A quilted map of Louisiana, where different regions are represented by various colored fabric patches. Labels for musical genres are placed within these patches: 'BLUES' in the bottom left, 'CAJUN' in the bottom left, 'RHYTHM & BLUES' in the center, 'CREOLE' in the center, 'GOSPEL' in the bottom right, 'JAZZ' in the bottom right, 'BLUES' in the middle left, 'CREOLE' in the middle left, 'BLUES' in the top left, 'CREOLE' in the top left, 'BLUES' in the top left, 'CREOLE' in the top left, 'BLUES' in the top left, 'CREOLE' in the top left. The text 'LOUISIANA' is written in large white letters across the top, and 'CROSSROADS' is written in large white letters across the middle. The background is a solid green color.

LOUISIANA

A million ways to get there

CROSSROADS

MUSICAL
JOURNEYS

The Land of t

The Nature of Art and Life

BY JOHN LAUDUN

THE RICE IS COMING IN. OUT IN THE FIELDS, MEN AND MACHINERY ply their way through fields golden with ripe heads of rice. Adjacent fields lie fallow, green with wild grasses, but as soon as the rice is cut, the men and machinery will make their way into these fields, turn the wild grasses under, rendering them a rich, fertile brown. Many months from now, having turned the green into brown several more times, they will, like the magicians they are, beckon forth the rice to rise up green and render its gold. Above all this is the vault of the sky, blue hot in August.

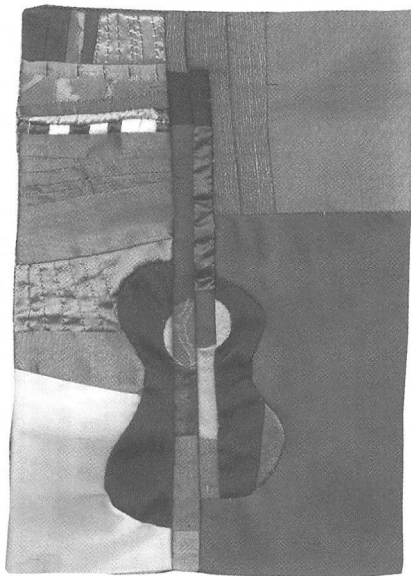
Look again at the cover of this book. There are the colors of Louisiana: green, gold, brown, blue. There are the colors of life, life renewed each year with the arc of the sun, the tumble of the rain, the soft music of our lives as we laugh and cry, gossip and argue, whisper and shout.

he Blue Guitar

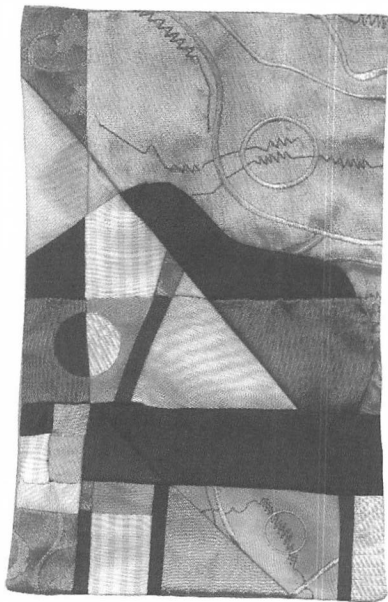
at the Crossroads

This season's featured visual artist, Megan Barra, has designed all the Louisiana Crossroads materials from the very beginning and her art accompanies this essay. In the studio, her preferred medium is textiles. She has had several exhibitions, and her work, which turns pieces of Japanese silk into larger wholes, seeks through color and composition to answer the question: what would Louisiana music look like if you could see it?

That would seem an impossible question, but it's not unlike the ones posed by the late American poet Wallace Stevens in his 1937 poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar," which Barra recalls in her "Louisiana Crossroads" piece and others. Early in the poem, the guitarist is asked to play "A tune beyond us as we are, Yet nothing changed by the blue guitar; Ourselves in the tune as if in space, Yet nothing changed, except the place. ... The blue guitar becomes the place of things as they are."



Guitar Landscape



Piano Player

For Stevens, the job of the artist, the job of all of us, is to take apart reality as we receive it and to reassemble it for ourselves. That seems like a mighty task. But Barra's pieces reveal the relationship between the work she does and the work we do every day: her pieces are compositions, patches of color and texture that respond to the bars of rhythm and pitch found in music. Here and there appear ideograms or flowers. Often a piece of fabric is cut into a crescent moon — in one instance, the crescent becomes the body of a banjo.

Moons and flowers are, of course, often symbols of fertility, which is simply another way of saying that they remind us of the cyclical nature of life. Flowers emerge from seeds, which not only appear dead, but are often the last, dying wish of the plant that produced them. King Cakes celebrating the Epiphany used to contain beans before there were plastic babies. The moon every month goes from full to new to full again.

Barra's pieces, with their oriental silks, hint at a larger history. The oldest quilt we have dates to the first century and was found in a Siberian cave used as a tomb. Quilting probably made its way westward from China to Europe on the Silk Road, quickening its pace with the Crusades, where it became a popular and comfortable form of armor. Quilting was so important to Europeans that it even appears in the 12th century French poem "*La Lai del Desire*," which mentions a "quilt of two sorts of silk cloth in a checkboard

pattern, well made and rich."

This line from the poem reveals a common confusion, one any quilter is quick to point out: quilting is the sewing together of layers of material to form a stronger or warmer fabric. The "checkboard pattern" of the poem is in fact a separate technique known as *piecing*, or often called *patchwork*, as in a patchwork quilt.

The practice of putting together smaller pieces to make larger ones stretches back to ancient Egypt and across world history. West Africans have long woven small pieces of colorful fabric that are sewn into strips. The strips are then sewn into sheets, which results in regular repetitions along lines that are themselves offbeat from their neighbors, resemble nothing so much as the syncopations of jazz.

Piecing is like music. Small blocks of pattern and color, like pitch and volume, are put together, one at a time, until they fill the space of our human world that we desire. Guitarist and songwriter Sonny Landreth need not reinvent the blues every time he picks up his guitar. Far from

The brilliance of
David Egan and the
artists featured on
Louisiana
Crossroads' stages is
that they recognize
that the well of
collective tradition is
deeper than any
individual's
experiences could
ever be.

Louisiana's
landscape is itself a
patchwork, the
French system of
levees and roads
opening up to the
quadrilinear
American system of
townships and
ranges. Seen from
the air, some might
think it a crazy quilt.

it. He depends upon the form to be there, the twelve or more bars, the chord progressions. Into the form, he pulls notes he has heard from other places, other times. Some are memories; some are new; and some are new precisely because they are more impression than memory. That is the miracle of creativity: it is an amazing combination of bits and pieces of our mental landscape unfolded like a favorite quilt on a winter's night.

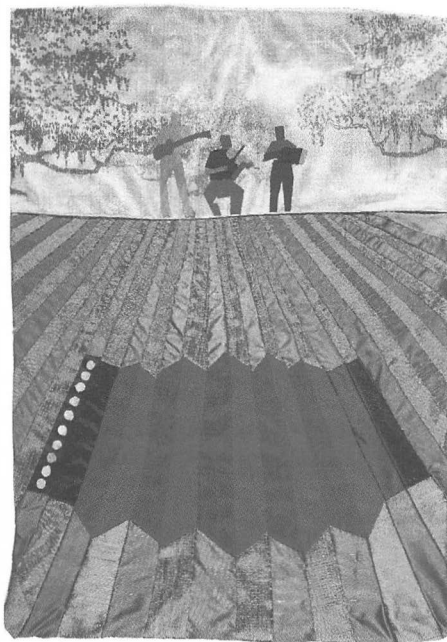
Our modern notions of aesthetic, of art, trick us, trap us into believing that something can only be considered art when it is new, innovative. That is nonsense. None of us wishes to get up every morning, invent a new language, and teach someone how to use it in order to have a conversation. But that's what novelty requires. Instead, we work with what we have, within time-tested forms. As pianist and songwriter David Egan in a Louisiana Crossroads performance a few years ago put it, "You can't fault yourself for not inventing the soul ballad. Shakespeare didn't invent the sonnet, but that didn't

stop him from writing some great ones."

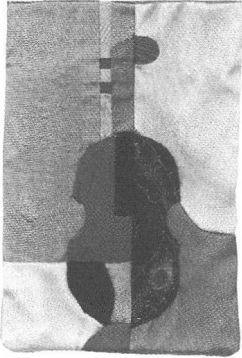
The brilliance of David Egan and the artists featured on Louisiana Crossroads' stages is that they recognize that the well of collective tradition is deeper than any individual's experiences could ever be. They also do piece work. Fiddler and songwriter Michael Doucet picks out a strand of melody he hears late one night while visiting with fiddler Varise Conner and builds on it. The late Conner himself was quick to point out that his most famous tune, "Lake Arthur Stomp," was built on a melody he once heard. This season Doucet and Landreth will join their old friend Steve Conn to celebrate years of putting pieces together.

Barra's work illuminates this way of doing things and its place on our personal, musical, and collective landscapes. And that's how it should be. Louisiana's landscape is itself a patchwork, the French system of levees and roads opening up to the quadrilinear American system of townships and ranges. Seen from the air, some might think it a crazy quilt.

Down on the ground it's just people, people making their way through the world, making groceries, making music, making life. Once upon a time, before we discovered we



Triple Row



Fiddle

had no time thanks to cell phones and computers and televisions, people would sit around in the evening and catch up on news of neighbors, swap stories, and maybe even play a little music for each other.

Louisiana Crossroads cultivates that sense of home-making, which is what all that storytelling and music-making does. In the intimacy of our living rooms and porches, with friends and neighbors around us, we are willing to let go a little more, maybe reveal a bit more, maybe try out a new idea or two. This series of shows brings together artists from Louisiana, from nearby Texas and Tennessee, and from far away Canada and Sweden.

All of them agree that music-making in Louisiana is an intimate experience. As Wallace Stevens put it in his poem, "Ourselves in the tune as if in space, Yet nothing changed, except the place."

John Laudun is a writer and folklorist living in Lafayette, where he is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

FOR MORE ON THE NATURE OF ART AND LIFE AT THE CROSSROADS

"The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937), "The Collected Poetry and Prose" (1997), Wallace Stevens

"Quiltmaking in America: Beyond the Myths," Laurel Horton, 1994

"A Communion of the Spirits: African-American Quilters, Preservers, and Their Stories," Roland Freeman, 1996

"Louisiana Folk Masters: Varise Conner," Louisiana Crossroads Records, 2004

"Swapping Stories: Folktales from Louisiana," book by Carl Lindahl, Maida Owens and Renée C. Harvison, 1997; film by Pat Mire, 1998