Southern Exposure: The Story of Southern Music in Pictures

Southern Exposure presents a slice of photographic history of mostly Anglo, mostly male, mostly amateur music-makers of the South, their instruments, and various performance contexts. The aim of this book is to explore how pictures tell stories of the musical life of the southern states. The authors wanted to address the questions "What is southern music? And how is it popularly portrayed?" (p. 8). In an attempt to answer these rather large questions, they have compiled seventy-nine photographs dated from the 1880s to around 1950. The book is divided into eight sections with the following topical headings: Music Making at Home, Rural and Industrial Working Music, Folk Instruments and Their Players, Music as Part of Worship and Ceremony, Music for Dancing and Recreation, Street Musicians and Semiprofessionals, Ragtag Child Bands, and Small-Town and Big-City Performers. One of the book's strengths lies in its diverse collection of images exhibiting a variety of contexts for music making in the South.

Slightly less than half (thirty-three) of the photographs date from the 1930s. This emphasis is understandable considering that one of the authors' primary sources for these pictures was the Library of Congress's Farm Security Administration (FSA) archives. The FSA was one of Franklin D. Roosevelt's relief agencies enacted during the Depression era. The purpose of this program was both to document the vanishing life of the southern Musical Traditions (New York: Schirmer, 2002), published in collaboration with the Smithsonian Folklife Archive and edited by Jeff Todd Titon and Bob Carlin. In addition to Bob's co-editor role with the series, Richard Carlin's essay, "Irish Music from Cleveland," can be found in the third volume of this series, British Isles Music.

Besides North Carolina, other southern states pictorially referenced in Southern Exposure are Tennessee, Alabama, Louisiana, West Virginia, South Carolina, Mississippi, southern Ohio, Oklahoma, and Texas. Twenty-six photographs are included without any reference to a state. The visual representations of music making in Texas are limited. There are two pictures in the section titled Rural and Industrial Working Music, one of a group of African-American prisoners "singing in time to the movement of their axes" at Darrington State Prison Farm, Sandy Point, Texas (p. 35), and another of an Anglo railroad work gang laying track in Lufkin, Texas (pp. 38-39). Besides a mention in one annotation that Bob Wills started out selling Light Crust Dough (p. 151), the only other Texas reference is found in a photograph of Otis and Eleanor Clements, who were members of Doc Schneider's Texas (p. 149).

The textual material of this collection includes a six-page introduction briefly addressing such topics as "Who Are These Folk?"; "The Myths of the South"; "Family Gatherings"; "The Camera's Eye"; and "The Urge to Collect." In addition to a brief introduction at the beginning of each section, the authors provide short annotations to the individual photographs, including bibliographic information where known, such as the picture's date, location, photographer, source, and the names of the subjects photographed. While the authors "tried to allow the images to speak for themselves," the annotations often include circumstances surrounding the creation of the image. Some of the pictures included in this collection are portraits. Others are less formal snapshots of southerners making music. Whether posed or spontaneous, the authors use each photograph as a springboard into a brief description of the historical context of music making. To cite one example, the notation accompanying the mid-1930s photograph of Slim and Wilma Martin in the studio of WALB radio extends beyond description toward interpretation and history, when the authors write: "These kind of husband-and-wife, semiprofessional musicians would often have a fifteen-minute show on a local station (if they could find a sponsor). There usually wasn't any pay, but they could advertise other local appearances and also sell songbooks or records if they had any. Their repertoire would typically be a mix of favorite old ballads and songs, sentimental popular hits, and hymns" (p. 138).

The reader must take the authors at their word, since the information beyond the bibliographic specifics of the photograph itself is not documented. Indeed, a bibliography or suggestions for further reading would improve this collection.

One of Southern Exposure's strengths lies in its diverse collection of photographs of southern music activity in a variety of contexts. Unfortunately, for the reader interested in Texas's role in the southern musical contributions to American music, there are comparatively few photographs of Texans. Nevertheless, this book should not be ignored by those interested in visual representations of music making in the south.

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