

Drawing Crowds: A Night Out with the Hillbillies of Valencia Street

In his new column for The Bay Citizen, Jay Sacher goes country with the musicians and filmmakers frequenting Mission venue ATA

By JAY SACHER on April 19, 2011 - 8:50 a.m. PDT

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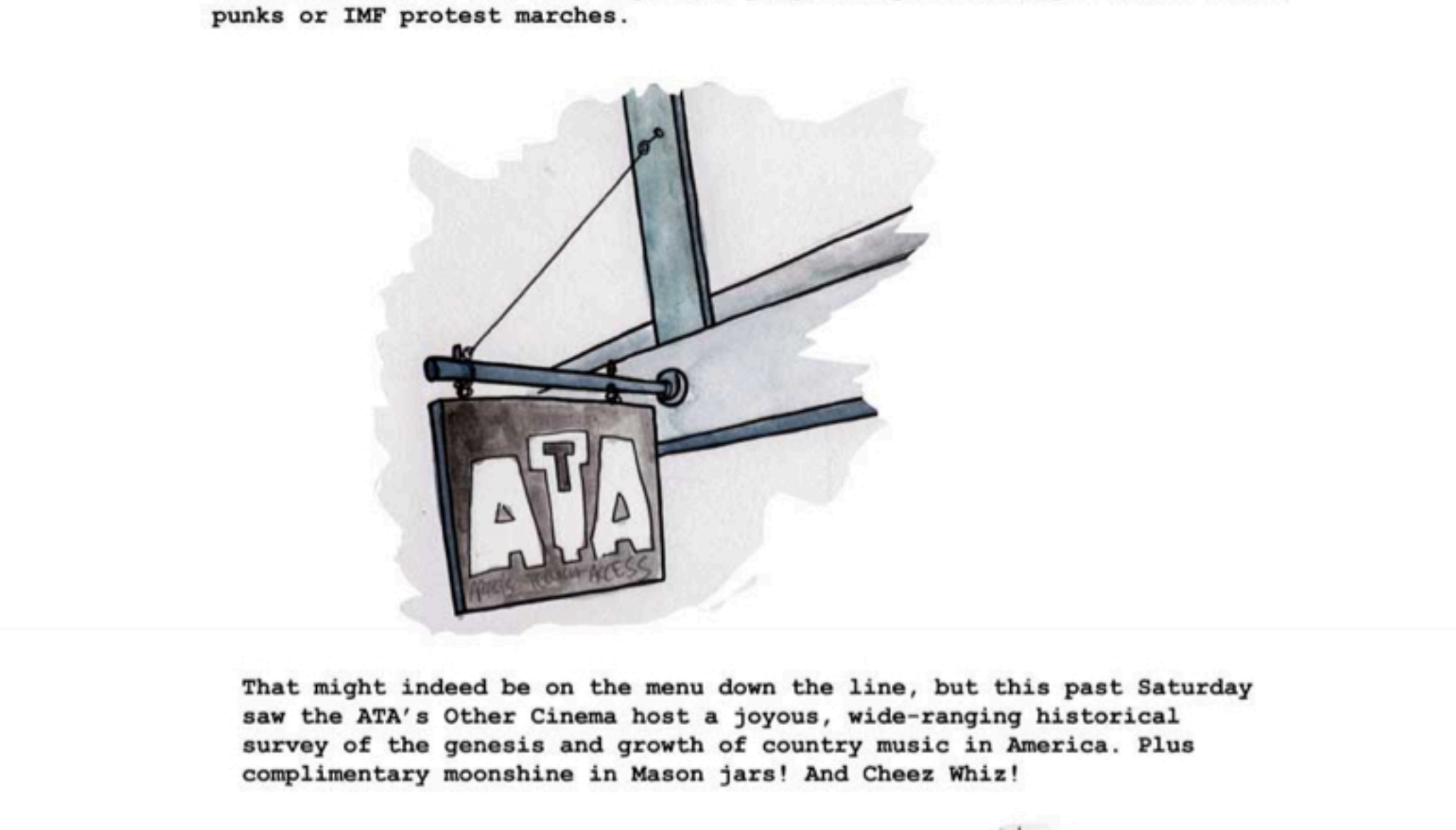
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Last Saturday night, a regular event called "Other Cinema" at Artists Television Access, a longtime home for out-there film and visual art installations and events, hosted a "Hillbilly Hootenanny." The Bay Citizen's new weekly illustrator/reviewer, Jay Sacher, went along for the ride. Looks for his column, Drawing Crowds, every Tuesday.

From its window displays on down to the black-hoodies-with-patches-sewn-on-them crowd that's generally milling around outside, the Artist's Television Access space on Valencia and 21st throws out an ABC No Rio, Food Not Bombs kind of vibe. Foolishly on my part, that aesthetic has kept me from even looking at the ATA's events calendar, assuming it would be stocked with dour and self righteous programming about Haight Street crust punks or IMF protest marches.



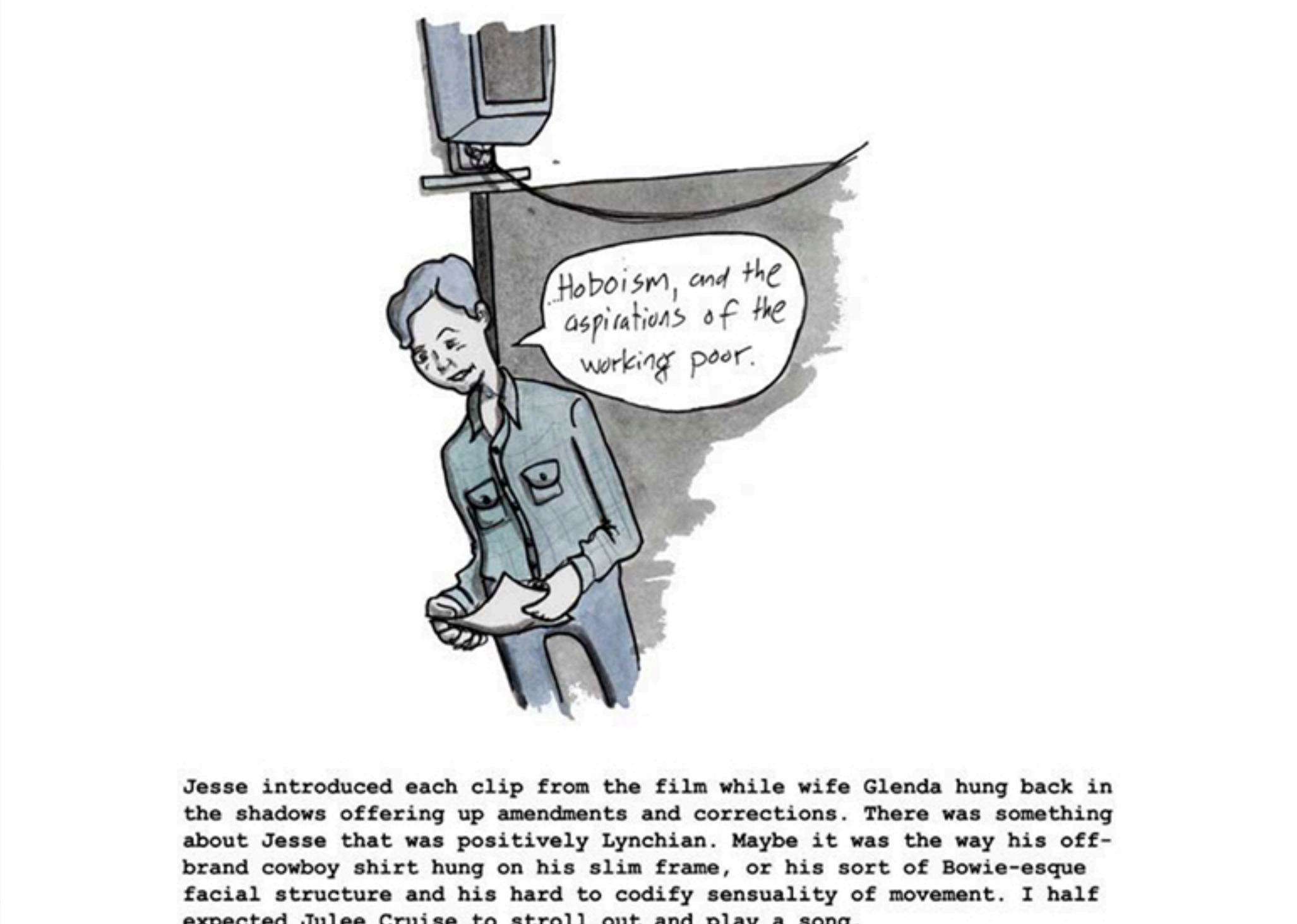
That might indeed be on the menu down the line, but this past Saturday saw the ATA's Other Cinema host a joyous, wide-ranging historical survey of the genesis and growth of country music in America. Plus complimentary moonshine in Mason jars! And Cheez Whiz!



There's an odd comfort inside ATA. It's an old-fashioned, non-slick artist's space. No third wave coffee or reclaimed wood on display here, just grit and dirt and people trying to showcase their art. Our night began with some old-timey yodeling and strumming by local favorite Toshio Hirano. He is a classic SF mix: Pacific Rim meets Appalachia by way of a teaching assistant from Noe Valley.



Filmmakers Jesse and Glenda Drew took the stage to introduce clips from "Big Country," their 7-year-in-the-making documentary about the de-politicization of country music and California's importance as an unheralded hub of the genre.



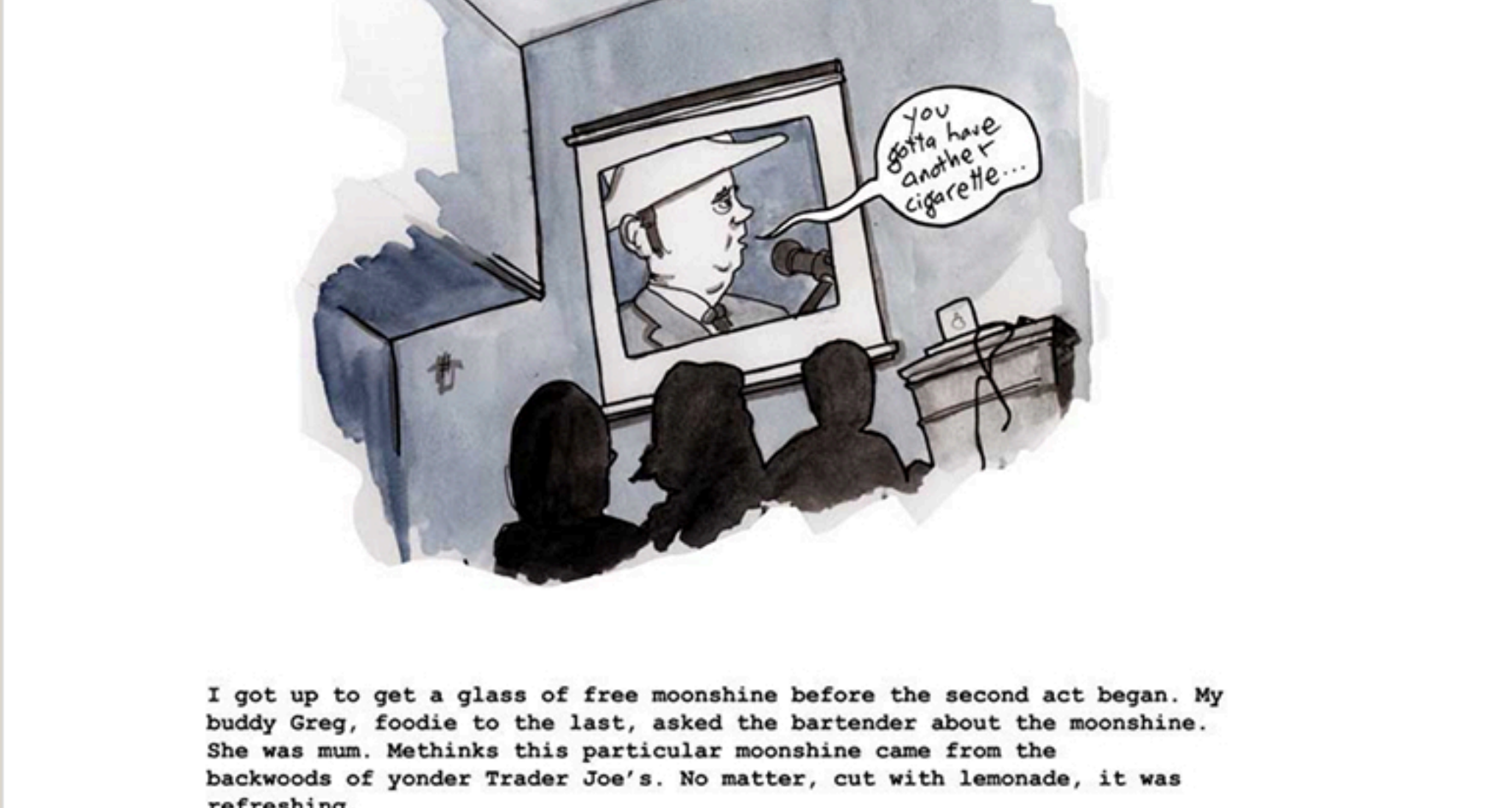
Jesse introduced each clip from the film while wife Glenda hung back in the shadows offering up amendments and corrections. There was something about Jesse that was positively Lynchian. Maybe it was the way his off-brand cowboy shirt hung on his slim frame, or his sort of Bowie-esque facial structure and his hard to codify sensuality of movement. I half expected Julee Cruise to stroll out and play a song.



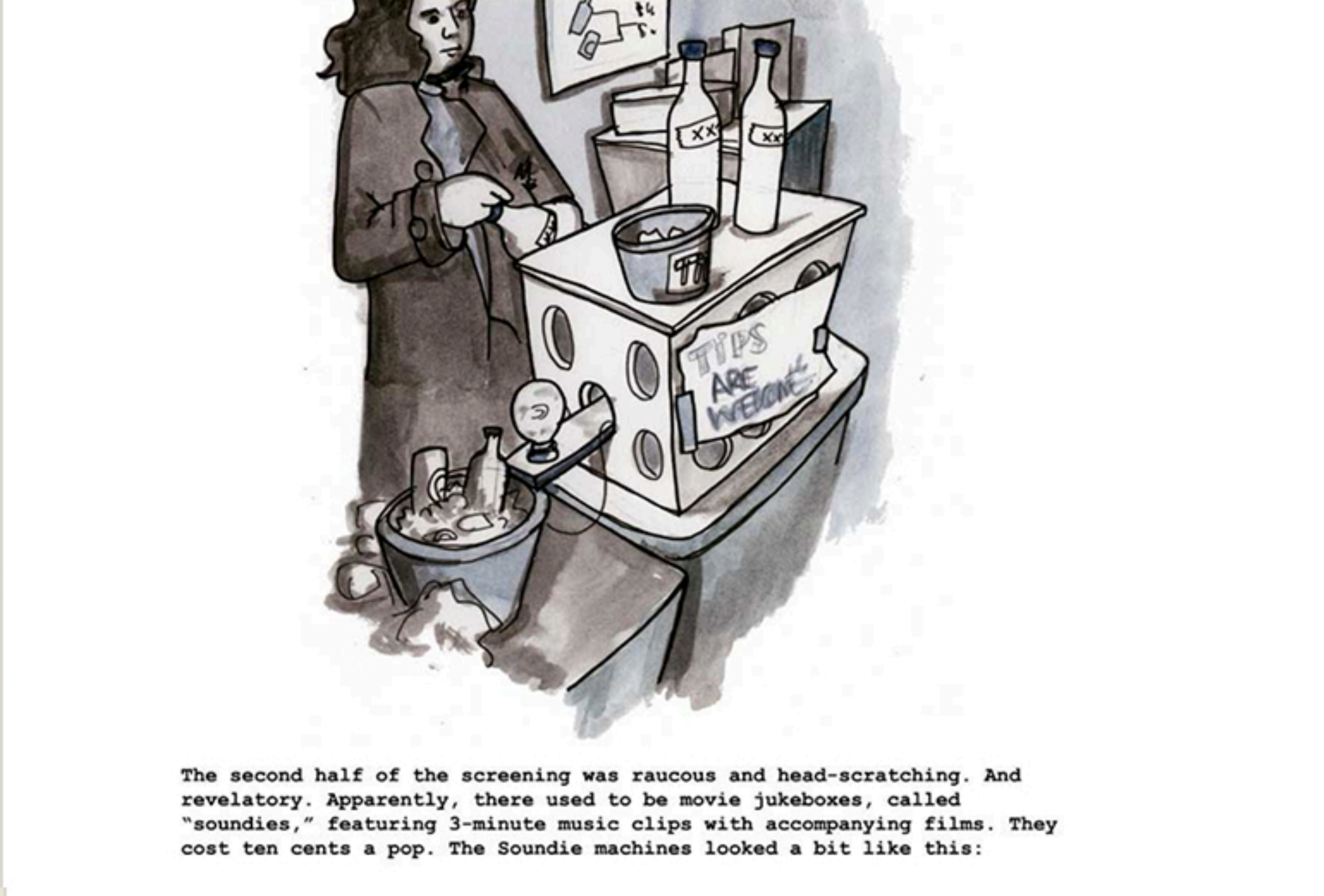
The documentary traced country's legacy from coal mining labor movements and freedom riding banjo strummers to the cartoonish stereotypes of "Hee Haw" and finally to Mr. Football himself, Hank Jr, chumming it up with Sarah Palin and the Tea Party. The brief Q&A section witnessed one audience member name drop Greil Marcus, Dadaism and "self-negating hillbillies."



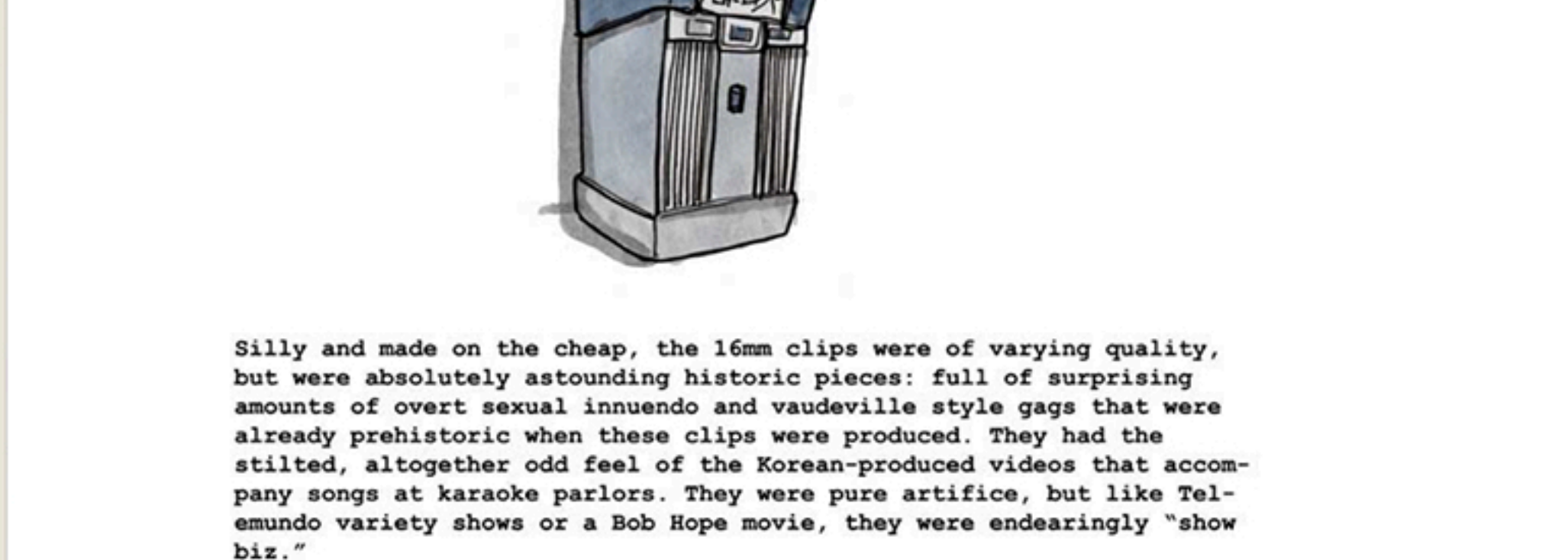
Another viewer felt that the newsreel clips of labor protests from the 30's looked staged. A Merle Travis clip about cigarettes ushered the Drews off the stage. I thought about Greil Marcus as well. His bit about the Old Weird America defines for me the joys of country music. Less politics, more weirdness, I thought. Happily ATA's programmers felt the same way.



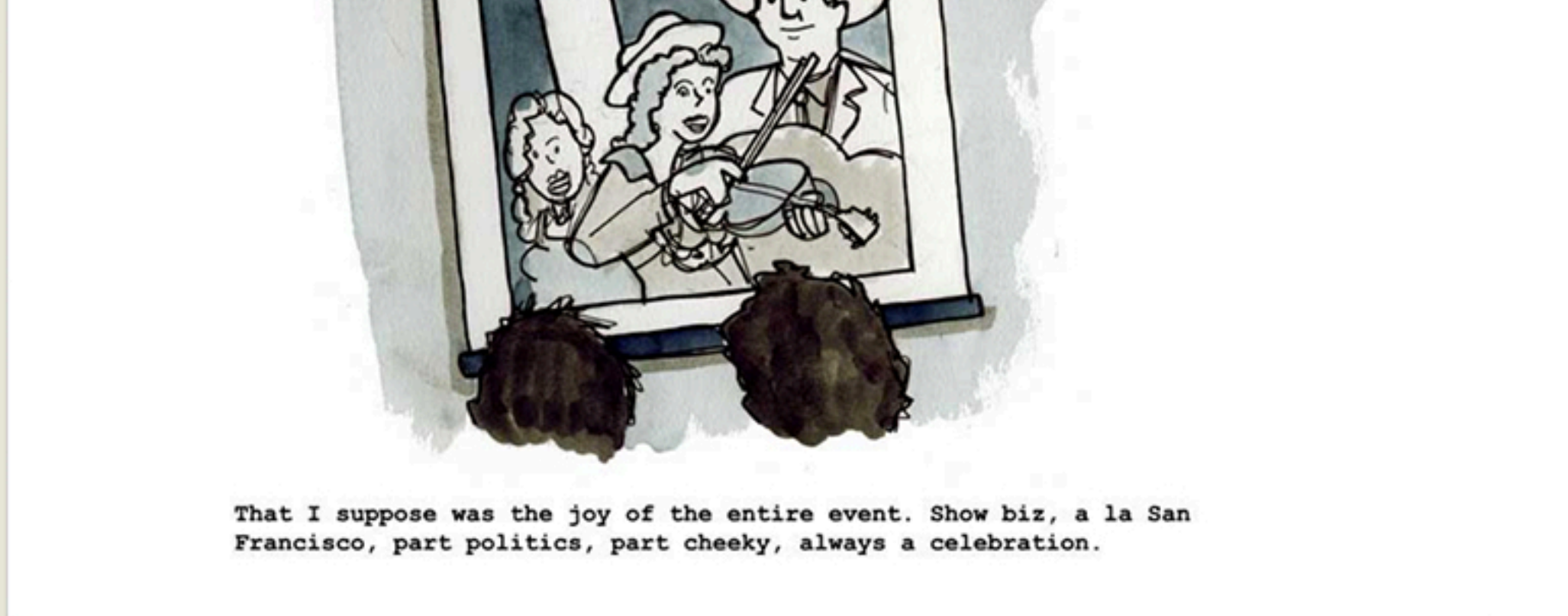
I got up to get a glass of free moonshine before the second act began. My buddy Greg, foodie to the last, asked the bartender about the moonshine. She was mum. Methinks this particular moonshine came from the backwoods of yonder Trader Joe's. No matter, cut with lemonade, it was refreshing.



The second half of the screening was raucous and head-scratching. And revelatory. Apparently, there used to be movie jukeboxes, called "soundies," featuring 3-minute music clips with accompanying films. They cost ten cents a pop. The Soundie machines looked a bit like this:



Silly and made on the cheap, the 16mm clips were of varying quality, but were absolutely astounding historic pieces: full of surprising amounts of overt sexual innuendo and vaudeville style gags that were already prehistoric when these clips were produced. They had the stilted, altogether odd feel of the Korean-produced videos that accompany songs at karaoke parlors. They were pure artifice, but like Tel-emundo variety shows or a Bob Hope movie, they were endearingly "show biz."



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