

Review: [untitled]

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Dry Wood and Hot Pepper would be perfect to show to students in an Afro-American course, folk music of the United States, or to anyone interested in cultural blending in the United States.

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Discovering the Music of Africa. Produced by Bailey Film Associates Educational Media. Directed by Bernard Wilets; Advisor: Sam Chianis. 16mm, color, optical sound, 22 minutes, 1967. Distributed by Indiana University Audio-Visual Center, Bloomington, Indiana 47401 (\$8.50), University of Michigan Audio-Visual Education Center, 416 Fourth Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48103 (\$7.50), University of California Extension Media Center, Berkeley, California 94724 (\$16), Bailey Film Associates Educational Media, 2211 Michigan Avenue, Santa Monica, California 90404 (\$15).

Discovering American Indian Music. Produced by Bailey Film Associates Educational Media. Directed by Bernard Wilets; Advisor: Louis Ballard. 16mm, color, optical sound, 24 minutes, 1971. Distributed by University of Michigan Audio-Visual Education Center, 416 Fourth Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48103 (\$8), Bailey Film Associates Educational Media, 2211 Michigan Avenue, Santa Monica, California 90404 (\$15).

These two films are part of a twenty film music education series in which eight titles are devoted to ethnomusicology; the other six films introduce Jazz, American Folk, Indian, Japanese, Latin American, and Middle Eastern musics. All of the films are short (20-25 minutes) and are specifically designed for general classroom (elementary through college) audiences. As most teachers know, "series" films usually vary considerably in quality; these two titles in the *Discovering Music* series are another case in point.

Discovering the Music of Africa should be retitled *Discovering Ewe and Ashanti Percussion Music*, as it is only this facet of the African music scene that the film deals with, and overgeneralization from this material to all of Africa is inaccurate. The film was shot in a studio (actually a basement) with four Ghanaians from Wesleyan's World Music Program. The artificiality of a studio production is always a problem and rarely transcended; this one is worsened by backgrounds of African masks hung on brick walls and harshened by hot red, green, and blue lighting and shadow photography. One surmises that these gimmicks are supposed to produce some sort of exotic feeling; actually they are distracting and totally cornball.

The film begins with the usual educational technique, the "talking face" who shows us (all too briefly) a map of Africa which quickly becomes West Africa and then Ghana. The narrator tells us that the film will concentrate on the music of the Ewe and some other Ghanaian groups; the number of people or geographical distributions for which the music is representative is not given.

Thus, the student having no prior knowledge of African cultures would not know how much to generalize, given the traditions demonstrated in the film.

The narrator then tells us that the film will concentrate on rattles, bells, and drums, the "chief instruments of all Africa." This is disappointing not only because rattles, bells, and drums hardly constitute the chief instruments of all Africa, but also because it reinforces the prevailing Western stereotype that African music is all percussion. As Merriam and others have repeatedly pointed out, Westerners mistakenly characterize African music by *West African percussion* music.

The film continues by discussing and demonstrating the construction, uses, and sounds of rattles, bells, and drums. This is handled very well, although it might have been aided by some mention of the verbal basis of drumming, which figures prominently in Nketia's work on Ashanti drumming. The drum demonstrations are performed by Robert Ayitee, an Ewe master drummer. In addition to the Ewe drums, Mr. Ayitee plays the hourglass tension drum and shows how linguistic messages are played by speech tones; he also demonstrates how a poem may be recited on the Ashanti *atumpan*. Finally all the rattles, bells, and drums are joined together for an ensemble performance; here the Ghanaians are aided by Western students.

The point of the film is to demonstrate to students that African music is not primitive; the narrator concludes, "we hope you've learned that our music, like yours, has a long tradition." But this is not what the film teaches—the major information conveyed by the film concerns rhythm patterns and Ghanaian percussion music. The "long tradition" point could have easily been included in a number of ways—by discussing the role of music in Ghanaian history, the use of song as a historical device, the bells as products of a long West African iron-making tradition, the necessity of music for important cultural ceremonies throughout Ghanaian history, etc. And the instrumental section could have been easily balanced out by materials on Ghanaian flute and vocal music.

In all, little sense of the pervasiveness of music in African (read Ghanaian) life is put across in the film. In addition students will have to be informed of many contextual factors, such as the fact that Ewe drummers do not usually play Ashanti and other drum music in their spare time. Throughout the film I felt pressed by one question: how does an Ewe drummer feel about playing Ashanti drums while standing in the hot red shadows of Bambara sculpture in a brick walled basement? I kept thinking of myself wearing a tuxedo playing avant-garde jazz at a Bar Mitzvah on a tennis court.

By contrast, *Discovering American Indian Music* is a far more comprehensive introductory film which gives a sense of how much information, when carefully planned, can be visually and aurally transmitted in 24 minutes. The film begins by explaining that over two hundred Indian groups now live in the United States (a map contrasting aboriginal and modern population geography would have been nice here) and proceeds to introduce the musics of a number of tribes. Twelve sequences follow; on the soundtrack Indians introduce themselves, talk of their current background and present occupation, discuss traditional and modern location and modes of employment of their tribes, and mention the use categories of their music/dance. Then there is a performance sequence, with the singers and dancers (in some cases the narrators) in traditional costume.

This organization works well. In the first sequence we meet a Navajo woman who attends college in Santa Fe, after which there is a sequence of Navajo corn-grindings songs. In the same fashion we learn something of Southern Ute, Seneca, and Apache music. In addition we meet the members of an intertribal dance group in Albuquerque; they draw on their backgrounds to present a Plains war dance, Sioux love song, Jemez Pueblo Eagle dance, and Taos Pueblo Hoop dance. We also meet a young Creek Indian studying at the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe; he discusses the Pan-Indian feelings which motivate the study and performance of traditional arts by young Indians today, after which there is a Creek stomp dance and Tlingit song sequence.

While all the performances are in traditional dress, it is obvious that the action is being staged for the camera and not being performed for other Indians. But unlike the African film, the out-of-context situation is less of a problem here; this seems due to the facts that the film is done outdoors in traditional environments, the modern to traditional transitions are handled very well, and the sequences are short and tightly edited. All of the camera work is straightforward; where artistic liberties are taken (as in the Eagle dance sequence) they are done in a sensitive manner (camera on the ground shooting up to accentuate the flying quality of the feathered arms).

The use of Indian narrators works very well, and the total commentary balances out the feelings of tribal identity and Pan-Indian pride. The commentary also offers some stylistic information (relation of styles to areas) which will help convey some of the differences and similarities in the music to beginners.

In the final sequence we meet Louis Ballard, a native American composer. Mr. Ballard discusses the use of American Indian music material for modern composition, and then conducts an ensemble performance of part of one of his compositions, a percussion suite combining Western and Amerindian instruments and illustrating a wide range of timbres.

This is not a great film, but it is a very competent one, certainly among the better introductory ethnomusicology films to date. It is well organized and says a lot in a short time. Most importantly, it strives, within the limits of a general educational film, to present Indian music and its social importance from a modern Indian point of view.

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