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'American Routes' Waters Roots of Folk

By NAT HENTOFF

Louis Armstrong once said, "All music is folk music. Horses don't sing." In the history of American radio, no series has ever come close to Nick Spitzer's "American Routes" in exploring the many streams of this nation's music.

Heard via Public Radio International on more than 150 stations (visit www.amroutes.com for complete listings), the weekly two-hour series ranges from Cajun to country, from blues chants and klezmer rhythms to a New York cab driver singing of his old country, Transylvania. Also, gospel shouts and the Rebirth Brass Band of New Orleans, along with the Grateful Dead and Bob Dylan.

Mr. Spitzer, who was Louisiana's first official folklorist and then a specialist at the Smithsonian's folk division, has produced "American Routes" since April 1998 in an old water-bottling plant in the French Quarter of New Orleans. (It's funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities and Community Coffee, a New Orleans coffee company.)

Academic folklorists tend to specialize in such genres as Appalachian ballads, bluegrass or Native American culture and to hold to the conviction that these once "pure" forms have been so adulterated by fusion with other idioms, especially commercial music, that only a few saving remnants still exist. But Mr. Spitzer challenges this belief. He has traveled, recorded and interviewed throughout the land. And he emphasizes that, from the beginning, as Americans and new immigrants of all kinds of backgrounds have moved to new places for work and a better life, "they have merged their music as they have mixed socially and culturally," often enriching one another in the process. Mr. Spitzer believes that "all these musics deserve to be heard together as part of an understanding of the broader American cultural experience."

Mr. Spitzer also issues a challenge to the way music is all too often programmed on radio. "Instead of segregating music genres into discrete, market-driven formats of different classes and ethnicities," he presents what Alan Lomax—the Johnny Appleseed of folk music collectors—calls "the rainbow of American music."

Years ago, in New York clubs, it was possible to hear the Clancy Brothers exulting in Irish drinking songs; Jean Ritchie recalling, through the centuries, English ballads; and Sonny Terry transforming his harmonica into a train hurtling through the night. They and other variously rooted performers appeared together at festivals. And on one glorious night in the 1960s, at a song-swapping session at Mr. Lomax's New York apartment, a jubilant gathering of singers and players from proudly distinct cultures not only traded songs but a degree of mutual indebtedness in their latter-day styles.

Nick Spitzer

I hadn't felt as exhilarated by such a musical gallimaufry until I heard a number of Nick Spitzer's "American Routes" broadcasts.

In December, for example, Mr. Spitzer mined the sounds of New York City. Starting with Duke Ellington's version of "The Sidewalks of New York," Mr. Spitzer then presented Carolina Slim, recorded last year in Grand Central Terminal, singing "The Subway Blues" for his living. Slim told listeners he had come to New York many years before from South Carolina, "where I was made." From his always pertinent collection of recordings, Mr. Spitzer played the "Second Avenue Square Dance," featuring the legendary klezmer clarinet virtuoso, Dave Tarras, followed by Woody Guthrie singing "New York Town."

Threaded through the program were such nonpareil folk as Louis Armstrong ("There's a Boat Dat's Leavin' Soon for New York"), Tito Puente ("On Broadway"), the Boswell Sisters ("42nd St.") and Chicago bluesman Jimmy Reed ("Going to New York").

Mr. Spitzer's conversational narration revealed a remarkable intimacy with many of the city's neighborhoods. And, from what he claimed are more than 40,000 licensed New York cabbies speaking 76 different languages, he found not only the Transylvanian troubadour but also a mellifluous driver, lately arrived from the Dominican Republic.

The people Nick Spitzer records and interviews are, he wrote in Southern Changes magazine, "in migration in history, in real life and in our show. Things that pop culture has turned into static icons are freed and allowed to flow again. The music selections speak to each other and to listeners."

Alan Lomax noted, during an interview in the New Orleans Times-Picayune, that "back in the '30s and '40s, most people didn't like indigenous music. They thought it was something ignorant people did because they didn't know any better. Today we've accepted this music but still haven't truly heard it. It lives in out-of-the-way places, and we still don't understand its mysteries. Nick is one of the people I'm proudest of because he spends most of his time in the field, looking people up, helping them."

In a 1998 "American Routes"—as he recalled in the journal Louisiana Cultural Vistas—Mr. Spitzer traveled along Route 66. "We talked to the Navajos about the history of the highway that came through their land and brought them both problems and progress. We played multiple versions of 'Get Your Kicks on Route 66,' along with Native American music and West-Texas-oilfield rhythm-and-blues forms. All of which, when mashed together, offers fresh commentary on the nature of westward travel in the paved-over, road-weary 20th century."

Describing his vocation, Mr. Spitzer said: "My job is to find performers in the community, support them where they live, and try to let others hear them. How do we reconcile 'progress' with the notion of keeping some of our past for the future? My job is to water the roots." And on "American Routes," he is also creating living archives for future generations.