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# Book Review of Stephen Wade: The Beautiful Music All Around Us: Field Recordings and the American Experience

Ted Olson

*East Tennessee State University*, [olson@etsu.edu](mailto:olson@etsu.edu)

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# Book Review of Stephen Wade: The Beautiful Music All Around Us: Field Recordings and the American Experience

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On the nuts and bolts side of this set, nothing here is overly difficult. The Evan Price tune does take a bit of effort, some of the others as well, but ear players with intermediate skills, or good sight readers, should have little problem. The CD, which can stand on its own, is obviously quite helpful. Most of the tunes have chord markings, and a couple include bow direction markings. The charts are easily read and if you press hard enough the book stays open on a stand. All around a nice set of tunes celebrating a fine magazine.

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To order: [fiddle.com/Fiddlers-20-book-CD.page](http://fiddle.com/Fiddlers-20-book-CD.page)

Stephen Wade  
**The Beautiful Music All Around Us:  
 Field Recordings and the  
 American Experience**



University of Illinois Press

A beloved performer of American folk music because of his long-running one-man stage shows *Banjo Dancing* and *On the Way Home*, Stephen Wade in 1997 earned the praise of scholars as well as fans by producing what is widely regarded today as one of the most significant albums of American folk music: the anthology *A Treasury of Library of Congress Field Recordings*. Appreciation for Wade's work deepened in 2012 after he simultaneously released two new projects: *Banjo Diary: Lessons from Tradition*, a Grammy Award-nominated album that featured his own musical interpretations of the American folk banjo repertoire, with album notes that offered eloquent reflection on his life in music; and the book *The Beautiful Music All Around Us: Field Recordings and the American Experience*, a perceptive and richly textured study that contextualized and humanized a number of the recordings he had included on *A Treasury of Library of Congress Field Recordings*.

Winning two prestigious music history book awards, the Deems Taylor Award and the Association for Recorded Sound Collections' Best History Book in the Recorded Folk, Ethnic, or Ethnic Music category, *The Beautiful Music All Around Us* (part of the University of Illinois Press' Music in Amer-

ican Life Series) explores the stories behind 13 of the 30 recordings that, years earlier, Wade had identified as classics from the golden years (approximately 1934 - 1942) of field recording by field documentarians commissioned by the Library of Congress. Several of the recordings discussed in the book are already inspirational touchstones to many musicians (for example, W. H. Stepp's "Bonaparte's Retreat" and Pete Steele's "Coal Creek March"), but aficionados of old-time music will appreciate such exposure, the book contains a CD that features all 13 in their entirety, presented in their order of appearance within the text. The recordings on this CD include such masterful performances from the Library of Congress' archival holdings as Kelly Pace's version of "Rock Island Line" (1934), Ora Dell Graham's children's song "Shortenin' Bread" (1940), and Bozie Sturdivant's haunting "Ain't No Grave Can Hold My Body Down" (1942). For the uninitiated, an exciting way to experience *The Beautiful Music All Around Us* would involve first listening to and marveling at the beauty and power of the recordings and then reading Wade's revelations about the origins of those treasured sound documents gathered from musicians who, marginalized during their lifetimes, did not receive much in the way of public recognition or financial compensation for their participation in the field recording process.

In the Preface to *The Beautiful Music All Around Us*, Wade relates that, when a young banjo student, he was encouraged to seek out and learn from masters of folk music by his Chicago-based teacher Fleming Brown, a regionally prominent musician of the urban folk revival who challenged his pupil to "find the people who know how to play the music." One of the first musicians that Wade befriended, as conveyed in the album notes for *Banjo Diary*, was in fact Brown's teacher, former medicine show and WLS *National Barn Dance* performer Doc Hopkins; Brown and Hopkins shared with Wade fascinating repertoires and profound respect for other people who make music. But there were more lessons to learn, and *The Beautiful Music All Around Us* illustrates the lengths to which Wade was willing to go to discover new truths about traditional music.

Exposed at a formative age to albums featuring Library of Congress field recordings, Wade was amazed by what he heard; as he put it, "these performances shared with field recordings everywhere an underlying theme: the location of art

in human experience." As Wade's interest in that particular archival collection of field recordings deepened, he developed a relentless curiosity about those mysterious musicians of yesteryear. He observed that, while the original Library of Congress recordists—whether John Lomax, Alan Lomax, or Herbert Halpert—situated themselves to capture those treasured recordings, they often did not take detailed notes about the full background of the musicians and/or the musical material they had documented. Understandably, Wade complemented his anthologizing work by further researching tracks from *A Treasury of Library of Congress Field Recordings*; he simply wanted to know more about the musicians and the music he loved.

Another lesson from Brown was that the serious student of historical recordings should "set their vivid qualities in a pedagogical frame," and Brown also advised Wade to interpret a recording with consideration for "its natural environment" since not doing so "amounted to the difference between seeing a polar bear in the Arctic and one confined to the Brookfield Zoo." Taking Brown's ideas to heart, Wade conducted illuminating research into those 13 Library of Congress recordings by visiting the very places that had fostered them and by interviewing several of the surviving musicians from those many-decades-ago field recording sessions, as well as many next-of-kin and other community contacts of the musicians that had bestowed to the Library of Congress, and ultimately to us, the gift of their music. These latter-day field encounters were conducted with obvious respect for all the people involved, and Wade's descriptions of his efforts to communicate with some kind-hearted yet skeptical people (who did not immediately understand the fuss about old field recordings) make for engaging reading.

All Americans should thank Wade for his musical archeology and for caring so deeply about these historical recordings—some of our nation's most essential sound documents—that he brought their complex and nearly forgotten backstories forward into the present-day. Because of Wade and a few other dedicated scholars, the archival recordings long held in the Library of Congress are now living presences in a contemporary world that certainly needs such music, such aesthetic and spiritual enrichment.

TED OLSON

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