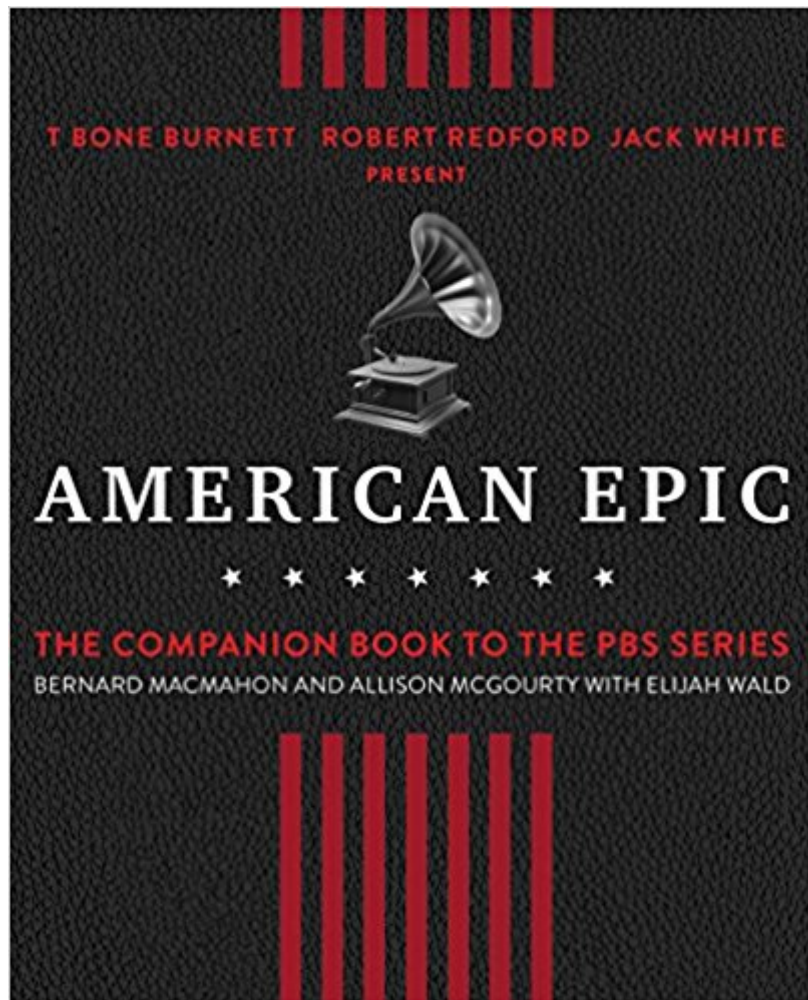




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# American Epic: The First Time America Heard Itself



## Synopsis

The companion book to the groundbreaking PBS and BBC documentary series celebrating the pioneers and artists of American roots music—blues, gospel, folk, Cajun, Appalachian, Hawaiian, Native American—without which there would be no jazz, rock, country R&B, or hip hop today. Jack White, T. Bone Burnett, and Robert Redford have teamed up to executive produce *American Epic*, a historical music project exploring the pivotal recording journeys of the early twentieth century, which for the first time captured the breadth of American music and made it available to the world. It was, in a very real way, the first time America truly heard herself. In the 1920s and 1930s, as radio took over the pop music business, record companies were forced to leave their studios in major cities in search of new styles and markets. Ranging the mountains, prairies, rural villages, and urban ghettos of America, they discovered a wealth of unexpected talent—farmers, laborers, and ethnic minorities playing styles that blended the intertwining strands of Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. These recordings form the bedrock for modern music as we know it, but during the Depression many record companies went out of business and more than ninety percent of the fragile 78 rpm discs were destroyed. Fortunately, thanks to the continuing efforts of cultural detectives and record devotees, the stories of America's earliest musicians can finally be told. Bernard MacMahon and Allison McGourty, who directed and produced the documentary with American musician Duke Erikson, spent years traveling around the US in search of recollections of those musical pioneers. Their fascinating account, written with the assistance of prize-winning author Elijah Wald, continues the journey of the series and features additional stories, never-before-seen photographs, and unearthed artwork. It also contains contributions from many of the musicians who participated including Taj Mahal, Nas, Willie Nelson, and Steve Martin, plus a behind-the-scenes look at the incredible journey across America. *American Epic* is an extraordinary testament to our country's musical roots, the transformation of our culture, and the artists who gave us modern popular music.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In American Epic we can examine how important the fact is that when phonograph records were invented, for the first time ever, women, minorities, poor rural men and even children were given the opportunity to say whatever they wanted in song, for the whole world to hear, shockingly without much censorship. • (Jack White, Executive Producer) "This is America's greatest untold story." • (Robert Redford, Executive Producer) "These musicians we profile are the real American heroes. They set out from the darkness with nothing but a guitar on their backs, and put out their thumbs and conquered the world." • (T. Bone Burnett, Executive Producer) "American Epic is the story of one of the great moments in American history – when the voices of working people, minorities, and rural people throughout the country were first heard." • (Bernard MacMahon, Director) "We traveled the length of America in our quest to discover the stories of America's earliest recorded musicians." • (Allison McGourty, Producer)

Bernard McMahon is cofounder of Lo-Max Films as well as the director and writer of the American Epic film series and the performance feature The American Epic Sessions. Elijah Wald is a writer and musician whose books include Dylan Goes Electric!, Escaping the Delta, and How the Beatles Destroyed Rock & Roll. A respected expert on the folk revival, he collaborated with Dave Van Ronk on The Mayor of MacDougal Street, the inspiration for the Coen Brothers' film Inside Llewyn Davis. His awards include a 2002 Grammy, and he has taught blues history at UCLA and lectured widely on American, Mexican, and world music.

This is another great companion to the documentary as seen on PBS, and for those interested in music history it's well-worth the money.

One of the best albums I have purchased this year!!! such a great project, fantastic artists, great performances and a history lesson all rolled into one!!!

very pleased

As I've said before in other reviews--I've had a copy of this book before it's release date--so I've had a good chance to read this book."The late 1920's were particularly exciting, because for the first time the record companies were ranging out into what they regarded as the hinterlands and recording all sorts of styles that had never before been thought of as professional or popular music." "The thing that saved the record industry of the great America was what is now commonly known as the rhythm and blues and the country and western." Art Satherley, record producer."They had made a phonograph record, and that was the next best thing to being President of the United States in their minds. Frank Walker, Columbia Records producer. This is a companion to the PBS series of the same name. The book explores the period in the 1920's when pioneering music scouts, carrying bulky, heavy, yet portable recording equipment, set out across America to record indigenous music of varying styles. If you like the great box set "Anthology of American Music", and if you've read the several books on Alan Lomax's exploits recording music, and the book on Ralph Peer's pioneering efforts, this book may be of some interest to you. A solid four "stars", partly because people had the wherewithall to tackle this important subject. The book's first chapter lays the groundwork of the early record men as they searched for new artists/music. The following chapters trace ten artists to their home regions, where the authors learn more about these artists through interviewing their families and collecting hundreds of period photos, ads, and other ephemera. And it's through the insightful comments from family members that these artists begin to come alive. The book has many photos which are equally important in telling these artists stories and that era--an example--check out the photo of an acoustic recording session with a man holding a large cone over his shoulder to collect the sound as the band plays. The writing style is warm and straightforward befitting the subject matter. Included are well known artists Mississippi John Hurt, the Carter Family, Will Shade and the Memphis Jug Band, Charley Patton, and Lydia Mendoza. Lesser known but equally important artists include Elder J.E. Burch, Dick Justice, the Hopi Indian Chanters, the Breaux family, and Joseph Kuku. The styles of music include jug band blues, Mississippi Delta Blues, gospel music, Appalachian music, Native American music, Hawaiian music, Mexican/American border music, and hybrid Louisiana music. Plus, to better get the feel of those times the authors rebuilt a 1920's era recording studio and recorded people like Jack White, Pokey LaFarge, Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, Elton John, Taj Mahal, Nas, and others. The chapter devoted to that endeavor brings a connection between the past and the present, and the photos of contemporary artists only add to that whole feel. But ultimately it's the combination of comments

from family members about those spotlighted in this book and that era, and the many evocative period photos and ads that really bring this period alive. If you're interested in music from this era, and where a lot of today's music came from, this book is something worth checking out. There's a box set of music available covered in the book, and also a set of more contemporary artists who were recorded using the '20s style equipment.

First off, I want to point out that [this](#) has a policy of combining reviews of both the Audiobook version and the print edition of a book in the same place. I have both the print edition, which I really like and would recommend the book ["American Epic"](#) though not over the BD/DVD of the PBS Series which PBS Home Video will release in June 2017. That's an even more important item You can also read my more detailed review of the whole ["American Epic"](#) multi-media project by looking at my review of the ["American Epic Collection"](#) CD set. For now I want to cover just the AUDIOBOOK version from Highbridge/Tantor. I have previously reviewed (and praised) Highbridge for their music related audio books. But this time they really let me down in both their production and choice of ["American Epic"](#) reader. The ["American Epic"](#) book was written by producer Allison McGourty (from Scotland) and Director Bernard MacMahon (British) with help from others. The book uses LOTS of quotes from interviews with legendary recording artists or their descendants. These interviews are excerpted from the 3 1/2 hour PBS documentary. There is little to no crossover between the photos or content in the Touchstone book and the Sony box set. To make things EVEN more confusing, [this](#) lists the book's title as "American Epic The First Time America Heard Itself", yet that is not the title on the cover or title page. That is "American Epic: The Companion Book to The PBS Series". Confusing, eh? Just search "American Epic" and the Authors' names and you'll find it. Simon and Schuster say the title in THEIR system is "American Epic The First Time America Heard Itself" Well, Highbridge/Tantor chose to use, for the narrator, Mike Chamberlain, a name not familiar to me, even after 40-plus years of listening to audio books. A Google search showed that Chamberlain (originally from New Jersey) now lives in California and has a list of audio books to his credit. BUT, in this reading he does not even try to change his voice or inflection when moving from the person interviewing to the interviewee. And his accent is purely American. Since he is often quoting McGourty or MacMahon, the only way you know who is speaking is because he says ["Allison McGourty"](#) or ["Bernard MacMahon"](#) (Mississippi) ["John Hurt"](#). There are many quotes from the grandchildren of Mexican singer Lydia Mendoza and the Cajun Breaux Brothers, just to name a few. Yet, Chamberlain's voice never changes. The audio runs five hours on five CDs and I made

it all the way through. Luckily I read the print edition first,As an added note: Though I have no financial connection with the "American Epic" project, the subject is of great interest to me and I have spoken with both MacMahon and McGourty. Neither of them was aware that their book was being released as an audio book and both were surprised when I told them that I listened to it.So, five stars for the print edition but one for the AUDIO version.I hope you found this review both informative and helpful.Steve Ramm"Anything Phonographic"

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