

Hitting the open road



Glenda and Jesse Drew, both UC Davis professors, released "Open Country," a documentary reclaiming country music as a "creative musical expression of working people of all colors." They are showing the film as a benefit for KDRT on Sunday, March 10, 6 p.m. at the Davis Odd Fellows.

MONICA STARK/
ENTERPRISE PHOTO

UCD professors release country music documentary

BY MONICA STARK
Enterprise staff writer

"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 40 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

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screening something like 15 times at different venues. Their premiere featured Bay-Area musician Cindy Sawprano on the saw, "a really cool, down-home funky instrument" that's not included in the film, so they brought it to the screening.

The second stop: a benefit for KDRT (95.7 FM) and the Davis Odd Fellows on the evening of Sunday, March 10. Sacramento musician Casey Thompson begins the evening with some live music accompanied by singer Connie Reeder.

Thompson will play a selection that spans decades and perhaps highlights a few contemporary pieces, including Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car," a working-class ballad, and older songs from musicians like Woody Guthrie (who is featured in the film). "I'll add to it, to the atmosphere of the screening. I'm happy to do it," he said.

With Beyoncé at the top of the charts with a No. 1 country hit, and a couple of weeks ago, "Fast Car," Jesse says it's a great time to release Open Country. The roots of country are from many different places. One could say that a cornerstone of country is from 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 makes the case that in the 1950s, McCarthyism played a prominent role in creating the Country-Western genre, distinct from that of Folk music, with its left-wing associations of 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.

Teamwork

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. In Glenda's words, "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



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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.

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.

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."

Social vibe

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.

A fun, self-driven documentary, the material 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.

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

During her college days, 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 voice-mail 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 Greg 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."

students to hear Yu speak at 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 "featuring classic country album covers, while artifacts like cows' skulls and banjos emphasize the motif," the Drews called the reader to "helly 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.

Shared experience

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! Film Bar 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."

Thompson, who saw the film at its premiere, said he appreciated interviews with "a more radical position."

Reeder agreed, stating the film shed light on the often-overlooked working-class roots of country music and how it highlights the genre as "the people's music."

"It was eye-opening to see how working-class struggles and protest movements have shaped the genre."

With its release and KDRT as the beneficiary of the Sunday, March 10 screening, the local radio station expressed its gratitude on social media: "We are honored and grateful that the filmmakers have selected KDRT 95.7FM as the event beneficiary."

With a student body plugged into the campus with student-run KDVS and the community with KDRT, Davis is a radio town. Jesse says. Longtime promoters of public access stations, the Drews' future fundraising screenings may include KDVS and KYMR in Nevada City as beneficiaries.