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American Reel

Although not in the same league as “Crazy Heart,” fans of the Jeff Bridges vehicle might consider renting **“American Reel,”** in which David Carradine plays another singer-songwriter whose refusal to sell out has kept him out of the spotlight for 20 years. Instead of bashing his head against the wall, James Lee Springer has made a modest living teaching school and doing his own musical thing. Out of the blue, a song he wrote as a young man hits the charts, opening the door to a comeback tour. Springer’s all for it, as long as he isn’t required to compromise the same ideals upon which he refused to compromise two decades earlier. If anything, though, the music industry – now, apparently, centered in Chicago — has only gotten more segmented, hit-driven and rigid in its demands on artists. His old friend and manager, played by British Shakespearean Michael Maloney, tries desperately to get Springer to bend just a wee bit, if only to acknowledge the passage of time. He hires a Second City comedian (Mariel Hemingway) to babysit the singer and keep him amused (not sexually ... just happier). Even if the setup doesn’t reflect current reality and the ending is fairly predictable, “American Reel” moves along at an even pace and the music, at least, is good. Finished in 2002, Carradine looks very much alive and comfortable in his character’s boots. He co-wrote and plays guitar on several the songs on the soundtrack, which gets a boost from some of Nashville’s top session players. “American Reel” is serious enough to qualify as a drama, but it has gentle heart and offers more than few laughs.

– Gary Dretzka