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'Open Country' film is hitting the open road



UC Davis Professors Jesse and Glenda Drew released a history of country music documentary that they are taking on the open road; next stop The Pageant Theatre in Chico. Tickets benefit the theatre and community radio station, KZFR 90.1. (Photo by Monica Stark — The Davis Enterprise)



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"Reclaiming Country Music!" reads the flyer for the recently completed documentary "Open Country," which takes the audience through time with interviews (Pete Seeger, Billy Bragg, Hazel Dickens), graphics, and clips of years past in minutes.

After 20 years in the making, the filmmakers Glenda Drew and Jesse Drew, both professors at UC Davis, are taking "Open Country" to union halls, community centers, and avant-garde and underground theatres across the land and abroad. Hitting the open road to organize and fundraise for community-based music programs, community radio stations, and musical artists, the Drews say community venues can use the film for fundraising.

The film premiered on Feb. 10 in San Francisco's Mission District at Other Cinema, a theater and center for indie filmmaking run by famed filmmaker Craig Baldwin, complete with his basement stacked with cans of old film footage. So, as that may be, they were in good company. The premiere's guests included friends, family, and a cross-section of San Francisco's arts and activist communities: filmmakers, actors, performance artists, writers, musicians, and political movers and shakers. A local musician has opened for every work-in-progress screening something like 15 times at different venues. Their premiere featured Bay-Area musician Cindy Sawprano on the saw, "a really cool, downhome funky instrument" that's not included in the film, so they brought it to the screening.

The next stop is the Pageant Theatre in Chico on Thursday, April 25. The event is sponsored by KZFR "The Mighty Zephyr" 90.1 and the Pageant. The Drews will be there to introduce the film and answer audience questions afterward. Local acoustic roots musicians, the October Coalition Family Band, will play a live pre-show set starting at 6:30 p.m. The film starts at 7 p.m.

The Pageant Theater's Miles Montalbano said he saw a rough cut of Open Country some years ago in San Francisco and loved it. "I met Jesse and Glenda and we talked about bringing the film here, so we are very excited to finally be able to share this fabulous film with the Pageant community! We love collaborating with and supporting local filmmakers, musicians, and artists; that's always been a big part of our mission statement as a neighborhood arthouse theater."

Known for playing "everything from some of those 80-year-old punk songs we played then to honky tonk," says band member Ken Smith. "Our sometime lap-steel player Scott Pressman will be joining us this time out, so we'll also definitely delve into some weepy, cosmic Americana."

While none of the band members are actually related, Smith says they follow the "family band" tradition of folk and country music. "We have some core members and others come and go as they can, so we have an ever-changing mix of voices, mostly acoustic instruments and songs from all genres. Everyone sings and anyone can step up and lead. It's all about having fun, sharing songs we love and playing music with friends, usually on a porch," he said.

Where country meets 'protest'

Smith said the film's focus on protest music resonates with the band. "Most of us played together for the first time about five years ago when we started a one-off Woody Guthrie cover project called This Band is Your Band for a benefit for unhoused youth.

Jesse says it's a great time to release Open Country. Country has roots in many different places. One could say that's a cornerstone of country is the music of formerly enslaved African-American people in the South. Surprisingly, to many people, it's a very cosmopolitan music.

The filmmakers examine many fundamental instruments from around the world that are influential to country music. "You'd be surprised where those instruments come from; for instance, the classic Nashville steel guitar is a Hawaiian guitar; the banjo, African, and yodeling Swiss musicians were really popular on that same circuit with the Hawaiians. People were really taken by this," they said.

The movie argues that in the 1950s, McCarthyism played a prominent role in creating the Country-Western genre, distinct from folk music, with its left-wing associations with artists like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger.

Jesse says country music as a term didn't come about until the late 1940s to early 1950s. "It was just hillbilly music or old-time music, or folk music." Under McCarthyism, the powers wanted to split more political singers like Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie from singers who dealt more with apolitical or patriotic themes. They called this new genre "country music." Jesse mentions, for example, Hank Williams (1923-1953), considered the "father of country music, called himself a folk musician."

A mix of skills

The Drews bring many different talents and skills to their filmmaking process: Glenda specializes in animation and design, while Jesse specializes in archival research and writing. Glenda says, "We are lucky to have such a fun and productive partnership. We work well together and know how to divide tasks based on the best of both of our abilities. We are also starting some new labor-related, creative research projects."

Having the premiere at Other Cinema was the meeting place of their origin story. Glenda recalls learning about Craig Baldwin from a Film Arts Foundation workshop she was taking. "My instructor said we could contact this guy Craig to buy found footage," and "a few months later, the little film I started working on during that class screened at Other Cinema for their "New Experimental Works" night. And shortly after that, my film played at the Roxie as part of the SF Film Festival on the same night/ticket as a film made by this super-cute-and-nice guy named 'Jesse Drew!!!"

While they've shared the UC Davis professor title for almost 20 years, the two share a love-of-country-music backstory and unyielding support for the working class.

Glenda grew up working class in Cicero, Illinois, where she worked in a factory during high school and her first year of college. Her dad was a trucker, and a lot of country music kept the momentum, spilling into weekends of easy listening. Jesse ran away from home in the ninth grade, didn't finish high school, lived in communes, worked in factories, campaigned with Bernie Sanders in the 1970s for third-party political campaigns, and wrote much of his dissertation at bars. Together, they found that their research and practice center on alternative and community media and their impact on democratic societies, particularly emphasizing the global working class.

'Country' to the core

When working on farms in the northeast, Jesse realized that "Led Zeppelin just didn't cut it anymore."

"It's like, you're working in a field all day, and you listen to rock 'n' roll. I just didn't connect to that anymore," says Jesse. He was living in rural Vermont, where local fiddlers, guitarists, and banjo players would play, and Merle Haggard could be heard regularly on CHOM-FM in Montreal. The film features one of his fellow commune residents who moved to the North Carolina mountains, where she is involved in old-time music preservation efforts and performing and recording. She's applied these skills, including her banjo playing to Himalayan folk music.

In the 33rd issue of Otherzine, a publication of Other Cinema, the Drews recount interviewing people who could "help us move the conventional framing of Country music beyond the God, guns and girls enthusiastically promoted by Nashville."

They further explain: "Archie Green—historian, working-class activist and instigator of the American Folklife Center—invited us to sit down with him at his kitchen table. Hazel Dickens, whose Appalachian voice earned her a National Heritage Fellowship, allowed us to set up camera in her hotel room before her set at the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival in San Francisco. Wobbly musician and troublemaker U. Utah Phillips invited us into his home to record what he knows about our subject. Gerald Haslam, author of Working Man Blues and classmate of Merle Haggard from the Oiltown section of Bakersfield, California, shared his perspectives. Pete Seeger contributed valuable stories as well, seated in front of his fireplace, banjo on his knee. All of these people and many more helped a new story of Country music emerge from under the shadow of Nashville. To illustrate our research and interviews, we spent countless hours searching archival repositories, obscure collections, and the internet archive, as well as relying upon the blood, sweat, and tears of San Francisco archivist and filmmaker Craig Baldwin."

Jesse says the documentary is not about the stars but rather the social phenomena of country music; therefore, they interviewed the musicians, not as musicians, but more as historians.

The material in this fun, self-driven documentary speaks for itself. Take, for instance, Glenda's top picks: the 1957 recording of Elizabeth Cotten's soulful performance of "Freight Train," an interview with Billy Bragg, and the section on performances of historical women. "But really, there are so many to choose from!" she says.

Face-to-face with heroes

The filmmakers relished the opportunities to talk with some of their heroes, such as Bragg, Seeger, and Dickens.

During college, Glenda drove five hours to Chicago with her friend to watch Bragg perform "when he was super up-and-coming." Glenda said, "If somebody who can be one of your heroes gets integrated into the contents of your life and work, it's so powerful."

In meeting Seeger, Jesse says: "I mean, the guy is just amazingly generous. I mean, who the hell am I? He liked the letter we wrote to him (asking for an interview), and he liked what we were doing. So he invited us over." Upon hearing Seeger's invitation to his home over a voicemail message, Jesse, Glenda recalled him sounding like he couldn't breathe. And he's like, 'We're going to Pete Seeger's home.'"

Regarding meeting Dickens (1935-2011), who invited them to her hotel room for an interview before performing at the annual Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival in Golden Gate Park: "Usually singers don't like to do interviews before they perform because they're worried about their voice," Jesse said appreciatively; "She generously invited us to interview her."

Archival research is abundant in the documentary, including little golden nuggets, such as Southern Rocker Gregg Allman calling for the burning of the Confederate flag. Jesse recounted, "Here's the most significant southern rocker, and the fact that he would say, 'burn the Confederate flag' is a big deal. It was against his fan base, but he didn't pull any punches on that."

Glenda reveled in the process of drawing the illustrations and portraits for Open Country and enjoyed looking for images of people to use as source material. "Greg Allman was especially fun for me because he was married to Cher. I spent a day just watching Greg Allman before drawing his picture." She also enjoyed making the graphics on the sequence about women and using neon-style cowgirl hats. "It just was fun."

Chico State connection

Glenda had just started teaching motion graphics at UCD when Desperate Housewives, the popular comedy-drama mystery television series with its artistic pop-art style opening credits, came out. "I thought, 'these are really great,'" Glenda said of the title art. She then learned about the creator, Garson Yu, and his Los Angeles-based graphic arts company, yU+co. She left a voicemail asking if he'd talk with her students; he gladly obliged. Collaborating with Chico State faculty, Glenda brought Yu to Chico and bussed the UCD design students to hear Yu speak about his motion graphic work.

According to his bio, Yu has worked with filmmakers like Steven Spielberg, Ang Lee, John Woo, Sydney Pollack, and Ridley Scott.

Since Open Country has been a work in progress for a long time, the film has undergone many iterations until its recent completion. As they uncovered research, they realized they had so much material, too much for the film, but they still wanted to share it.

The Drews made time-based portraits of some of the clips for the FilmBar —"a walk-in film set," "in the honky tonk tradition" — and have given interactive talks with various clips from the film at places like ATA, the Crocker Art Museum, and the Mondavi Performing Arts Center when Jesse opened for Merle Haggard by discussing the history of country music.

Describing the FilmBar aesthetic in Otherzine as "darkly lit with colored lights" and walls "festooned with classic country album covers, while artifacts like cows' skulls and banjos emphasize the motif," the Drews counted the reader to "belly up to the bar, and park yourself in front of the large monitor mounted over the liquor bottles, that could be playing Loretta Lynn, Charlie Pride, Merle Haggard, or other country legends," as the "Conventional jukebox interfaces allow the bar-goer to select clips of our film that show up on the large monitor.

'Menus' scattered around the tables and bar listed the film clip choices and the credits for the project. Thus, the film audience can select and watch clips of the film while ordering from the bar and socializing with the crowd. The bartenders serve drinks (mostly root beer for all ages shows!) as well as act as live narrators for the film."

The experience engaged visitors, write the Drews. "Many stayed a while to drink their rootbeer, play clips from the jukebox and reflect on their own experiences with Country music. Many returned with their friends! FilmBar demonstrated that there remain many new ways to bring cinema to large audiences in an immersive, fun, and non-conventional way."

Along the journey of making Open Country, and with FilmBar in particular, drinks were slung and stories swapped "the same way bars have always functioned."

Helping theaters rebound

A programmer at KZFR since 2007, Jake Sprecher, also a local booker, said with a mix of new arthouse releases and classics from any era, the Pageant's spotlight on repertory pieces have helped the theater rebound somewhat from the increase in video streaming at the expense of going to the movies. Occasionally, they bring in documentaries and live music. "It's just a special place," he said.

Before the Pageant had its beer and wine license, KZFR would supply the bar. "We did underwriting with them on the air and combined forces. So it's definitely familiar territory. A lot of the people that support the theater are the same folks that support the station," Sprecher said.

Drawing the line at early 1980s Dwight Yoakam, and George Strait, Sprecher said after that, "it's over" with the exception of smaller-circuit groups, Jenny Don't and The Spurs, an independent country quartet.

Sprecher looks forward to how politics play out in the film. "It's gonna teach me something because these are all artists I haven't thought about in that way. I still think of country music as both sides, coming out of American conservative movements; despite the fact that people on both sides of the aisle like it."

If you go:

What: A screening of Open Country

When: Thursday, April 25. Doors open at 6:00 p.m. and live music begins at 6:30 p.m. The film starts at 7 p.m., followed by a Q&A with the directors at 8:30.

Where: Pageant Theatre, 351 E 6th St.

Tickets: \$10, benefitting The Pageant and KZFR