

The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress  
presents  
the Benjamin Botkin Folklife Lecture Series

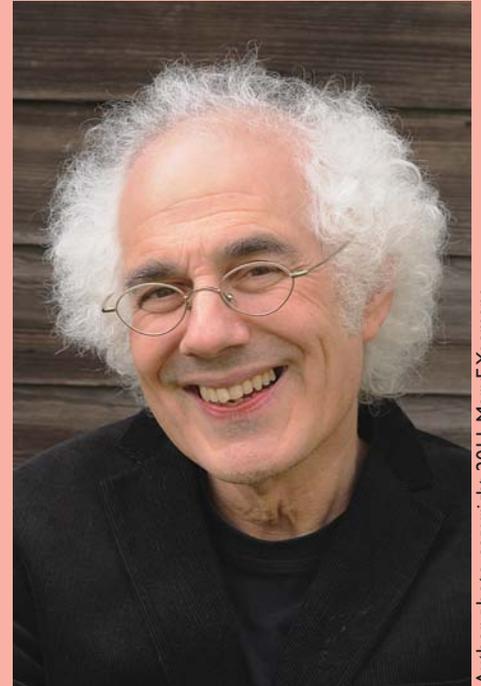
**AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT**

# The Beautiful Music All Around Us: Field Recordings and the American Experience

book talk by

## Stephen Wade

Researcher and Author



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**MARCH 27, 2013**  
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# The Beautiful Music All Around Us: Field Recordings and the American Experience

Musician and writer Stephen Wade has spent nearly his entire life studying American folklife, uniting the twin strands of scholarship and the creative arts. A musician since childhood, he draws on long experience as a stage performer whose award-winning, original theatrical events have delighted viewers of all ages. He has presented his scholarly research at conferences such as the American Folklore Society and the Society for American Music, and he has presented classes in departments ranging from music to American studies, history to English, folklore to Appalachian studies. He was a fellow at the Newberry Library under an Arthur and Lila Weinberg Fellowship for independent scholars and researchers. He has performed in all manner of public forums with material that combines bravura artistry with traditional music, scholarly substance, and storytelling. "Wade is a master at creating compelling narratives that entertain and inform," wrote *Washington Post* reporter Richard Harrington in October 2006. In September 2012, Terry Teachout extended that thought in the *Wall Street Journal*, describing Stephen Wade's book as "a masterpiece of humane scholarship-but one that reads like a detective story."

Growing up in Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s, Wade was exposed to vernacular musicians who had moved north to the city from the Mississippi Delta and the Southern Appalachians. By the late 1970s, he developed *Banjo Dancing*, a theatrical performance combining storytelling, traditional music, and percussive dance. The show opened in Chicago in May 1979 and ran for thirteen months, including an invited performance at the White House. In January 1981, Wade brought *Banjo Dancing* to Washington, D.C.'s Arena Stage for a three-week engagement that stretched to ten years, making it one of the longest-running off-Broadway shows in American theater history. Wade's second critically acclaimed theater show, *On the Way Home*, was honored with the Joseph Jefferson award, which recognizes outstanding theater artists in the Chicago area. In 2003, Wade received the Helen Hayes/Charles MacArthur award (for excellence in Washington, D.C.-area professional theater) for his work as composer, adapter, and musical director for the world premiere of Zora Neale Hurston's *Polk County*.

Stephen Wade's book, *The Beautiful Music All Around Us: Field Recordings and the American Experience*, was

published in September 2012 by the University of Illinois Press. This 504-page study showcases nearly two decades of research during which Wade tracked down the communities, families, and performers connected with early Library of Congress field recordings all across the American South. These recordings, which he brought together in *A Treasury of Library of Congress Field Recordings* (Rounder Records, 1997), also gave rise to his folksong commentaries that have aired on National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*. His essays, reviews, and articles have appeared in such publications as *American Music*, *ARSC Journal*, *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, *Studies in Popular Culture*, *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, *Musical Quarterly*, *American Archivist*, *Southern Quarterly*, *Journal of Country Music*, *New Letters*, *Beloit Magazine*, *Folklife Center News*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Washington Post Book World*.

In September 2012, Wade released *Banjo Diary: Lessons from Tradition* on Smithsonian Folkways. This Grammy-nominated album explores musical knowledge passed across the generations. He has recorded and/or produced more than a dozen albums.

Combining images, live music, and spoken narrative, today's presentation brings viewers along on Stephen Wade's eighteen-year journey into musical traditions across the American South. Introducing the largely unknown players and singers whose performances of traditional songs and tunes were captured on early Library of Congress field recordings, Wade shares stories of tunes, creators, and communities that speak to the interconnectedness of American lives. The program attests to Benjamin Botkin's belief that "culture, like love, laughs at locksmiths."

*The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.*

