowment for the Arts. “If Obama wants to have a successful cultural policy to match his politics,” says Green, “he could not do better than to choose someone like Nick to be his cultural czar.”)

Another mentor was Roger Abrahams Gr’61, now the Rosen Professor Emeritus of Folklore and Folklife at Penn. He had done his fieldwork in the realm that had so fascinated Spitzer: “that borderline zone between white downtown Philly and white South Philly—that black strip along South Street,” out of which came his classic (and, at the time, controversial) book: *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*.

The power and intricacy of borders was also key to the work of Américo Paredes, author of *With His Pistol in His Hand*, a book about the Spanish ballads on the Texas-Mexican border.

“Paredes understood the mixing of culture,” says Spitzer. “He gave me the idea that the border was a powerful place, precisely because there was so much cultural flux and negotiation.”

Paredes encouraged Spitzer to go back to Louisiana and investigate some of that state’s borders—not the political boundaries but those between the African and

French worlds. Key to those cultural minglings was a certain music that Spitzer knew well.

“Zydeco music was the mediation,” he says. “It’s French, and it’s African; it’s Caribbean, and it’s American. It’s all those things.”

Armed with a grant from the NEA, Spitzer immersed himself in French Louisiana fieldwork: living with families, teaching school, recording in clubs, producing a couple of Zydeco records. Though he had only planned on getting his master’s degree, Paredes and Abrahams convinced him to stay on to get his doctorate, and got him a major fellowship to make it work. His doctoral dissertation was “Zydeco and Mardi Gras: Creole Identity and Performance Genres in Rural French Louisiana,” and as he worked on it he began to see the possibilities that “very diverse African-French culture” offered in a variety of media. (He directed a film about Zydeco in 1986, and is now revamping his dissertation in a book format that will include film and audio components.)

When the Smithsonian hired him in 1976 to put together some Gulf Coast programming for the Bicentennial Festival and the National Folk Festival, Spitzer brought a series of Zydeco bands to Washington—one of which, on a sweltering day in July, brought Arthur Schlesinger Jr. out of the Library of Congress in his white pinstriped suit and bow tie.

“Who’s responsible for this band?” Schlesinger demanded. “I am,” Spitzer replied, bracing himself for a stern request to turn down the volume. “This is very good, very authentic,” said Schlesinger, turning on his heel and walking back into the Library.

Spitzer’s belief in the power of live performance as a transformative activity didn’t always sit well with the modern ethnographers in the academy.

“They saw it as kind of, ‘You’re getting involved subjectively in the aesthetics, and working with a community, and we don’t want to be mistaken for the folk revival in what we do—we’re social scientists,’” he recalls. “And I said, ‘I’m sorry, but these aesthetics are a really good way for people to think about what’s going on in our society. If we all share going to a music occasion, I can do the ethnography of where it came from.’”

Doctorate in hand, Spitzer moved back to Louisiana—this time to Baton Rouge, to become the state’s first official folklorist. It wasn’t always smooth sailing. Jibby Fox, the state’s Secretary of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism, told him: “You don’t need to teach rabbits to eat lettuce,” suggesting that he spend less time on the “colorful and musical Negroes and Cajuns” in south Louisiana, and maybe a little more on the “clean” people in the north.

Spitzer—who liked the fact that those same Negroes and Cajuns would often pop into his office to tell him stories and bawdy jokes (and even ask him if he knew somebody who could uncross voodoo)—wasn’t slowed down by Jibby Fox. But something else very nearly stopped him cold.



HE had noticed something was wrong when he couldn’t play a full game of soccer. Then there was the weight loss, and the pain in his chest. His doctor sent him for an x-ray, which revealed a “gigantic mass” in the lining of his chest. It was cancer: a germ-cell tumor, and it was killing Nick Spitzer fast. The surgeons at Baton Rouge General Hospital opened him up, but couldn’t excise the tumor. When he came to, one told him he had three weeks, maybe three months, to live. He was 29 years old.

Spitzer’s oncologist, one Frederic Billings, reacted with professional indignation to that prognosis: “Everyone’s different,” he said, and laid out the options for treatment. But, he added: “We don’t have much time here.”

Moved to the hospice floor, Spitzer embarked on a “brutal” chemotherapy program, and was soon down to 100 pounds. His hair fell out, and infections were jumping on him like something out of *The Hot Zone*.

“You know, they’re trying to kill the tumor before they kill you, and I’m dyin’,”

“BLACK FLAG AND MENU” BY SKYLAR FEIN ©2008

man, I'm just goddamn dying," he says. "Everything was so painful. The good thing now is that you can't feel pain when you remember it, but at the time, I mean, you were just ... immobilized with pain."

To calm his nausea, he used a "lot of marijuana," he says. "It was illegal at the time, so the doctor stood up for me doing it." Needing something better than a homemade bong, he asked his mother to venture into the head-shop district of New London, Connecticut, where sailors got tattoos and God knows what else. Mom came through.

"This white Southern lady nurse comes over to me and says, 'Mr. Spitzer, I have some very, very good news for you. We're not making it a big issue in the hospital, given the situation; however, your marijuana pipe has arrived.'

"By now all the nurses and the orderlies were on my side," he says. "The orderlies were betting one night, 'Man, are you the guy on the hospice floor smokin' pot? I got \$100 that you ain't.' And I said, 'Man, get your \$100 together, 'cause I am.'"

By then he was something of a cause célèbre at the hospital.

"I became much more sensitive to the plight of African Americans," he says, "because those orderlies, they carried me around like a little baby, and they did everything for me, and bet on my smoking pot, and came and sang gospel music to me, sang blues—everything," he says. "I was like the folklorist being entertained on my deathbed, you know. It was very intense."

In addition to the chemotherapy and radiation, the marijuana and occasional shot of morphine, he began to meditate and visualize healing. He also had the benefits of a Cajun *traiteur* (healer) and a Cuban folk Catholic prayer regimen, not to mention all the friends and musicians who stopped by or sent records.

Finally a day came when the news was good: The tumor had shrunk, and they couldn't detect more cancer cells. When the surgeons opened him to make sure, "all they saw was dead tissue, and a bunch of surgical staples left from this tumor that had shrunk." He was skeleton-thin, hairless, and weak as watered milk—but cancer-free.

Dr. Billings was amazed.

"I deal with advanced tumors, and not the more curable things," he told Spitzer.

"The odds were *way* stacked against you." But, he added: "Medicine is an art as well as a science. I know the science. You found the art of it."

When they finally wheeled him out of Baton Rouge General Hospital, the orderlies, nurses, doctors, and other hospital personnel gathered to give him a rousing send-off.

"It was like a second line," says Spitzer, using the term for the onlookers who join a New Orleans jazz funeral or parade. "And when I walked out of there, this one black lady who's an orderly says to me, 'I want to tell you something, Mr. Nick. When we were shut out of school by segregation, I got to learn reading from two big books. One was the Bible; we read it every day and every night, and that was a hard book, 'cause it's got all that old language. The other was *Gumbo Ya-Ya* [the classic collection of Louisiana folk tales]. I know you do that folklore work. I'm glad you're going back home, because you need to do that work.'"

When he did get back to work, Spitzer was one fired-up folklorist.

He compiled a guidebook, *Louisiana Folklife*; did some field recordings; and created a major pavilion, "The Creole State," for the 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans. (When it was suggested that he script "Cajun automatons" to accompany a boat ride, he responded: "Why would I do that when I can get real Cajuns to play music and build boats and cook food?" His vision prevailed.)

By the time he left Baton Rouge in 1985, he had put together a sustainable program in what had been a pretty inhospitable bureaucratic climate.

"I was always making the argument that—economically, aesthetically, spiritually—keeping continuity with the old culture was important," he says. "Don't just wipe it out 'cause you think people are non-literate."

In Washington, where he was appointed senior folklorist at the Smithsonian, Spitzer was able to indulge his love of live performance through the Folklife Festival, which brought musicians and other artists onto the National Mall, and through a series of concerts at Carnegie Hall for its centennial. By then he was also doing radio features for NPR, followed by the Folk Master

series at Carnegie Hall and Wolf Trap.

"My NPR features were entertainment disguised as news," he says. "My Folk Master series was news disguised as entertainment."

Ever since he left WXPB, he had wanted to have a regular radio show called *American Roots*. But by the mid 1990s, his *roots* metaphor had evolved: from the old folklore ideal of the "bucolic, isolated community," as he puts it, "to a more human action, where consciousness would be part of what we shaped the future to be."

"I began to see that great American culture didn't all have to be communal and bucolic and deep-rooted," he explains. "As much as I love the real Creole culture, I realized that they were into television there. I mean, they were playing the *Beverly Hillbillies* theme on the accordion and fiddle as a two-step."

By now his elocutionary pistons are humming like a '55 T-bird on an empty stretch of highway.

"The world's a gigantic diaspora," he says. "The world's in constant contact. And so we might hold up the *roots* as a kind of idealization—and I've nothing against idealizations; if we didn't have romance, it'd be a pretty awful world—but there's also the romance of the road and the romance of the possibility of what we can grow into. So I don't focus on conserving or preserving any group of people's culture as some static thing. I'm much more interested in what creative continuity there is to a future."

He pauses for a microsecond, then sums up for his jury of one. "I just felt that *Routes* was the way to think about America—hopefully emphasizing the idea that the journey was as important as the destination."

Mary Beth Kirchner was an executive producer

in the Smithsonian's Office of Telecommunications when Spitzer popped into her office to talk about this radio idea he had been mulling over for the past couple of decades. Having been the executive producer on the Folk Masters at Carnegie Hall series that Spitzer hosted, Kirchner, like a lot of people, found his musical vision and his gift of gab an irresistible combination.

"He kind of fell from heaven," says Kirchner, now an independent producer and programming consultant who has accumulated her full share of production

awards over the years. “Creating new shows is so hard. It requires such huge intellectual horsepower. When you’re looking for a host in public radio, it’s a rare individual that’s up for doing years and years of weekly programs. You have to have enormous passion, because it’s a long road to convince stations to carry it. And then it requires a great capacity to fundraise.” Knowing that Spitzer had all of those qualities, she finally dared him to give it a shot with her.

The irony—and challenge—was that they decided to go for it “at the precise moment where the public-radio system was shifting away from eclecticism,” notes Kirchner. So when they pitched the idea to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, they kept their initial goals modest. “We asked them to do just a handful of shows,” Kirchner recalls. “Look, we’re just going to pilot this. We’ll do it on five stations around the country and grow it slowly.”

The CPB’s response was, to say the least, unexpected. “They said, ‘No, make it national, now. We’ll give you more money than you asked for,’” says Kirchner. “That’s never happened to me.”

It’s hard to imagine *Routes* being broadcast from anywhere but the iconic city of jazz and gumbo that Spitzer calls the “Creole soul” of America. He toyed briefly with the idea of basing it in Austin, among other places, but in the end it was no contest.

“I said, ‘I’ve got to come back to Louisiana, and I’ll go to the big city, New Orleans,’” he says. “I’m pretty fluent in Louisiana French, and I understand the dialects; I know what’s going on. I figured I could make an economic and cultural difference. And so I came here.”

The first *American Routes* blasted off with Clarence Garlow’s “Bon Ton Roula” in November 1997 on WWOZ. Within six months it had gone national, and American Public Radio (now Public Radio International) had syndicated it to 39 stations; by 2000 that number had swelled to 175. “Mr. Spitzer’s uncompromising passion for American music in all its vast variety has found expression in ... *American Routes*,” wrote Samuel Freedman in a glowing feature for *The New York Times*.

In recent years, Spitzer has gradually increased his spoken-word content,

mostly in the form of interviews. Some of the best, with the likes of Dave Brubeck and Nina Simone and Tom Waits, appear on the 10th anniversary CD, *American Routes: Songs and Stories from the Road*. But the main draw is still the incredible tapestry of music, woven together with his insights. (If you haven’t heard *Routes* on the radio, stop reading now and go listen to it online: www.americanroutes.org.)

“My job is to be the listeners’ guide in the mix,” he says. “Not to interpret it in a heavy-handed way, but to create the mix, create the conversations with the folks, make the decisions about what’s in, what’s out. And people who like country music, well, they might start liking blues. People who like blues, they might like jazz. People who like jazz, they might like western swing and Klezmer—they have jazz elements. The music selections speak to one another, and I don’t have to say that much about ‘Listen for this, and listen for that.’

“If I did it as a lecture, you know, it would fail,” he adds. “It has to rise as radio art—great segues, great songs, and the right interviews, whether it’s an up-and-coming performer or the performers in a little community, or we try to take the famous person and find out how they got there, and what they care about. Ray Charles discovers country-western—what a story that is, from him.”

The fact that a fair number of people think the show is called *American Roots* seems to give Spitzer a perverse pleasure, though he acknowledges that the different pronunciations of *Routes* raises some interesting linguistic issues.

“I say *rowts*,” Dolly Parton told him in an interview. “When I’m talking *roots*, I’m talking my dye job at the hair salon.”

There’s another pronunciation he hadn’t counted on.

“One day Dr. John was in the studio, and he did an ID for us,” Spitzer recounts, sliding into a Big Easy growl: “This is Doctah Jawhn, and yaw listenin’ to *American Rutz* from N’awlins.”

“And I went, ‘Shit, I forgot about the third pronunciation, *rutz*,’” Spitzer says. “And Dr. John says, ‘It’s alright, just as long as that *rout* or *root* don’t become a rut.’”

The familiar piano chords are rolling now, but mournfully, in a minor key.

Even now there’s something heart-breaking about “Tipitina and Me,” Allen Toussaint’s reflection on the old song he had played so many times, as though he had taken all the city’s buoyant Creole revelry and distilled it into a meditation on mortality.

“Tipitina and Me” came out on the *Our New Orleans* CD, a collection of music by various artists to raise money for the half-drowned city in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Spitzer, who wrote the liner notes and produced some of the songs, had heard Toussaint noodling around with that minor variation some years before when he was recording his major-key “Tipitina” for *Routes*.

“I couldn’t believe the effect that it had,” he told NPR’s Melissa Block on January 2, 2006, just four months after Katrina. “And so when this record came up to be done, I said, ‘Allen, I think you really should do it in a minor key for the condition of the city now.’”

By the time of that interview, Spitzer and his wife, Peabody-winning radio producer Margaret Howze, and their two young sons had just returned from the French Louisiana town of Lafayette, to which they had fled as the hurricane approached. From there he and a skeletal *Routes* staff broadcast a series called “After the Storm.” During those trying months he chronicled his Katrina experiences and post-deluge observations in a range of media, from *Nightline* to *The New York Times* to the *Gazette* [“Exile from the Land of Dreams,” Jan/Feb 2006].

In a strange way, he acknowledges, Katrina ended up expanding the audience for *American Routes*.

“It suddenly gave us the power of news because we were timely,” he says. “We were using the culture to comment on what happened—with the songs, the interviews with the artists in diaspora—and it offered us a chance to have a real-time-based and catastrophe-based currency.”

Having been named Louisiana Humanist of the Year for his role in his adopted city’s cultural recovery, Spitzer has put down roots there: with *Routes*, with his teaching posts, and with his family. Their roomy clapboard house in the Uptown section is a melding of Victorian and Arts and Crafts, folk art and Thomas the Tank Engine. For all his celebration of New Orleans’ cultural heritage, he’s pretty invested in its future.

“The spirit didn’t drown, because the memory of how you play music doesn’t drown,” he says. “Allen Toussaint loses his Steinway baby grand, but he can still play music. The mystery of culture and its power is one of the greatest assets New Orleans has. And in a funny way, the catastrophe put the culture back at the center.”

That cultural re-centering was part of the reason Tulane hired him last year

as a professor of communication and American studies. (The fact that he was already adjunct professor at the University of New Orleans didn’t seem to bother anyone.) Tulane was hit hard by Katrina, and has mapped out a strategic plan to recover from the storm and remake itself in the coming years. Put simply, it is a lot more focused on the city around it than it used to be. Students will become more involved in community service, and the faculty will reorient their research toward the city and surrounding region.

Spitzer, a champion of local vernacular culture who believes that “all theory with no practice is usually not very good theory,” is a perfect fit for that new agenda, says Tulane provost Michael Bernstein.

“Nick personifies this notion of public service that’s animating our efforts,” explains Bernstein. “His visibility in the region is probably at an all-time high. He’s clearly understood to be one of the leading American folklorists of his generation.” Equally important is Spitzer’s urge to “rejuvenate” the cultural landscape, Bernstein says. “He does not want to make New Orleans into another Disneyland.”

Spitzer warns his students not to get “lost in their iPods”—encouraging them to get out into the neighborhoods and clubs where their identities might be challenged a little.

“You put a native next to the intellectual searcher/seeker, and you’ve got a powerful pair,” he says. “If the native is of good will and wants to reach out beyond provincial concerns and improve their own culture and community setting, and the outsider wants to learn something and share something they know—that’s the combination that’s helping to save New Orleans. The two of them can become more than the sum of the parts.

“Sometimes I wish I had a bigger instrument in academia to get those

theories and ideas out,” he adds, “but in a funny way, my classroom partly is *American Routes*.”

Classroom attendance was optional at the House of Blues this past January 16th, when *Routes* threw itself a 10th-anniversary concert that would be distilled down to a program that aired the week before Mardi Gras. But for those who made the effort, the reward was some Grade A south Louisiana hot sauce.



Dr. Michael White and the Original Liberty Jazz Band ripped through a set of traditional New Orleans jazz numbers, from “Shake It” to “Canal Street Blues,” with Topsy Chapman joining them for a romping “Darktown Strutters Ball.” When Feufollet, a Cajun band whose members are barely old enough to vote, combined with the brass band Hot 8 on a minor-key Cajun swinger called “Femme l’a Dit,” the fusion was electric. Deacon John (the rascally band leader who had been telling hilariously filthy jokes at Spitzer’s house the day before while they went over the contract), started off too smooth for some tastes, but once he and his Ivories got rolling, the gear switched to foot-stompin’. Trombone Shorty helped blast out “Saint James Infirmary”; Al Johnson came out in a lavender cape and crown to sing his Mardi Gras staple, “Carnival Time”; and Shorty, White, Topsy, Johnson, and several others joined in to leave the audience jumping with “Bourbon Street Parade” and “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

Between numbers, Spitzer had arranged to come out on stage and ask each group of musicians a few questions—and to let them turn the tables and interview him. At one point Michael White asked if it was true that he was the “continuation of Alan Lomax,” the legendary folklorist and musicologist. The question, while flattering, seemed to catch Spitzer off guard—perhaps because it would have involved reducing his life story to a few sentences between songs.

“Journalists will write anything,” he responded with a staccato laugh. “We love Alan Lomax for doing some of the work that he did, but that was then and this is now, right?”

Trumpeter Gregg Stafford wouldn’t let it drop, urging him to “keep the legacy of Alan Lomax going.”

“Well, I suggest you keep the legacy of [Sidney] Bechet going, and keep King Oliver’s legacy going,” responded Spitzer. For a second a hint of unease hovered over the stage, and I wondered if his students were taking in this modest challenge to his identity. But then:

“Wait a minute,” he said. “I’ve got a better idea—I think you should keep the legacy of Gregg Stafford and Michael White going, here with the Original Liberty Jazz Band, here on *American Routes* at the House of Blues in New Orleans!” With that, he turned to the audience and pointed to the musicians: “Give ’em a big round of applause!” ♦