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'Troubadour Blues' showcases world-class working musicians

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Anne McCue in 'Troubadour Blues' (photo: Eric S. Swist)

Yes, the cream rises to the top.

Like, actual cream. In a cup of hot coffee or tea.

But people apply that statement to music all the time, usually smugly, asserting that superb artistry will garner superb commercial reward.

Which is just hogwash.

Like, actual hogwash. Good for situations in which your hog needs a bath.

It happens sometimes. Commercial success is sometimes available to those who write, play, sing and/or perform at the highest levels. And the inability to carry a tune can be a detriment to embarking on a Hall of Fame music career.

But, to believe that commercial reward equates to ability and execution is to believe that Meat Loaf's "Bat Out of Hell" is the sixth-best album of all time, that the "Saturday Night Fever" soundtrack is the eighth-best album of all time, that Shania Twain's "Come On Over" ranks at No. 10, that all of those are better than anything Bob Dylan or The Beatles did, and that the best Beatles album is "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." (Cool album, but gotta go with "Revolver," right?)

It's also to believe that music is set up like sports, where greatness is calculable and palpable, and where the most impressive performers tend to play in the biggest stadiums, in games broadcast the world over.

In music, not so much.

"People equate being well known with being good, like it's a giant talent contest," says Tom Weber, whose "Troubadour Blues" film documents what he calls "True stories from the front lines of American music." "But quality of performance doesn't translate directly into people knowing who you are. What I learned doing this film was that it's got to be pretty intrinsically rewarding for these people to just go out there and do what they're doing."

The people — the cream — in "Troubadour Blues" include Nashvillians [Mary Gauthier](#), [Anne McCue](#), [Garrison Starr](#) and [Amy Speace](#), musicians whose jobs involve traveling hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles in cars or vans, then playing on small-ish stages.

Minor leaguers, then. Except they aren't. That's hogwash. They're world class.

"I was starstruck at the beginning of this," says Weber, whose documentary also focuses on Peter Case, Chris Smither and other troubadours. "These were my musical heroes. I felt there was a mystique about them. Later, I learned about the driving all those miles in rental cars and sleeping in cheap motels and the underpaid, overworked life that many of these artists lead. 'Troubadour Blues' didn't lead to an answer. It led to more questions."

'Moment' drives them

The biggest question is, "Why on earth would anyone voluntarily do what these people do for a living?"

They aren't paying dues in hopes of a big break. They're just doing this thing where you drive seven hours, load guitars and CDs and such from the van into the venue, check the sound, scarf down a meal, and put your heart on display in front of the devoted and the distracted.

Then they talk with anyone who wants to talk, sign anything anyone wants to be signed, load everything back into the van and drive to wherever there's a bed.

"They might have driven 1,000 miles, might not be feeling good, but they get onstage and leave all that behind them," Weber says. "It's a moment they have, and that moment is what drives them, clearly. Chris Smither says it's a time/space nexus where everybody's lives meet for that one moment, and it makes something tangible, and then it goes away."

It is all of that. And it's the blessed or cursed reality for the majority of Nashville's singer-songwriters.

And, as "Troubadour Blues" makes clear, that reality looks stranger and less fulfilling than it really is.

"I tell my audience stories and have no desire to be background music for conversation, dance music in a lounge, or the latest fad," the late and brilliant Nashville troubadour Mickey Newbury once explained.

Every day in Nashville, the cream rises. It rises in the early morning, gets into a car or onto an airplane, and travels somewhere devoid of friends or relations.

That sounds kind of miserable, but it's not. Imagine taking a long, long trip to a place where you know no one, and finding upon your arrival that there are dozens, maybe hundreds, of people who are happy to see you in their town, and who want to hear your thoughts and your voice and to share a never-to-be-replicated moment.

That's rare stuff, both heady and humbling.

Stronger than coffee.

Sweeter than the rising cream.

But useless come hog-washing time.

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Details