

American Epic Bernard MacMahon & Allison McGourty with Elijah Wald

Touchstone (280 pages)

★★★★★

The vernacular music of the American people: a labour of love



This book, and the BBC/PBS film series that it accompanies, has been a long time in the making. I know this because in 2006 I met Bernard

MacMahon in a windswept graveyard in Mississippi, where we had both gathered for the unveiling of a commemorative plaque to the Delta blues legend Charley Patton. He had a camera crew with him and when I enquired as to his purpose, he set out a sketchy blueprint for what a decade later became the three-part documentary *American Epic*.

The book makes a superb companion, chronicling the ten-year journey taken by the British-born MacMahon and his producer Allison McGourty across the US in search of the earliest roots of recorded American music. The book tells the story evocatively through archive photography, the reproduction of historical documents and the use of some gripping personal testimony. Some of the first-hand accounts are lifted from historical sources, but many come from interviews with the last surviving links with the music of the pre-war era, conducted by MacMahon during the making of the series. He got there just in time, for several of them, including the nonagenarian bluesmen Honeyboy Edwards, Homesick James and Robert Lockwood, have since died.

The odyssey – although the authors engagingly prefer the word ‘ramble’ – grew in scope and air miles as the initial impetus of digging deep in the Delta into the origins of the blues expanded to take in jug bands, Hopi Indian chanters, Appalachian folk music, the Mexican roots of Lydia Mendoza and traditional Hawaiian music, all of which get compelling chapters of their own. Another section tells the fascinating story of the 1920s record company scouts who fanned out across the mountains, prairies, rural villages and urban ghettos of America to record their multi-varied forms of vernacular music, and in whose footsteps MacMahon and his crew faithfully followed. The text, which could have been chaotic, given

its diverse sources and disparate voices, has been lent splendid coherence and purpose by the expert editing of the writer Elijah Wald.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON

Guinea: Masks, Music and Minerals Bram Posthumus

Hurst & Company (275 pages)

★★★★★

The turbulent story of Guinea's post-independence path



Guinea Conakry (to differentiate from Equatorial Guinea and Guinea-Bissau) was, in 1958, the first French colony to declare independence.

Author Bram Posthumus has travelled extensively through its different regions. He gives a detailed account of its different ethnicities and clans, the history of the country, and its gradual conversion from traditional African spirituality (often referred to as ‘fetishism’) to Islam and theocratic rule. It’s a complicated history, woven around border and internal conflicts, diplomatic incidents, and colonial interference and sabotage – not just from the French but also the British, Portuguese and Americans among others. But with an easy-going writing style, Bram Posthumus manages to make the story flow.

The period of French rule in Guinea was predictably difficult, as the people were exploited and resources pillaged. On September 28 1958 the nation voted emphatically against remaining part of the French ‘community’ of nations. Sadly the country’s subsequent independence was to lead to a dictatorship in which the bulk of Guinea’s populace saw little improvement. This book analyses the paradoxical nature of Ahmed Sékou Touré; his rising, and tyrannical leadership between 1959 and 1984. To the Western powers Touré was leading a ‘Communist satellite’ and a ‘regime out of control.’ Quite rightly he is condemned to history as a merciless tyrant, a vicious president who routinely had innocent citizens and his political rivals tortured and executed. However, Touré was simultaneously responsible for supporting the arts and, in particular, music. The chapter on music is eloquently written, well researched, and shows that Touré’s patronage of Guinean music with its national ‘authenticité’ was the one bright and comparatively positive element of his grim leadership.

What makes this book so appealing is the anecdotal and informal style of writing. Posthumus tells the story of Guinea and its successive governances of corrupt incompetence in a thoroughly compelling way. A fast-paced and well-informed account of a West African country rich in culture, political intrigue, natural resources, and fantastic music.

MARTIN SINNOCK

My Festival Romance Thomas Brooman

Tangent Books (382 pages & CD)

★★★★★

Cool, calm recollections from the man who made WOMAD



My abiding memory of Thomas Brooman’s long reign as the director of WOMAD is of the 2007 festival, which was his last.

When I arrived on the Friday afternoon, the Charlton Park site resembled a disaster area. Torrential rain all week had turned the fields to mud, a gas main had blown up and gridlock on the roads meant none of the artists had arrived. Backstage in his Wellington boots, a remarkably cheerful Brooman asked if I fancied a cuppa and we repaired to his Portakabin, where he put the kettle on. I was astonished at his calmness amid the chaos but, having read his book, I now understand: to a man who had seen and done it all so many times before, triumph and disaster really were imposters to be treated exactly the same way.

Brooman’s tales of WOMAD’s early years are hair-raising, from the catastrophic financial losses of the first festival and the crisis that plunged the organisation into liquidation in 1992, to an unconventional booking system that found him turning up uninvited at Totó la Momposina’s apartment in Paris with contract in hand. His engagingly written book is also full of amusing non-world-music vignettes, about encounters with Nina Simone, Bob Geldof and Van Morrison among others. But it’s the stories about the festival he ran for 26 years from 1982 to 2007, its international expansion and the birth of the Real World label that will fascinate *Songlines* readers.

The book comes with a 16-track CD featuring many of the favourites he booked over the years, including Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the indomitable Totó and Kanda Bongo Man. He’s diplomatic about the circumstances that led to his departure from WOMAD in 2008 but

is honest enough to fess up that his management style had its shortcomings and that ‘a mood of entitlement and alienation’ had been allowed to simmer. It was a sad end but it cannot detract from the legacy he created.

Pack a copy of this book and read it while you’re waiting for Orchestra Baobab and Afro Celts to come onstage at this year’s festival – and then raise a glass to the man without whom you wouldn’t be there.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON

T Bone Burnett: A Life in Pursuit Lloyd Sachs

University of Texas Press (260 pages)

★★★★★

The éminence grise of modern Americana and old-time



Over five decades of making music as a compelling songwriter, innovative performer, visionary multi-genre producer and valued advisor on

soundtracks, T Bone Burnett has remained rather hard to pin down. He insisted on ‘remaining on the sideline’ of Lloyd Sachs’ biography of him, and this may account for the relative absence of information about Burnett’s personal life. But he seems to have facilitated Sachs’ contact with numerous other musicians and music industry personnel who’ve collaborated with and/or engaged the services of Burnett. Sachs is an artful writer, a scholar with deep and wide knowledge of many sorts of music. A remarkable researcher, he’s turned his skills and talents towards an impressively deep and broad look at Burnett’s career.

Songlines readers will probably be most interested in Burnett’s achievements as ‘the go-to man for artists in search of roots (and other kinds of) authenticity,’ most famously showcased in his assemblage of blues, old-time and bluegrass music for the Coen Brothers’ 2000 film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack. This effectively revived the career of bluegrass pioneer Ralph Stanley and engaged many younger musicians in similar genres. Sachs seems justified in declaring of the album that, ‘Americana starts here,’ and he reveals how this and similar projects fit both Burnett’s background and his ‘ongoing celebration of the borderless glories of American music.’ In telling this story, Sachs himself has done roots music a great turn, in fine style.

JEFF KALISS